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B. Hernandez

Walking The Streets

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Cover: B. Hernandez

Translation: Julia Ritter

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“Das Leben ist ein Spaziergang”

B. Hernandez, 2017

So it was true – the tree had laughed at him. John could have sworn the tree started to laugh as soon as he'd stopped before it. Maybe because this leaf-bearing pole standing here in the middle of the sidewalk had seen the police car drive up. It could have warned him. Instead, it chose to laugh. John shrugged, leaned against the tree and watched as the cop wrote a ticket. The cop then handed John the ticket with a completely blank expression.

"Public urination is against the law, Mr. Smith. And it doesn't make a difference how urgently you needed to go or how much you wanted to spare your pants."

"Really? I actually thought, better against a public tree than in my private pants. Isn't that how it usually works?"

"Mr. Smith, it's 3.30 in the morning and I'm just doing my job."

"Call me John. No need to be so formal. After all, you've watched me pee."

"I don't think so, Mr. Smith. And I did not watch you pee. I caught you urinating in public. That's why you're issued this ticket."

It was 3.30 on a Saturday morning and the police car absolutely had to cross his path on his way home. If he hadn't been drunk, John would have felt extremely pissed off and gotten into quite a rage about the cop's early-morning nitpicking. On

the other hand: had he been sober there would have been no need to relieve his beer-and-vodka-filled bladder against the tree. Now, with alcohol still softly soothing his brain and temper like a layer of cotton wool, he only felt peaceful. He took the ticket from the cop's still-outstretched hand.

"Wow. The most costly piss of my life, hands down – or not, as it were. Listen, I'm plastered, doesn't that count as mitigating circumstances? Couldn't I get a discount or something? Pissing while pissed?"

"Sorry, Mr. Smith. Drunk or not, public urination is against the law and there are no discounts on the fine."

"I get it. Justice is blind, even at half past three in the morning. Don't worry, kind sir, I will pay for my misdeed. What is it they say? If you can afford the drink, you can afford the piss."

"Thank you Mr. Smith. Enjoy the rest of the night."

"You, too."

The cop turned his back on John and walked to his car. John watched him for a few seconds.

"That's it? No last admonitions or advice on how to avoid getting in conflict with the law?"

"Good night, Mr. Smith," the cop said without bothering to stop or turn around.

"Oh, come on! Who if not you is gonna give me some useful advice? Isn't that part of your job?"

Now the cop did turn around, his car door already open. He looked intently at John and then shrugged, a kind smile on his lips.

"Go take a walk. Sober up. Use your toilet."

With that, he raised his hand, got in his car, and drove off.

John waved after the cop car and did his best to ponder the officer's advice. Well, dumb questions did merit dumb answers. Wasn't that how the saying goes? But there was also this other one: there are no dumb questions. There definitely were. He'd just asked one. The answer made that clear. Though maybe he'd just asked the wrong person. After all, cops weren't the ones making the rules. They just made sure that everybody followed them and fined you if you didn't.

Anyway, it had probably been the *wrong* question. In his mind, John tried to phrase the right one, the really pressing one. But his mind wasn't up to the task. The night had been too long, he was too drunk. Instead, he noticed that his hand was still raised and waving at the police car, which he couldn't see or even hear anymore. He dropped his arm and stared into the darkness at the spot where the car had disappeared.

Rules, the system, a full bladder at the wrong time, and on top of that, a gazillion questions. It

was all a bit too much for John, this early in the morning.

Especially this particular morning. John had been out to dinner with a group of friends. Usually they were a slaphappy, cheerful bunch, guys who celebrated that much-quoted lightness of being. Or at least they pretended for a few hours to live that lightness. They always talked about living it, for sure. Or how one could go about living it. Should be living it. But today, Alexander went and spoiled it all. Took a sledge hammer to all that lightness and just smashed it to bits. Alexander arrived at the restaurant and announced that he would be boarding a plane and leave for warmer climates in just a few days. He planned to live there cheaply, and when the little money he saved ran out, he would take odd jobs. Maybe he'd live on the streets. Or on the beach. He had canceled the lease for his apartment, quit his job, and sold everything he couldn't fit into a knapsack. Sledge hammer. Obviously, no one believed him. They'd all thought he was pulling their leg. At least they'd agreed that even if he did actually leave, he'd be back within weeks, months at most. But they hadn't been sure about it. And then, as they were saying their goodbyes, Alexander had asked if anyone cared to join him.

John started moving. A little walk didn't seem like such a bad idea right now. The morning was quite crisp. There hadn't been frost for weeks, but

the nights were still long and the temperatures only bearable in the sun. Spring crept up hesitantly this year. Still, John wasn't cold. Must be the alcohol in his blood. And his pace, too. He was a city dweller through and through. When he walked, he knew where he was going and did so quickly. But then he almost never walked. At least no farther than the next subway station. "Going for a walk" was not part of his usual vocabulary. That's why he was moving quite fast now, too, as if he knew where he was headed. Not caring where he went, he crossed streets, took a right turn, then a left, followed small side streets, passed little parks, and walked across squares. The only thing he really noticed was that the city was virtually dead at this time. He met a few cabs. Here and there a human figure appeared, but they soon disappeared again somewhere in the dark, or he just passed and left them behind.

The longer he moved, the calmer his mind became. Before long, he'd forgotten the ticket in his jacket pocket. Even the impact of Alexander's exit faded until John managed to finally dismiss it as just another occurrence. Aimlessly, he walked the streets. At least that's what he thought. All the greater his surprise as he found himself in front of his mall.

Of course it wasn't "his" mall. Just the mall where he did his shopping every Saturday. He'd return here in a few hours. Right now, the mall

was closed. An unfamiliar sight. Not to mention the ambient noise – or lack thereof. All John could hear was the faint burbling of the fountain in front of the main entrance. He stood still for a moment and listened. Normally you couldn't hear that sound over all the babbling voices, car horns, and other noise. Not even if you stood right next to the fountain.

John strolled on until he reached the wide stairs. They led up to the large courtyard in front of the main entrance, with the fountain in the center. The almost circular space wasn't a real courtyard but rather like a very wide passage. From the top of the stairs he had just climbed, John could see the wide, curved mall façade with its host of doors hugging the left semicircle of the courtyard. A tight arrangement of small fast food shops and cafés lined the other half circle. All of them were still closed at this early hour. Exactly opposite from the stairs that led up, mirroring stairs led down to a series of short walkways, which in turn led to the giant mall parking lot that stretched all the way to the canal. John considered hanging around till the mall opened, but it was a bad idea. It would be hours and he was tired. Still, he walked up the rest of the stairs to the courtyard and the fountain in its center. It was pretty big – a circular pool with a wall that went almost to John's hips and a diameter of at least 50 or maybe even 60 feet. The sculpture in the middle was large enough to block the

view to the fountain's other side, which made the whole thing seem even bigger.

John was surprised that the burbling didn't seem that much louder up close than before, when he stood quite a bit farther away down at the stairs. He tried to get a closer look of the sculpture in the middle. He'd been here often, yet he'd never really cared to find out what it was supposed to represent. It was a kind of memorial, he vaguely remembered. But however much he tried, he couldn't focus properly. Too drunk. John shrugged and stared instead into the water right in front of him. Almost reverently, he listened to the steady gurgling and sputtering. It was beautiful. Ripples of relaxation went through John's body, mimicking the soft little waves of the fountain. His eyelids started feeling heavier and heavier and finally closed. Slowly, his head sank down on his chest. It was a wonderfully pleasant feeling. Like the very last moment on the verge of consciousness.

It hit John that he was about to fall asleep. Immediately, his whole body jerked awake, his eyelids and head went up, and his arms windmilled through the air. Losing his balance with all this commotion, he staggered backwards, overcompensated and stumbled forward, hit the pool wall and went head first into the water, while his feet stayed firmly on the ground. Startled fully awake by the shock and the cold water, John grabbed the side of the pool and hoisted himself upright.

He had not quite processed what had happened and was still breathing heavily, rubbing water from his eyes, when he was startled yet again.

"What the hell are you doing in my bathroom?"

Someone had shouted at him. Dumbfounded, John stared into the pool and felt his legs give way as he fell backwards on his butt. Standing in the pool in front of him was a bearded and very naked man who stared angrily at him, hands on his hips.

"What the hell are you doing in my bathroom?" the naked guy in the pool repeated.

John kept sitting motionless and wide-eyed on the ground.

"If you didn't come to bring me a towel, get lost!"

John gasped for air. But even after his breathing had returned to normal and he had rubbed his eyes repeatedly he could see the naked guy standing there. Plus, he felt his butt hurt. The fall had been pretty hard. John started shivering in his cold, wet clothes. He stood up carefully and with considerable effort.

"Who are you?" he asked the man in the pool as he straightened.

"Nobody. Got a towel?"

John looked around as if to check for a towel somewhere on the floor.

"Unfortunately not. I could use one myself right now."

"I don't care. Get out of my bathroom."

"Wha-? This is no bathroom, it's a fountain and ..."

"Are you drunk? You smell of booze. And why else would you fall into my bathtub? Just get lost!"

"Again, this is not a bathtub and it's none of your business ..."

"Don't talk to me while you're drunk. Take a hike!"

"Okay, okay, slow down. Yes, I have had a few drinks and I'm sorry I fell into your bathtub ... into the pool. I didn't do it on purpose. My name is John. And you are?"

"Pissed off. And late for my morning ablutions, thanks to you. Come back when you've sobered up."

With this, the man turned his back on John and waded away through the water.

"And don't forget my towel next time!" he shouted over his shoulder.

John just stood there and watched him disappear behind the sculpture in the fountain's center. That must be where he'd come from in the first place. John shook his head. This for sure was new. A naked, bearded guy taking a bath in a freezing

fountain pool, telling him off and demanding he bring him a towel. It was so weird that John started to chuckle. Laughing felt like a release. Maybe that was just because he was so tired and had started to shiver all over from the cold.

For a moment he thought about going around the fountain to talk to the man again. But the guy had been pretty clear. John turned instead and walked down the stairs and along the small side streets to the main road passing the mall. There was a lot more traffic already. He set off in the general direction of his home, hoping to find a cab pretty soon. Before long, he got lucky and stopped a bored-looking cab driver who didn't even seem to wonder about John's wet hair and clothes – much less care to ask him about them.

When he finally got home, John took a hot shower and then snuggled up on the couch in front of the TV. He fell asleep before he could even notice what was on.

It was already shortly after noon when John woke up again and turned off the TV. His head ached and he felt nauseated. Most nights, he'd have a few beers and his body spared him the unpleasant and no less savory reminders the morning after. But last night, beers hadn't been enough to blunt the shock of Alexander's farewell. John dragged himself to the bathroom and under the shower. Alexander wouldn't be gone forever. Certainly not. No one would just pick up and leave. At

least no one John knew. He let minutes pass by as the hot, prickling shower massaged his scalp and neck, the water enveloping his entire body like a close and pleasantly warm embrace as it flowed down and disappeared into the drain. Afterwards, he felt slightly better and got dressed.

He went to the kitchen, shoved a couple of pre-baked buns into the oven and watched through the glass door as they slowly went up and turned brown. It was a wonderful sight and John felt immediately uplifted. Warm buns were the best. Ever since he'd started seeing Izzie more or less regularly, he was well supplied with baked goods. Izzie worked in a bakery and never came by without bringing him a little something from the shop. Out of pure sympathy, as she liked to say. Because it was the only human touch in his entire apartment. Needless to say that she didn't care too much about his place. Too big, too modern, the walls too white, the decor too cold and impersonal – whatever that was supposed to mean. Not to mention the of gadgetry and the fact that the building was in the wrong part of town. John lived in the city center, which was surrounded by the river on one side and the canal on the other, which earned it the name "the Island". As if that wasn't enough, he lived in the northern part of the Island, purported to be the "upscale" neighborhood. And when Izzie said "upscale", she made it clear that there was nothing good about that. But well, John didn't care about Izzie's complaints as long as he got his fresh

buns. He just loved their smell. Maybe in part because that particular smell usually filled the air after he had sex with Izzie. Last time, though, they had met at her place. Which is why he had to resort to the pre-baked buns that morning.

Only now did it occur to him that he should have called Izzie the day before. Actually, he should have called her some time ago but kept forgetting. He definitely had to do that today.

The buns on the other side of the oven door were almost done. John took a deep breath and inhaled their aroma. He took the first one from the oven, cut it open, buttered both halves, waited a bit until the butter had melted into a thin layer, and took a big bite out of one half. A deep and deeply satisfied sigh escaped John even before he started chewing.

After devouring the rest of his buns in front of the TV – a rerun of last night's game – he got ready to go shopping. On weekdays, he bought whatever he needed urgently at the shops around the corner or near his office. Today was Saturday, though, and on Saturdays he indulged in a nice long visit to the mall. The very mall he'd come by in the wee hours. John smiled as he remembered what had happened. His smile quickly faded when he put on his jacket, checked his wallet and found last night's ticket. He rolled his eyes, dropped the slip of paper on the floor, and left. He had planned to make a

mental grocery list but instead he just walked on, thinking of other things.

Like Alexander's announcement. That had really been something. And John had almost missed hearing the shocking news. If his day at the bank where he worked as an oversea bond broker from noon to midnight had been just a little bit busier, he would have cancelled the night at the club. After all, those nights with his buddies weren't a binding commitment. Everybody had too many of those in their lives. You didn't want to burden your valuable free time with another one. Plus, John considered only a few of those present as real buddies. Some former colleagues, a neighbor from back when, friends of friends. Of all these people, Alexander was the only one he felt actually close to. In fact, John considered him one of his best friends. They knew each other from college and worked in the same industry, albeit for different companies. Alexander hadn't even told him when exactly his plane would be leaving, let alone where to. He only said that it was his last meal with them because he'd relocate to warmer climates, an island somewhere, for good. He'd figure out how to get by when he got there. All he wanted was to live the simple life and be satisfied with what he had.

John had reached the pedestrian light at the large crossroads near the mall. He just needed to cross the street and then take a left, that would

take him directly to the large stairs he'd been at the night before - or rather, that same morning.

The lights changed to green. John was about to take a step onto the road, but stopped. Other pedestrians pushed past him. Some of them cursed as he blocked their way.

The light went back to red. John watched the cars rush past from both directions. Noise rained down on him: engines, car horns, and the vague static of the city. It had been a long time since he had really, consciously heard all that. He didn't actually need to buy anything. He had enough stuff at home and usually ate out somewhere, anyway.

A bit surreptitiously, John glanced up to check whether he could see a plane somewhere. There actually were some crossing the great blue sky - but for sure it was unlikely that Alexander was aboard any one of them. Alexander had a very good job. And it wasn't as if he'd have to flee a bad relationship - he was single. No known illnesses, either. Alexander's life had been good. Or had it?

John kept walking down the street. It led him south of the Island through the Financial District into the neighborhood called "Newtown", where the canal met the river. The bakery where Izzie worked was down here, too. He once again remembered that he should have called her. Well, at least this gave him a destination. Izzie worked on weekends. From early morning until the afternoon,

as always. He glanced at his watch: it was late afternoon. He knew for sure that Izzie's shift would be over by now, but still he kept walking in the direction of the bakery. Maybe she would still be there after all.

His headache had lifted a little. No amount of drink had led Alexander to divulge any more information about his plans, let alone to dissuade him from going through with them. Sure, they had all been fantasizing time and again about leaving the daily grind behind. They had all kinds of crazy ideas how they'd like to live the rest of their lives. Parallel universes. Alternate realities of practically nonexistent probability. Mind games. Male consolation bonding. Things like opening a bar. Or a diving school. Living in a cave far away from it all, all the rules and systems, a free and autonomous existence. Real life. But it had been no more than therapeutic nonsense. Night-shade dreams that wouldn't survive until morning.

Alexander used to say that they all missed out on the true wealth life had to offer and that none of them were doing anything about it. As long as human beings didn't need to worry about the bare necessities, he said, the governing doctrine would continue to work. But that didn't mean that he, Alexander, had to follow the herd and keep prostituting himself to some employer. He'd always thought that mankind's misery was obvious. *Just look around you*, he'd said. *Does anybody seem truly*

happy? Or even satisfied? All you see in their faces is numbness and routine. They're indifferent. They just put up with it. They're dead. Everyone has some kind of psychological condition: burnout, bore-out, ADHS, all the other diagnoses, and the pharmaceutical companies sell lots of pills that are supposed to help. And if you don't like to take pills, you run a marathon through the desert, climb some ridiculously high mountain or join one of those ultra-modern gyms and work out till you break down. Just to get that next finisher shirt or at least the sweet consolation of utter exhaustion.

Most of the guys, John included, had taken these verbal outbreaks as the usual – and usually amusing – beer-fueled tirades, though they didn't always follow his arguments. Yet for Alexander, it must have been the long lead-up to his exit. It seemed as if he hadn't enjoyed to be a human being anymore.

John strolled on for a few minutes, lost in thought, before the well-known aroma of fresh bread distracted him from this latest upheaval of his worldview. He had reached the bakery in New-town. Stopping for a moment, he pretended to be interested in the goods displayed in the shop window while he breathed in a bit more of the wonderful scent.

Then he stepped inside and joined the short line at the counter, even letting two other customers who had entered the shop after him get in line before him. All the while he took deep, appreciative

breaths. That smell! Like an ocean you could just dive into.

John patiently waited until everybody had been served and one of Izzie's colleagues had time for him. She recognized him right away. John asked for Izzie but as he'd expected, she had left a while ago. She probably went home, the girl behind the counter told him. John nodded, smiling softly and enjoying the aromatic bakery air.

With a freshly baked bun in one hand and a paper bag containing half a dozen more under his arm he finally stepped out of the shop onto the street. Focusing all his attention on the delightful bun, he chewed as he walked on.

It wasn't like bread was some new-fangled invention. Still, he had spent the better part of his adult life ignorant of such bliss. Ever since he left his parents' home, he had only bought the soft, pre-packed, sliced kind. And to be honest, he couldn't even recall whether he'd ever had fresh bread as a kid. It was Izzie who'd got him hooked on the real deal. John thought back to the first time she'd made fresh buns for him. She hadn't let him in on the secret of refrigerated buns, let alone fresh-made buns, from the very start. Oh, no. They had been seeing each other for quite a while before she deigned to enlighten him. In those first few weeks, they had done the usual stuff couples did: go to the farmers' market, cook meals together – or rather, Izzie had cooked while John had stood in

her way -, meet friends at parties, and go to the movies. They'd also gone ice skating on one of the brinks the city set up in various parks in the winter. Those brinks were much too small and crowded to even hint at the romanticism such places always seemed to be imbued with in the movies. Still, it had been fun. In fact, John had been surprised how much he enjoyed falling on the hard ice with Izzie.

And of course they also had sex. Sex was hands down the one activity they had indulged in most until now. Or until that weekend when Izzie had been off work. A great occasion for them to spend two whole days together. John would have been content to stay in bed all day - or close to the bed, anyway - and have lots of sex. But Izzie had suggested that weekend together and so he'd left the planning to her.

Of course he should have known better. Izzie not only had a completely different sleep pattern than himself, her idea of how to spend two free days together also differed quite a bit from his. She'd decided that the best thing to do on a Saturday morning was go for a run.

John could still feel the agony. She'd told him to pick her up at 5.30 in the morning. He arrived dead tired, having barely slept at all. Not to mention that he hated running. Back then, he'd been about as fit as a guy with an office job and a penchant for steak and fries whose main contact with

sports was the TV screen at his favorite bars could be. On his way over he'd considered calling the whole thing off.

But he didn't. He went over to her place and even arrived on time. He had thought about ways to dissuade her from the run, though. No sooner had Izzie opened her door than his anti-running plot dissolved into thin air. He could still picture it. Izzie, standing in the door and smiling at him - fresh, alert, and brimming with energy. Her running outfit left him gasping for breath before he'd even started running. A tight-fitting, midriff-baring tank top, tight running pants ending above the knees, and matching head- and sweatbands. John just stood there, feeling like a black hole sucking up all the light, warmth, and energy of this amazing sun beside him. Or at least trying to.

"I didn't think you'd show up. And even on time," Izzie said in lieu of a greeting.

They had barely left Izzie's front yard and crossed the street when John already started wishing he'd never been born. He was panting and very aware of his pulse hammering inside his carotid arteries. His legs felt as if they might just give out any second. All the while, Izzie was jogging lightly beside him, chatting along. John focused all his attention on staying upright and didn't hear a word she was saying. He vaguely remembered that they'd jogged along the canal for a while, crossed a bridge and went back on the other side of the canal

before crossing it again somehow and running back to Izzie's place.

The whole time John tried to hide how intensely he was suffering. Izzie had of course seen right away that his running shoes hadn't seen much action and were more of a piece of decoration in his closet. At least she didn't comment on it. But nor did she cut John any slack. His legs and his lungs were burning, his feet were in agony, and his shoulders hurt. There came a point when the exhaustion was so intense that he could barely see. All that kept him from collapsing was his fear of looking like a wimp and Izzie's voice, which he held on to for orientation. He pulled himself together and made it to the end of the round.

Back at her apartment, Izzie did a few stretching exercises that John skipped. Instead, he collapsed on her couch and fell asleep immediately. The next thing he remembered was being kissed awake. Lost between sleep and consciousness, he opened his eyes to see Izzie sitting next to him, in fresh clothes and with her hair still wet from the shower. She smiled at him and stroked his cheek. John took a deep breath and started to smile - and that was when he smelled the buns. Fragrant, fresh-baked buns, sitting on a tablet along with butter, jam, yoghurt, a glass of milk, and a glass of orange juice on the couch table. John's breath caught and he froze. He'd never told Izzie this, but at that moment he almost burst into tears.

He'd been absolutely exhausted, his whole body was aching, and he was so hungry his stomach hurt – and there was beautiful Izzie sitting right next to him, babbling on like a waterfall and buttering a fresh-baked bun for him. To John it had felt like a touch of heaven. The smell alone had been overwhelming. But when Izzie let him take a bite of the bun and he started chewing, there was this magical wave of wellbeing that swept through his entire body. That was the day he fell for fresh-baked, warm buns. He couldn't imagine ever living his life without them again.

John smiled and fished another bun from the bag under his arm. He still hadn't called Izzie. But he didn't want to do that out here on the street. He certainly didn't want to be one of those people who seemed to like it when others listened in on their conversations. Who made them listen, whether or not they wanted to. He'd have to find somewhere private for his call.

John stopped to take a look around and realized that he was right on the Newtown Bridge, close to his office building. Funny how that worked: yesterday, or rather, early that morning, he'd automatically walked to the mall. And now, his steps had automatically taken him to his office. Whenever he decided to try new, unknown routes or at least walk aimlessly, he ended up on the old, much-trodden paths. He thought about turning around but crossed the bridge instead, leaving the Island

behind. From afar he could see the top of the office building sporting his company's logo. He could take the subway near his office and go home. If it had been a weekday, he'd start working around this time in the afternoon.

When he'd taken the job after two stints as a stock analyst that turned out to be both tiresome and boring, he'd had a tough time adjusting to the new rhythm. At first it had felt as if all he did was work or sleep. Not because he worked long hours. He'd just slept a lot. He'd always felt tired. Keeping a very strict schedule had helped. After a while, he had managed to adapt. Now he got up shortly after noon, started work in the afternoon, came home after midnight, and went to bed between four and five in the morning.

Still, adjusting to this new schedule had been hard as he could do little more than watch TV in his waking hours. At least after work. It wasn't that John minded watching TV – in fact, he'd always enjoyed it. But the morning programs weren't exactly thrilling, and he'd had trouble staying awake.

That changed when he started seeing Izzie some months ago. He'd actually come to enjoy his work-dictated daily rhythm. At least he'd started to appreciate its benefits. Izzie's shift usually started at five in the morning and she got off work around one or two in the afternoon. On days they decided to meet, Izzie would get up a little earlier so she

could see John when he got back from the office. She would stay until it was time to head to the bakery, at which point John was about ready for bed. Sometimes, they turned things around and met when Izzie got off work and John had just got up. However, that only worked on his days off. Usually that meant on the weekend. But only if he didn't fail to catch her at the bakery, as he had now.

He had the feeling Izzie liked this arrangement, too. She did despise his job and the whole industry but was far less outspoken about it than she was in criticizing his apartment. Only now and then did she comment that it was only the cheap stuff money could buy and making money by manipulating money was as low as one could possibly get - but if it made him happy, it couldn't be that bad after all. Her words sometimes rang in his ears as he paid for dinner or the movies.

"Dinner is cheap, my dear, but my presence is something you need to work for and be able to afford," she'd answer every time he mentioned it.

It wasn't as if she could get by without money. Maybe it didn't make her happy. But she'd be pretty unhappy without it.

During the week, John had also started to work out in his spare time. At least now and then. After the jogging incident with Izzie he had started to get fitter. He usually went to the gym for a bit of

cardio and weight training. Sometimes he went for a run. He still hated running, but the hatred was interspersed with a wonderful feeling as it reminded him of his first buns. Following his early-morning disaster with Izzie he even vowed to start training for the annual marathon. But he let that idea drop pretty soon. Actually, it had been Izzie who had dissuaded him. She told him to keep running but not for a marathon – much better to do it to keep healthy or even for her. But for a marathon? Better to leave it altogether.

There were times when he really couldn't make heads nor tails of her. Again, the thought that he should have called her, should call her now, crossed his mind. However, he had already reached the subway station. He'd call her when he got home. He took the train. At home, he settled in front of the TV for a bit of rest after his long walk. The same rehash of the game he'd seen earlier was on.

A few hours had passed as he awoke on his couch, the TV still on and showing a live broadcast from another game. John watched for a while. It was boring, yet oddly comforting.

His headache was gone, but now he felt dazed and cranky. That was the drawback of irregular sleep patterns – they messed up your whole system. Plus, he was hungry.

John went out for a bite to eat. He still hadn't called Izzie, but he wasn't in the mood for it now. Anyway, it was too late. She'd have to work tomorrow and was probably already asleep. He would drop in at the bakery the next morning.

He went to the bar that had become his regular hangout over the last few years. The bar staff and the other regulars greeted him. John took a seat at their table. He didn't even have to place his order because the staff new his pleasure by now. His fellow patrons were well into their glasses. John hoped that a bit of company, a steak, and a few beers would lift him up as it usually did. But it didn't seem to work. John ate, drank, he watched a game on one of the many screens, he talked. Nothing made him feel any better.

Finally he looked around the bar for some female company to while away his time with. He wasn't planning on picking up a woman, but a little flirt might be a welcome distraction. There had been times when a Saturday night without a pickup spelled failure. That had changed since Izzie. Especially since she knew few inhibitions in bed. She'd surprised him there.

Truth be told, he didn't know all that much about her. He didn't even know what exactly it was, that thing between them. But he had fun with her, no doubt about that.

Contrary to the present situation – John very much doubted that he'd have fun tonight at the bar. Taking a closer look at the clientele, he began to doubt he'd ever had. All their cheering and laughing was just alcohol-induced. The quiet ones with their heads down and their stares fixed on their glasses were either too drunk or too glum to laugh or cheer. The ones who flirted were too spruced up to hide their desperation. The staff were only cheerful because they got paid for it. The only ones who looked like they were really enjoying themselves were a group of young people John had never seen here before. They seemed to be celebrating something, maybe someone's graduation or birthday. Or maybe just the fact that they were young and carefree. John didn't begrudge them their happiness. After all, "carefree" was just another word for "inexperienced" or "ignorant". They would find out what life was really like. Just give them time. And once they did, they would stop partying without a care in the world and start having guys' nights and girls' nights.

He ordered another beer. Maybe Alexander's age was to blame for his decision to leave. Classic midlife crisis. He'd just yearned to feel young and careless again. Smiling warmly, the waitress placed John's beer in front of him. John tipped her generously and slid the untouched beer over to his drunk neighbor, who thanked him effusively if somewhat unintelligibly. John nodded and left. He hailed a cab and gave the driver his home address.

En route to his street, he changed his mind and told the cabbie to drive him to Izzie's. It was just after one a.m. when John arrived at her place. He had no idea why he'd come here. Izzie would surely be asleep at this time of night. Waiting out in the cold until she left for work wasn't the best plan, either. It was no use calling her as she always switched off her phone before going to bed. Or at least she hardly ever picked it up at night. He knew that. He could of course just ring the bell and wake her. But he'd need a very good explanation for that. John took a walk around the block but didn't come up with a good idea.

As he approached Izzie's building, though, he saw light in her living room window. John was surprised – Izzie never left the light on – but didn't think too much of it. He decided to ring. After all, the light had given him a good reason. Still, he hesitated. It was now just after one a.m. and highly unlikely that Izzie expected him. And yet there was light in her apartment. She must be up for other reasons than a meeting with *him*.

His head bowed and his fist in his pocket, John went to find another taxi to drive him home. Lying on his couch, he drank another beer and watched the reflection of the TV flicker across his living room ceiling. After a while, this spectacle began to absorb his mind until he focused only on the dancing splotches of color and felt a tender tiredness spread through his body.

He'd called Izzie at the bakery right after waking up the next morning, or rather, noon, catching her just in time before her shift ended. Izzie couldn't talk long at work so they'd agreed to meet in their usual café at the mall.

Now, they were sitting across from each other and drinking coffee. If not for the charged atmosphere between them, it would have felt like a cozy Sunday-afternoon ritual.

"Why didn't you call earlier?"

"Izzie, I told you I'm sorry. I just forgot, okay? It's not as if you've been pining for me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

John shrugged sheepishly. He apologized for the remark and, yet again, for not calling earlier. The last thing he needed this weekend was a row with Izzie. The afternoon sun was shining on their table outside the café. The weather wasn't quite warm yet but winter finally seemed to be over. John told Izzie about Alexander and his decision, hoping it would distract her into forgiving and forgetting.

"He'll be off by now, probably on a plane to wherever it is he thinks he needs to go."

"Actually, John, I admire him a little for taking that step."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. Yes, it sounds a bit extreme, quite dramatic in fact. But still, kudos for him. I wish him all the best. I respect and admire him. I'm even a bit envious."

"Well, you could have gone with him. He asked if anyone wanted to come. Hell, you might still catch up with him if you're so thrilled by the whole thing. Complete bullshit, if you ask me."

"Johnny, dearest, that's what I like about you: you look like the quintessential limp-wristed urban lemming but you can't keep your caveman instincts in check for long. Whenever you sense some threat to your territory you go into attack mode. A typical male. So cute."

"Very funny. As if I cared what Alex does. Let him leave. Never hold up travelers."

"Oh. I must have hit a nerve there."

"Not at all."

"Still, this whole thing seems to bother you more than you care to admit."

"Nonsense. I just told you to make you forget you're mad at me. Anyway, he'll be back. I'll give him a few weeks, maybe a bit more."

"Do you really think so?"

"I don't know. No one just drops everything and leaves. I'm sure he just needs some time out."

"Maybe. By the way, I'm glad you care whether I'm mad at you."

"Of course I care! You're my fresh-bun connection, after all."

"You could just go ahead and buy some."

"They don't taste as good as when you bring them."

"I have a bunch at home. You can take them later when you leave."

She said with a broad smile as she stood up. Overly excited, John almost jumped out of his chair, hitting his knee on the table. How right Izzie was: typical male. Eager to regain his composure, he let Izzie take his arm. She lived across the canal, not too far from the café, though at her pace it would take them a while to get there.

They passed some of the few remaining abandoned factory buildings still lining the canal. Most of them were condemned and dilapidated, their walls sprayed with graffiti, their windows smashed in or just broken.

It was a widely known hangout for the homeless. Every time the city or some real estate developer planned a major building project on the canal, the squatters had to go. The last time this happened was when the mall, where they both did their shopping and where they just had a coffee together, was built.

John remembered his strange encounter with the naked man in the fountain early in the morning. Maybe he had been homeless, too. That would make sense. He told Izzie about the guy. She laughed and commiserated a little with John. It sure had been a tough weekend for him, she said. First his buddy takes off and then he gets spooked by a naked man in a fountain. She'd have to see if there was anything she could do about it once they got to her place. That for sure made John quickly forget Naked Guy. From the first time he'd been with Izzie, he was under her spell between the sheets. He hated that. And loved it, too.

At Izzie's, she led him right to her bedroom. Slowly she undressed for him. He loved every second of it. She loved it even more. Then she helped him undress. It drove him crazy. For a long moment they stood facing each other, very close but not touching. He could feel the warmth radiating from her body all over his own. Her gentle breath caressed his neck. He smelled her hair. It was torture. Wonderful, glorious torture.

"Take me," she whispered at last.

And even though Izzie lay down on the bed and accepted him in total abandonment, seeming to give her body over fully to his will, John sensed – in fact, he was almost certain – that it was he who was giving himself, not vice versa. That all this was done for her pleasure and she wanted him to know that. He could barely contain himself. He

would have liked to rip her soft, warm skin open with his teeth and lap up her blood. He drove into her with all his might. He wanted to own her. But no matter how strong he felt, how physically superior as he pulsated inside her, at the very climax John realized that he was utterly powerless. While she had consciously and temporarily given up control, he had lost his completely. His desire for Izzie, this lust for her that she could stir up seemingly without effort, had overpowered him yet again. The very moment that he'd greedily thought he was taking Izzie, he knew exactly that she was the one taking what she wanted of him. That was what made her so wonderful and at the same time frightening.

As they lay spooning afterwards, exhausted, John asked: "Do you really think he won't come back?"

"No idea. You know him better than I do. He's your friend."

"People don't just leave. It's pretty good here."

They lay in silence for a while, their skin touching, their breath synchronized.

"Do you know why he left?" Izzie finally asked.

"Huh. Because he wanted to be somewhere else?"

"That's not a good answer."

"Mid-life crisis?"

Izzie wriggled out of John's embrace and turned to face him.

"I know someone who might be able to tell you."

"Sounds mysterious."

"That Neptune guy in the fountain you claim to have met."

John laughed. They stayed there for a while, discussing whether John should grow a beard like Mr. Neptune. Finally, Izzie got out of bed. She had an early day tomorrow so their evening was over. As promised, she packed up some buns for John. Then she sent him off with a kiss at the door.

Out on the street, John considered walking for a few blocks but decided he'd walked enough that day. He hailed a cab and gave the driver his address.

Back home, he fixed himself an instant soup and ate it in front of the TV with one of Izzie's dinner buns. Then he switched off the TV and went to bed.

Around noon on Monday he woke up and decided to hit the new week running – literally. He'd go for a jog. The last few weeks had been too chilly for outdoor workouts, but if he ever wanted to go running with Izzie again without failing miserably, he'd have to start getting fit.

He was greeted by early spring sunshine and air that was, to his slight chagrin, balmy enough for outdoor sports. He jogged for about twenty minutes in the park near his home. His lungs were unaccustomed to physical exertion, as was the rest of his body. He didn't run half as fast as he had with Izzie, and still it was straining.

"Holy shit," John thought as he stood hunched over in his living room, coughing so hard he started to choke. Before the winter he had been in relatively good shape for a guy his age. He was in his mid-thirties, after all, so no spring chicken. But now it was all gone.

A hot shower helped. Feeling a little better, he got ready for work.

He hated not being able to keep up with Izzie. Or maybe "hated" was the wrong word. But it definitely hurt his pride when she outpaced him – and not only when they went running. He felt inferior to her in many ways. She never rubbed his nose in it or otherwise called attention to it. It was just hard to feel like a man with her, at least for John. But why was that? Yes, Izzie liked to needle him a bit, but she was never aggressive. And the sex was great – at least on this front he had no problem holding his own. It was her entire being, her Iz-zieness, that had such an impact on John, though he couldn't exactly pin down what made her so fascinating.

Shortly after one a.m. he returned home after a monotonous and uninspiring day, or rather, night, at the office. Unlike other nights, however, he did not feel dull but wide awake and even a bit euphoric. On his way home, he'd decided to visit the fountain later that night. He wanted to meet Naked Guy, just as Izzie has suggested.

Having walked to the mall, John made straight for the fountain and went several times around it. Naked Guy was nowhere to be seen. John widened his search perimeter and looked all over. He went down the wide stairs on both sides of the courtyard, then up again. He even patrolled the footways all the way to the parking lot on one side.

After a long and disappointing search, he sat down on the edge of the fountain. He would just wait for the guy. After all, last time it was he who'd found John, not vice versa. John curled up and hid his hands in his armpits. Sitting still, he started to feel the cold. He yawned. The mall's lobby was brightly lit, of course, but outside the range of the lights everything was dark.

Cold from sitting there, he got back up and walked around the fountain once again. And another round, beating his arms against his chest to keep warm. He could feel his stomach growling - he should have eaten before heading out here. John had trouble keeping his eyes open. He was cold. The only thing keeping him from falling asleep on his feet was this hungry feeling. He

dragged himself around the fountain a few more times, more to stay awake and at least marginally warm than because he thought the man would show up.

It was beginning to dawn. Just as he was about to sit down again, John saw a figure move across the parking lot towards the fountain. Exhaustion, hunger, and cold were instantly wiped from his mind before he realized that it couldn't be the fountain man. John saw the figure pull out a key, open one of the smaller doors next to the main mall entrance, and disappear inside. Probably someone who worked there, someone in charge of getting everything ready before the shoppers came.

Frustrated, John walked down the stairs in front of the main entrance and headed towards the subway station. The whole thing had been a disappointing waste of time. All he wanted to do was go home.

When he reached the station, however, he walked past it to the major road, hailed a cab and told the driver the address of Izzie's bakery.

There were only a few customers in front of the counter this early in the morning. Izzie saw him as he walked in, gave him a short wave and finished serving her customer before asking a colleague to take over. John waited in a quiet corner near the shop window.

“What are you doing here? Did anything happen?”

“He didn’t show.”

“Who didn’t show?”

“The naked guy. He wasn’t at the fountain.”

“Is that why you look so beat? Did you wait for him the whole night?”

“More or less. Fool me. It was a dumb idea.”

“Why? Just try again tomorrow.”

Wide-eyed, John stared at Izzie.

“What, John? Naked bearded guys in fountains tend to be a bit unpredictable.”

John searched her face, unsure whether she had listened to him. He’d just spent hours waiting, freezing, and starving at that fountain. It was way past his bedtime and he was just exhausted. And she wanted him to do it all again? She seemed to be serious, though. John stretched his back and rubbed his nose.

“Yeah, sure, I was planning to try again some other time, anyway. Just came by to tell you I had no luck today.”

Izzie nodded, thanked John for dropping by and told him she had to go back to work. First,

though, she went to the back of the shop and returned with two fresh, warm buns. He finished the first one before the shop door closed behind him.

Izzie was right, of course. It was stupid to assume that today would be another bathing day for Naked Guy. John didn't know the man, after all. Maybe he was just some eccentric tourist who had long since left the city. Still, John would return to the fountain and get to the bottom of this.

Despite having slept only a few short hours, John felt awake and alert at work. For his next visit to the fountain he wanted to be prepared. First of all, he would bring a warmer jacket. And a blanket. He would buy that in his lunch hour, which in his case was in the evening. John also bought a thermos – he planned to take hot coffee, a sandwich, half a dozen doughnuts and some sports magazines on his expedition so he wouldn't get hungry or bored.

Home from work shortly after midnight, he got everything ready. He packed a bag with the blanket, his supplies, and his reading material and placed it next to his front door so he'd just have to grab it on his way out. Then he got a pizza to go from the little joint around the corner so he wouldn't be hungry when he arrived at the fountain. He ate in front of the TV, zapping through the muted channels. Just like the night before, he was nervous and almost sure he would meet the naked man.

That night, John felt neither hungry nor cold as he waited by the fountain. The coffee kept him awake. But he waited in vain. Finally, the early-morning mall guy arrived and John took this as a sign that his endeavor had once again failed. But as he packed up his stuff he knew he'd be back the next night. It could only be a matter of time. Maybe Naked Guy only bathed once a week. Or once a month. That would mean quite a wait, but John was well-equipped now and quitting was not an option anymore.

One reason for this was Izzy. John didn't want her to think of him as a quitter. But more importantly, she'd seemed so sure that he would meet the man in the fountain again. More sure than John himself, in fact, even though she'd never seen Naked Guy.

Early Thursday morning John went back to the mall, his bag of stakeout equipment over his shoulder. He took his tour around the fountain and checked if anyone was taking a bath there before he settled down on his blanket with his coffee to keep the tiredness at bay, his doughnuts, and his sports magazines. It wasn't quite as comfy as his couch in front of the TV. Still, it was bearable.

"Who are you?" The voice was loud and sudden.

Startled, John almost dropped the magazine he'd been immersed in. He jumped up and looked

around to see where the voice had come from. The man came rushing at him, almost at a run. John just stood there as if he'd been turned to stone. It was Naked Guy. Or rather, the guy he'd seen naked in the fountain, who was now fully dressed as if to defy John's expectations.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" the dressed Naked Guy repeated. He was only a few steps away now. John still stood petrified, staring at the man who seemed to loom over him as if he was going to hit him.

"Are you mute?"

John shuddered out of his rigor. "No, of course not. It's me. We met here a few days ago."

The man extended his index fingers and tapped the perplexed John on the forehead.

"I'm sure it is you. But that's not what I asked. I asked *who* you are."

John took a step backwards to get away from the guy's index finger and almost fell over the fountain wall into the water.

"My name is John. I'm the one who disturbed you while you were taking a bath here last week."

The man dropped his arm and looked closely at John, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"Indeed. You're John. John who disturbed me in my bath. Didn't think I'd see you again."

At that, he sat down on the edge of the fountain and started taking off his shoes.

John watched him. "Isn't the water freezing?"

"It is," the man said and kept undressing.

"Wouldn't it be nicer to take a bath somewhere where the water is less cold? Or at least not get fully immersed in the fountain?"

The man, now stark naked again, stood fully erect, hand on his hips. John felt awkward and strained to keep his eyes on the other guy's face.

"So, John, I gather you like your water nice and warm. If it's too cold you'll get no wetter than washing your hands. Right?"

John hesitated, then nodded.

"Okay, so that's settled. Thanks for the talk. I'll be taking my bath now." The man turned away and climbed onto the fountain wall.

John was irritated. What now? This meeting hadn't gone quite the way he'd imagined.

"In the freezing water?" he finally exclaimed before the man stepped into the fountain.

Naked Guy turned back to face John and rolled his eyes. "Yes, in the freezing water. It's not nice and warm, but I like it. I like taking the plunge."

"Why?" John asked, almost like a reflex.

"You're asking a lot of question, John. That's a good thing. But kind of annoying when I'm about to bathe."

The man looked ready to dive in but stopped and looked at John. "Because it wakes me up. I like the freezing water because it makes me feel awake. Being fully awake is important."

"Why?" John bleated again.

Naked Guy bent towards John, holding up his index finger in front of John's face. "Enough! I'm going to bathe now."

"There's something I wanted to ask you," John almost whispered to the raised finger.

"You did ask me something," the man replied and stood up again, only to bend down towards John once more. "Let me ask you something for a change: did you bring me a towel?"

John stared at him, surprised. Then he looked down at the floor and gestured at all the stuff he'd brought with him.

"No, but I do have a blanket, coffee, doughnuts, and magazines."

"I asked for a towel, though, didn't I?"

"Uhm, yes. You did."

"So have you brought me one?"

"No."

"Then you better get out of my bathroom."

At this, Naked Guy turned around and stepped down the rim of the fountain into the water. His muscles tightened on impact and he cried out, either in pain or in joy, John couldn't say which. But the water really had to be freezing. Naked Guy sloshed through the waves towards the other side of the fountain.

"Can I come back if I bring a towel?" John called after the man, who was now shivering all over from the cold. Naked Guy turned around and shrugged.

"When will you be here again?"

John's question was answered by another shrug. "I bathe whenever I feel like it," Naked Guy said.

"Of course you do." John rolled his eyes and turned to leave.

"Saturday, maybe," came the voice from the fountain behind him. "And don't forget my towel. Also, you might as well leave the doughnuts and blanket, John."

John turned around. Naked Guy had already disappeared behind the statue. John hesitated a moment before picking up his belongings. Grinning, he arranged the blanket and doughnuts on the fountain's edge. Shaking his head, he walked

away from Naked Guy's bathroom and all the way home, dismissing his initial impulse to call a cab.

Thursday afternoon John called Izzie before leaving for work. He wanted to update her on her meeting with Naked Guy. Izzie was so excited that John had to cut off her stream of questions because he had to get to work. At her insistence, he arranged to meet her that night at two a.m. at his place.

On his way to the office John remembered to buy a towel for Naked Guy. Back home, he folded it carefully and left it on the floor near his door to make sure he wouldn't forget it when he left for the fountain on Saturday. Then he plunged down on his sofa in front of the TV and waited for Izzie's arrival. He paid no attention to the programs he zapped through, just enjoying the different light patterns on his living room walls and ceiling. The multi-colored flickering soothed him.

With a grin, Izzie stepped over the towel and held out a paper bag from the bakery, which John took straight to the kitchen. When he returned to the living room, the TV was switched off and the lamp on. Izzie gestured for him to sit down on the couch and proceeded with her questions. She wanted to know every last detail and seemed almost disappointed that John's conversation with Naked Guy had been so brief. Finally, she wanted to know how John had prepared himself for the next meeting and what he planned to ask Naked

Guy. John couldn't answer either of these questions, so Izzie took it upon herself to offer some helpful suggestions.

When it was time for her to head off to work, John was secretly relieved. Izzie was reluctant to leave and made him promise he'd keep her posted about anything to do with the stranger at the fountain. She seemed particularly interested in Naked Guy's schedule - such as it were - and wanted to know whether there were any kind of signs or if the man just showed up unexpectedly as John was about to fall asleep and whether he only showed up at the fountain or might be found anywhere else. As weird as these questions seemed to him, John kept his mouth shut as he didn't want to risk prolonging the interrogation.

Once Izzie had gone, he fetched one of the buns she'd brought, lay down on the couch, and switched the TV back on. Only now did he realize that with all her curious questions, Izzie had managed to cheat him out of sex. He took a deep breath. It didn't bother him as much as he'd thought. The relief he'd felt when Izzie had finally left brought him enough satisfaction. Soon, the flickering light of the television had done their magic. Feeling comfortably drowsy, he went to bed.

The following night John couldn't wait to get off work, pick up his stakeout kit, and head off to the fountain. The chances of meeting Naked Guy

were pretty good, which made him a bit nervous. He picked up the towel and put it in his bag along with a box of doughnuts he'd picked up on his commute home. Then he headed out.

There was no one at the fountain as John arrived. After a few minutes, he wished he'd stayed home a little longer or at least brought something to read.

Sometime later, when he'd eaten two doughnuts and walked around the fountain a few times, John saw Naked Guy come up the stairs from the parking lot. Had he driven there? Despite the cold and the slight frustration he felt by now, John was relieved to see him. Relieved, and even a bit happy. He rushed over to his bag, took out the towel and waved it around.

"I brought your towel," he said in greeting as the man sat down next to him on the rim of the fountain and started to take off his clothes, just like last time.

"I brought you a towel, just like you asked me to. That means I'm allowed in your bathroom. And I can ask you a question."

The man, now half-naked, looked him in the eyes. "Good for you." He continued to undress.

"The thing is, a colleague of mine just dropped everything and left. He went away, far away. For good. To some island or somewhere, I don't know. And I want to know why."

The stranger, now in his boxers, stood up, glanced briefly at John's puzzled face, and shrugged.

"I guess he wanted to get away."

Having said that, he took off his boxers and started to step onto the rim of the fountain.

"Well, yes. Obviously he wanted to get away. But why?"

The naked man on the edge of the fountain turned to face John.

"Shouldn't you ask him that?"

"I did. And he did explain, in a way. He wants to get away because he doesn't like it here anymore. He said something about life in the city and that it works the way it works, about people who aren't happy, stuff like that. And that's why he left. And I thought since you also ..."

Naked Guy narrowed his eyes.

"Since I also what?"

John took a step back.

"Well ... since you also kind of left ..."

Naked Guy jumped off the fountain rim and stood right in front of John, who took another step backwards.

"I haven't left, I'm right here. Sure feels like I'm here, anyway," he said and began to touch his head and chest, feigning wonderment.

"Yes, of course you're here. You haven't left physically. But you did kind of drop out, and I thought you might be able to tell me why."

"Well, lucky me! So I haven't left after all. But now you're saying I dropped out? And what is it I dropped out of, as you so kindly put it?"

"Well, I just thought since, you know, you're taking baths in a public fountain at the crack of dawn and ... don't you live on the streets?"

Naked Guy bent down to John and stared hard at him.

"Here's a question for you: Did you bring a second towel?"

John couldn't hold the man's gaze and instead searched the ground for another towel though he knew perfectly well he had only brought the one.

"No. Just one," he whispered.

Naked Guy stood straight and climbed back onto the fountain rim.

"Well, that's it then. Towel. Question. Answer. That was the deal. No more towels, no more answers."

"But you didn't even answer my question!"

“Yes, I did.”

“But not the one I asked.”

“So I’ve answered a question you didn’t even ask? Interesting. I must be hearing voices.”

“Well, I did ask it, but it was the wrong question. I didn’t ask it right.”

“Not my problem.”

John started to gesticulate helplessly.

“I’ll bring another towel tomorrow. Ten towels even, if you want them. Or wait, here, I have money. I’ll give you money so you can buy a towel or whatever you prefer.”

“I’m not taking your money.” Naked Guy sounded angry now. “I’m not a whore.”

Bending down again he fingered John’s jacket appraisingly. “I do like your jacket, though.”

John pushed the man’s arm away.

“That jacket cost a lot of money.”

Naked Guy stepped down from the fountain ledge and moved his hands from John’s shoulders to the cuffs of the jacket in what seemed an attempt to measure its size.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I provide rather costly answers.”

Awkwardly, John tried to ward off Naked Guy's hands, which only seemed to spurn his opponent on.

"Hey!" came a shout from behind them.

Startled, both John and Naked Guy turned and stared into the direction the voice had come from. They saw a woman rushing towards the fountain.

"Oh, shit, not her," Naked Guy grumbled before stepping quickly into the fountain.

"Do you know her?" John said.

"She's the Saint of the Island. Come to save me."

"Was he bothering you?" the woman asked John when she reached him, looking sternly at Naked Guy in his fountain.

"Absolutely not," Naked Guy replied before John could say anything. "He was just about to give me his jacket."

"I did not ask you," the woman said.

She turned to John again, gave him a friendly smile and helped him straighten his rumpled jacket.

"No, thank you, everything's fine. We just had a talk," John said with a nod. He still felt a little taken aback by the woman's interruption.

"Well, I'm afraid you may have picked the wrong person for that," the woman said. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked again, mustering him with a look of such honest benevolence that he felt awkward.

Naked Guy started giggling. "He, he, he! Now she wants to save you, too! She wants to save everybody!"

The woman ignored him.

"Don't let him hassle you. He is basically harmless but if he sets his mind to it he can really mess with your head."

"Who's hassling?" Naked Guy protested from the fountain. He was shivering from the cold by now. "You call the tender effusions of my profound realism 'hassling'?"

The woman turned to face the fountain.

"Socrates, today is Saturday. I'll be expecting you at the shelter for your medical checkup later. And you better come or I'll have them look for you and bring you in."

"Yeah, yeah, woman! I'll be there," Naked Guy grunted before taking off through the water to the other side of the sculpture and out of sight, just like the morning before.

"My name is Joanna," the woman said with a smile, her hand stretched out. John shook the prof-

ferred hand hesitantly and introduced himself. Joanna gestured towards the leftover doughnuts and asked if she could have one. John picked up the box and offered it to her. Smiling, Joanna took one and sat down on the fountain ledge. She thanked John for the doughnut and patted the spot beside her.

After John sat down, Joanna started telling him about Naked Guy, or rather Socrates, which wasn't his real name, either, but fitting. Socrates, Joanna said, lived in one of the abandoned building down by the canal. He always came to the fountain to bathe. Joanna also told John about the soup kitchen where she volunteered. It was there that she'd met Socrates several years ago. He'd complained about the food, which in his view lacked seasoning.

"We're giving you a chance to do good here," he'd said. "So you should at least do it right." Smiling softly, Joanna dropped her gaze to the unbitten doughnut she was holding.

Then she hastened to add that John shouldn't worry. Socrates tended to act strange and gruff but deep inside he was one of the best people she knew.

John ran his hand through his hair, feeling doubtful. He told Joanna about his first encounter with Socrates and his failed attempt to talk to him about Alexander. Joanna nodded sympathetically. Before she could reply, however, Socrates stepped out of the fountain right next to them and started

drying off with his new towel. John and Joanna silently waited until he was done and dressed. To John's surprise, Joanna handed Socrates the doughnut she had been holding. There were several left in the box and he, John, would have gladly shared them. He just hadn't thought he needed to mention it. Socrates took the doughnut. Before taking a bite, he had to drop a comment about Joanna's desperate attempts to save him in any possible way.

John offered Joanna the box again, but she declined. He shrugged, took a pastry and placed the box in front of Socrates, who had sat down on the ground before them. Immediately he took another doughnut, now holding one in each hand. Joanna asked Socrates how things were going and what he had been up to these past few days. He balked at her questions, telling her in no uncertain terms that it was none of her business. They went back and forth for a while, and it seemed to John that it wasn't the first time they'd had that particular conversation. There was a certain tension between Joanna and Socrates, palpable even to John, who had just met the two of them. Yet he also felt that there was a special kind of connection. And that confused him even more. Joanna remained calm throughout, her voice soft and gentle. Socrates, on the other hand, brimmed with almost aggressive energy and seemed desperate to evade Joanna's solicitude and care. In the end, however, he told her everything she wanted to know.

Somehow, they switched to other topics. They talked about politics and current affairs, about which both appeared to be very knowledgeable, as far as John was able to say. He, John, only browsed the news for the latest sports results. The rest didn't really interest him. Certainly not enough to follow Joanna and Socrates' conversation. What he understood clearly though was that the two of them couldn't agree on one single thing.

Over the course of the discussion, Socrates and John finished off the doughnuts. Finally, Joanna got up, picked up the box and walked over to one of the many trashcans installed all around the mall. The two men's eyes followed her.

"She's completely wacko," Socrates said. "But, for just one moment, I'd really like to see the world through her eyes."

Joanna came back but didn't sit down again. Instead, she stood before John and looked him in the eyes.

"You haven't said much, John. Next time, it would be nice if you talked a bit more or joined our discussion."

"Next time?" Socrates said. "Why the hell would there be a next time?"

"Language, please, Socrates. If John wants to come back, I'll be here. You can do whatever you want."

John explained about his work schedule and said he would come by in the early morning whenever he got a chance. Socrates immediately wanted to know what kind of job would screw up John's daily rhythm that way but Joanna waved the question off, stopping John from answering. After they agreed to meet the same time next morning, Joanna said goodbye to John and took Socrates' arm, leaving him no option but to come with her.

"May I call you Socrates?" John called after them.

Joanna turned to face him, still holding Socrates' arm. When Socrates failed to give an answer, she nudged him with her hips.

"Only if you bring doughnuts," said he.

John smiled and nodded. He watched the unlikely pair walk down the stairs and over the parking lot. It was beginning to dawn. Soon, the mall would open. He could just wait here and do his weekend shopping or come back in the afternoon.

Lost in thought, John stared into the fountain and listened to its gurgling. After a while, he got up and decided to take a cab home. He wasn't exactly tired, but weirdly exhausted. It had been the strangest experience he'd had in years, if not his whole life. He didn't know what it was all about, much less, what it meant for him.

As he woke up on his couch in front of the TV later, he wasn't so sure anymore whether he really

wanted to return to the fountain and meet his two companions again. Joanna and Socrates were just so different from the people he usually associated with. Except maybe Izzie. She probably would have loved to talk to them. She would have asked them a million questions. Especially with Joanna in the mix. Joanna and Socrates. The thought of dealing with his new acquaintances again made John feel strangely uncomfortable.

To distract himself from this weird feeling, John spent the rest of the day watching television and visiting his favorite bar. In both cases he drank beer and watched games. Finding that he didn't enjoy himself, he decided he would try to meet Joanna and Socrates again, after all. He even made coffee and packed enough mugs for all of them before taking a cab to the mall early Sunday morning.

When he arrived at the fountain, Joanna was already there as promised. She was sitting on the fountain ledge, seemingly lost in thought. When she saw him coming, she leapt up and gave him a hug. Taken aback, John was unsure how to respond. In the end, he hugged her back, albeit awkwardly.

He asked about Socrates, though he didn't think he would be there yet. With a shrug, he told Joanna how he had waited hours for Socrates the previous times. Joanna looked a bit sad as she agreed that one could never really know when or

where Socrates would show up. Then she let her gaze slowly sweep over the fountain, the stairs, and the part of the parking lot that was visible in the dim light of the mall lamps. She looked like she was trying to will Socrates to appear. When she noticed John watching her, she forced a smile. "Capricious like a diva," she said. John decided to ignore the tone of worry in her voice and offered her hot coffee from his thermos and a doughnut. She thanked him and accepted the coffee. They chatted for a while, agreeing that it was nice to have the mall to themselves and that one could get used to sitting on the fountain ledge at this hour. This seemed to perk up Joanna a bit. She told the story of her first meeting with Socrates again with more detail, describing how he'd acted up in the soup kitchen and how taken aback and intimidated she'd felt. She could laugh about it now, she said, but back then, in that moment, she never wanted to have to see him again. Yet in spite of this, she'd felt oddly impressed by him. That hadn't changed. On the one hand, she found him insufferable. On the other incredibly fascinating.

John listened patiently as she talked. He was just about to tell Joanna about Alexander's departure when Socrates came rushing up the stairs. In lieu of a greeting, he complained that they had started their coffee break without him and that the tastiest doughnuts were probably all gone. Joanna raised her arms in exaggerated helplessness and gave John a look that told him this was one of

those moments where she found Socrates insufferable. John just grinned and held out a mug of coffee and the box of doughnuts to Socrates. Socrates declined both and started to undress. He would bathe first and have breakfast later, he announced. John and Joanna watched him as he stepped naked and clearly struggling to suppress a cry into the freezing water before wading over to the other side of the sculpture.

Joanna laughed and shook her head. Then she felt the water with her fingers. It was so icy that she pulled her hand back quickly. As she dried it on her coat, she commented that there was just no way she would go into the fountain in this cold. John agreed with her without even needing to feel the water.

While they waited for Socrates to return, Joanna told John that this was Socrates' daily ritual – he bathed every morning, if not in this fountain, then someplace else. He said it made him more aware and stronger. John said he doubted the health benefit of being as aware as the freezing water would make you.

Socrates had come back. When he was fully clothed again, they all had breakfast. This time, it was Joanna who did most of the talking. She told them about the remodeling at the shelter and the soup kitchen, the great new beds that have been

delivered the day before, and the wonderful tableware and cutlery that would replace the plastic ones they had used before.

Socrates didn't seem to care too much about her stories. He mumbled something about what a do-gooder she was and that he couldn't care less about all that. Finally, he took two more doughnuts, stuffed them in his pockets, and left. He did, however, deign to nod at them before he turned.

Joanna looked after him. Then she smiled at John. She apologized for Socrates' behavior and assured John yet again that the old grump didn't mean to hurt anyone and was actually a wonderful guy. Maybe, she said, Socrates was even too good for this world. John nodded sympathetically and took Joanna's hand in his. He didn't know why he did that. It just seemed right at the moment. Deep inside, however, he did not quite share Joanna's high opinion of Socrates. Before hugging goodbye, they agreed to meet again the next morning – same time, same place.

Briefly, John considered dropping by Izzie's bakery, where he knew she'd be working this morning, but he decided against it. He was tired and not in the mood for another round of interrogation. Besides, he had no answers to her many questions. Instead, he took a cab back to his apartment and slept a few hours before heading out for a run. He felt in much better shape than the last time, which had only been a few days ago. He also

ran a bit slower than last time. His thoughts were back at the fountain. On the way back home he even picked up a few newspapers. After his shower, he browsed them in front of his TV. This time, he didn't skip to the sports section but also read a few articles on current events as well as background reports. If Joanna and Socrates launched into another discussion, John at least wanted to understand what they were talking about.

However, there were no discussions the following morning. Joanna and John waited in vain on the fountain ledge. Socrates didn't show up for his morning ablutions. Maybe Mondays weren't bath days for him. Or not at that fountain. So they just sat there and drank coffee and John had a few doughnuts.

Joanna asked him about his Sunday - what did he do, how did he spend his free day? She also wanted to know about his work and was interested in every detail. John soon found himself in an unusually chatty mood. He gladly answered all her questions. Earlier, when it became apparent that Socrates was a no-show, John had feared it would be awkward sitting there with Joanna. After all, she hadn't come to meet him but Socrates. But he soon realized how wrong he'd been. He felt at ease in Joanna's company, and she didn't seem to mind being here alone with him, either. On the contrary: he soon started to feel that same sense of

familiarity with Joanna that he had previously noticed between her and Socrates. It was strange. Strange, but nice. John hardly knew Joanna, and yet he felt as if he was sitting there with his long-lost pal he'd known ever since they shared a sand-box. When they ended their wait, they agreed to meet again the next morning.

Before leaving, Joanna asked if she could take the remaining doughnuts with her. John gladly gave them to her, a little embarrassed that he had eaten so many. She thanked him and hugged him goodbye.

Early next morning, Joanna and John once again sat waiting on the fountain ledge. Joanna asked John about his day at the office. She seemed a bit disappointed to hear that work had been pretty boring and he had mainly thought about his next meeting with her and Socrates. She then wanted to know if John didn't enjoy working and looked forward to each new day at the office. When he merely shrugged, she uttered a deep sigh.

John was just about to ask her why she had sighed when Socrates came rushing up the stairs. No sooner had he reached the fountain than he asked them accusingly why they had started their coffee break without him yet again and how much he had missed already. Joanna gave him a brief summary of their conversation about John's work and his feelings about it - or lack thereof. Socrates made a dismissive gesture, muttering something

about wealth that didn't just materialize out of thin air and life in the city, which was what it was. Then he grabbed a doughnut, holding it in his mouth as he undressed.

While Socrates took his bath, John refilled his and Joanna's coffee mugs. He also took a doughnut, his first of the day. He had waited for one of the others to take one first and decided to have no more than two. Joanna could take the rest with her when she left.

It soon became clear there wouldn't be too many pastries left, however. Once Socrates was bathed and dressed, he helped himself to one doughnut after the other. In between bites, he answered Joanna's questions in his typically prickly and very direct, almost even aloof manner. Then the two of them talked about the latest soup kitchen gossip and mutual acquaintances who, John could only guess, moved in the same circles.

John felt quite the outsider during these discussions. Still, he was fascinated to see the obvious chemistry between his two companions. They kept exchanging jibes, and neither of the two seemed to be able to stop themselves from trying to dissuade, persuade or convince the other of something. Yet there also were these almost imperceptible, yet intense moments of familiarity. A look, gesture, or word that showed how connected they were. In these moments, each seemed to know exactly what the other one thought or felt. It was as if their

views of the world and life itself were absolutely synchronized for just one instant.

In the end, though, both seemed to be relieved that they would go their separate ways until their next meeting, which would definitely take place. Naturally, Socrates did not leave without grabbing the remaining doughnuts. John looked at Joanna and was about to intervene when he saw her smile and shake her head a little. She hugged John goodbye and told him she would be there the next day at the same time.

Wednesday morning John brought two boxes of doughnuts, which Joanna acknowledged with a grateful smile when she saw him. She did not try to hide her sympathy as she told John that Socrates had already been there, bathed, and left. He had come earlier than usual and was gone now. John shrugged. He had suspected it when he'd seen the wet footprints near the fountain. He merely expressed his surprise that Socrates hadn't waited around for coffee and doughnuts. Joanna laughed as she agreed with him. Socrates was always one for surprises, she said. Just when you thought you had him figured out, he did something unexpected. Not out of malice. He just couldn't help himself. She repeated her assessment of him: Socrates was as moody as he was brilliant. Joining in her laughter, John sat down next to Joanna on the fountain ledge.

Just like the days before, Joanna asked him about his day and his work. She wanted to know whether John had enjoyed work more this day. In lieu of an answer, he rolled his eyes meaningfully. But Joanna insisted. She wanted to know what brought him joy. Was there anything? John didn't have to think about the answer: "Izzie." Joanna beamed. Blushing, John stared at his feet. When he felt his face getting cooler, he told Joanna how Izzie had encouraged him to return to the fountain to meet Socrates again and ask him about Alexander. He still hadn't managed to do that, at least not the way he wanted. He hoped that this would take the spotlight off the whole Izzie story.

It seemed to work: Joanna didn't probe any further but told him about herself and her work at the soup kitchen and shelter. Born and raised on the Island, she hadn't traveled far. Her community work claimed a good part of her time. John was fascinated that Joanna had been born in the northern part of the Island – the part Izzie so despised – though she now lived in the south. However, Joanna didn't provide any details about her upbringing. Instead, she shared anecdotes of her daily work in the soup kitchen and shelter.

John wanted to know how she managed to stay inspired and motivated despite the many depressing aspects of that work.

"You're right, it's hard at times, being face to face with the poverty and suffering on the streets

of the city," she said and continued, sounding passionate: "But if you look closely, you also see and experience so much warmth and humanity among these people. It's not so much about suffering and poverty than the hope that lives everywhere. As long as there is the possibility of laughter and cheer, even under these circumstances and among people battling with them, there is hope for humanity. Or rather, the hope that happiness is something that just has to do with being human and not with the circumstances. I truly believe that someday all of us will find our way back to that kind of happiness."

She glanced at John, who must have looked skeptical rather than impressed. She got up, smiled, and said that it was exactly this belief that made her a do-gooder and world savior in Socrates' eyes. Then she held out her arms to John. He got up and let her hug him. Before picking up the two untouched boxes of doughnuts, thanking him again, she let him know that she would be back the next morning and that he shouldn't be afraid to ask Socrates any questions he had. Then she marched off towards the stairs. John looked after her as she walked down, crossed the parking lot, and disappeared into the still-dark morning.

It was earlier than the previous days, so he decided to walk home. He thought about Izzie and considered walking by her place, but he'd taken a different route and didn't feel like turning around

again. He could have called a cab to her, but he dismissed that idea. His mind was still with Joanna and Socrates.

Back at his apartment, he settled in front of the TV, ready to face out the usual way. Instead of watching, though, he fell asleep almost immediately as the programs were boring and his trips to the fountain had eaten into his sleep time.

When he awoke, still lying on his sofa, it was Wednesday afternoon. He would be late for work. To his surprise, this realization did not bother him. It didn't even make him hurry up and rush to the office. Quite the contrary. He sat up on his sofa, stretched a bit this way and that, and turned off the television. Then he took a shower and had some coffee. Just as he was about to leave, he changed his mind and went back into the living room. He was late anyway. In for a penny, in for a pound. He sat on a chair and dialed Izzie's number. After all, he had promised to keep her updated about his visits to the fountain.

Izzie sounded excited to hear about Socrates and Joanna again, but also disappointed that John obviously hadn't been too forthcoming at the fountain. Still, she wanted to know everything. She wanted to meet him that same night, but John used his prior engagement with Joanna at the fountain as an excuse to decline. His early-morning meetings with Joanna and Socrates at the fountain had

become a regular thing and he didn't want to interrupt that. Basically, this meant that he had no time to meet Izzie. Also, he started to regret having called her in the first place. The longer he talked to her, the more he realized that he didn't want to tell her any more about Joanna and Socrates. It was all so new and unfamiliar to himself – he still needed time to process. He ended the call claiming that he really needed to get to work – which wasn't a lie, but not the whole truth, either – and promised to call again soon.

After ringing off, John did go to the office, though he didn't exactly hurry. Once again, his mind was back at the fountain. He was increasingly irritated that Socrates hadn't answered his questions about Alexander. He hadn't even really acknowledged them, to be precise. And he, John, didn't get to say much at these meetings, anyway. He still seemed to be insufficiently informed about world events even though he had been reading or at least perusing the papers pretty regularly these past days. It seemed like the others didn't want to let him join their conversation. Or at least Socrates didn't. Socrates liked to talk and preferred others to listen. John decided to push his questions at the next meeting. Joanna had encouraged him to do so anyway.

Though John arrived very late at the office, the few remaining hours of his business day seemed to stretch on forever. Work seemed even more boring

and tedious than usual and John began to feel he was wasting his time. What irked him even more was that he had no idea where that feeling suddenly came from. It wasn't as if he had other things to do. He couldn't meet the others at the fountain yet - much too early for that. And he didn't have any place else to be, either. Nevertheless, he felt a strong impulse to leave the office - and did so early despite the fact that he'd shown up late.

Getting doughnuts and brewing coffee didn't take long. When he had filled the thermos, John tried to unwind in front of the TV and kill some time before he could finally head out. It didn't work. His restless channel hopping and the flickering images rushing by on the screen only made him more nervous.

When he could take it no more, he fled his apartment and started walking the streets. Only it didn't feel like walking so much as being chased. Pushed on by his inner tension and impatience, he trod along, hardly noticing his whereabouts and not caring where his restlessness took him. He only wanted to keep moving. Sitting still, first at his desk in the office and then on his sofa in front of the TV, had become unbearable. He'd hardly ever felt like this. Bored. Wasteful. True, he had to kill or waste some time now, too, before he would meet the others at the fountain. But this was different. He wasn't sitting or standing still.

Street corners seemed to pop up in his field of vision like images on his television screen. Some looked familiar while others were totally new to him. He stopped at crossroads to let the traffic pass. He crossed small parks, moving from one pool of street lamp light to the next, surrounded by what felt like black walls.

After a while he felt better. Walking through the cool night air soothed him. He began to calm down. Now he started to notice the street signs and tried to find out where he was. In the end, he hailed a cab and let it drive him home. He watched a rerun of an old game until it was time to head out to the fountain. The game held little thrill, but the flickering lights had regained their familiar, calming effect.

The others were already at the fountain when John arrived. Joanna stood watching as Socrates disappeared behind the sculpture in the center. As had become their custom, she greeted John with a hug. He poured a cup of coffee for her and offered her a doughnut, which she declined as always. He placed the box on the ground and sat down next to her on the fountain ledge. When John told her how he'd overslept after waiting at the fountain and arrived late at the office yesterday, Joanna first laughed and then asked earnestly if it caused him trouble at work. She seemed relieved when he smiled and shook his head. Joanna started to say

something but was interrupted by Socrates shouting from the back of the fountain: "Has the doughnut delivery finally arrived?" He came sloshing to the ledge and bent over John and Joanna to grab one of the pastries from the box, showering them with droplets of water. When he wanted to take another one, John pushed the box with his foot out of Socrates' reach.

"Finish that one first, why don't you?"

Socrates stared unbelievingly at John, then Joanna.

"He's got a point, Socrates," she said. "One at a time. There's enough for everyone."

"Did I miss something? Am I at the wrong fountain?"

"No, you're not," said John. "But we had a quid-pro-quo deal. Doughnuts for answers. And I think I'm finally due some answers."

"What John is trying to say," Joanna amended, "is that he wants to ask some questions we may then discuss."

"We've been discussing all sorts of things all along," Socrates replied tartly.

"We have. But he has some questions of his own he'd like us to discuss. And he has been bringing us all these nice treats."

"So what? Nobody's forcing him to bring anything."

"Come on, Socrates. You do owe him some civility and good will. After all he's not here because he enjoys your bad manners and swimming tricks."

"I don't owe him anything."

Joanna shot John a glance that asked for support.

"You're right, Socrates. You don't owe me anything. That's not what I meant. I just want to be part of the conversation. And I do have some questions I'd like to ask you."

"And what would I have to discuss with the likes of you, you blind little worm? When I explain something, you don't get it. Nor do you have anything interesting to say. You bore me. Coffee and doughnuts are the only interest you hold."

John felt his jaw drop.

"Socrates!" Joanna almost screamed.

"What?"

"You apologize to John. Right now! You can't talk to him like that!"

"Well, as it turns out, I can."

"Enough, Socrates. Stop acting obnoxious and start behaving like a decent human being."

"Why am I the bad guy? This one's too dumb to open his eyes and live his life. He's got nothing interesting to tell. That's not on me."

"It's not true that John doesn't know anything. And he certainly isn't dumb. No one's dumb, Socrates."

"Yeah, right. And pigs can fly."

"Okay, so people sometimes do or fail to do things and that casts a, shall we say, less than favorable light on them. You're no exception there, by the way. But we're not talking about people, we're talking about John. And he's come to talk to us. So we'll talk."

"Talk about what? There's nothing there."

"Socrates!" Joanna raised a warning finger.

In a gesture of desperation, Socrates threw his hands up and did a full turn. He was still standing in the fountain.

"Heavens, what do you want from me?" he exclaimed, looking theatrically towards the sky. Then he turned towards John and Joanna.

"Let's be real. This guy's been coming here for days now, here, to this fountain, but I bet you anything he doesn't even know what this sculpture there in the center is and what it means."

Now Socrates and Joanna were both looking at John, who reflexively turned to the center of the

fountain. Socrates was right. He had no idea what that sculpture was. He'd never paid it any attention, for all the time he'd sat here. But unlike that first morning when he'd been drunk and met Socrates for the first time, he could at least make it out. It was a kind of big wheel and it turned. A waterwheel. There was one statue to the left of it and another to the right. Feeling stupid, John turned back and looked at the other two but dropped his gaze when he met their eyes.

"The sculpture doesn't matter, Socrates," Joanna said. "Can't we just all sit here, enjoy the coffee and doughnuts, and have a good time?"

This said, she grabbed a doughnut from the box and took a big bite.

Socrates stepped out of the fountain and dressed.

"Of course it's not about sculptures. But if he doesn't even see what's right in front of him, what does he see?"

Nobody said anything as Socrates continued putting on his clothes. When he was done, he walked away without a word, down the stairs, and disappeared on the far side of the parking lot. Joanna watched John as she finished her doughnut. He'd been sitting hunched over for the past few minutes, staring at his feet. Now he swallowed several times. Joanna scooted over to him and put one arm on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," John barely managed to whisper.

"For what?" Joanna asked, sounding cheerful.
"For challenging the old grump and making him drop his guard? Or for keeping him from eating all the doughnuts?"

John smiled, albeit weakly. Joanna stroked his back. It felt both encouraging and comforting.

"Believe me, I know him. He likes to put on a show. You need to take him with a grain of salt."

John looked at her. His eyes shimmered with the tears he had managed to hold back.

"I didn't want to make him mad. And I definitely didn't want to start a fight between the two of you."

"Have you met us? We fight all the time, no external spark needed."

John's smile broadened as he nodded.

"John, you mustn't take this to heart. That's just the way he is. He's not as hard as may seem to you right now. He just can't help himself."

"Well, he did rip into me alright. And he wasn't that far off base, either."

"Of course he was off base. Most importantly, he took the wrong tone. I'll be sure to let him know what I think about that."

"Thanks, but that won't be necessary. It was my fault. I screwed up. So much for my visits at the fountain. The next time Socrates sets eyes on me he'll probably beat me up. Unless you're around, of course."

"I don't think so. First of all, he isn't violent, believe it or not. That's just not him. Also, he likes you."

"Excuse me? If this was how he treats people he likes what does he do those he doesn't? Plus, he made pretty clear what he thinks about me."

"That he did. But did you pay close attention to what he said?"

"Socrates very explicitly stated that --"

"He has a much better opinion of you than he cares to admit."

"Hardly."

"John, I've known the guy for a long, long time. You should trust me."

"Sorry. It's not that I don't trust you. But after this little spiel it's hard to believe that he doesn't despise me completely."

"You know, if he really didn't like you or didn't care one way or the other he wouldn't even notice your existence. Much less talk to you. But he obviously did notice you and talked to you quite a bit, wouldn't you agree?"

"Well, yes. In his own particular way he did."

"There you go. It's up to you whether your visits to the fountain are over or not. You can stay away and not meet us again. Or you keep coming and pick up where you started today."

With this, Joanna got up and started to rinse the coffee mugs in the fountain.

"And by the way," she said. "I also like you a lot."

John took a deep breath and exhaled again.

"Thank you, Joanna. And thanks for rinsing the mugs."

Smiling, she held them out to him so he could pack them in his bag. He handed her the doughnut box. They hugged a bit longer than usual before going their separate ways.

John had almost reached the street when it hit him that he could take another look at the sculpture in the fountain. Socrates had been right – he didn't know what exactly it depicted and meant. Now that he thought about it he remembered that it was something to do with the city. A few years back when the mall opened, someone – probably the investor or owner – had given a speech and unveiled the sculpture. John recalled that the fountain was supposed to symbolize the city or its greatness or something. There was also some kind of reference to the city's founders, but John's

memory was foggy on that. Basically, the unveiling ceremony consisted of little more than turning a tap. There had come a gurgle from somewhere and the fountain had started to fill with water. Nobody had paid much attention as they all just waited to storm the new mall and spend money. John, too. He'd returned every weekend since to do his groceries and other shopping. He'd often sit in one of the cafés, which put up their tables near the fountain when the weather was nice. But Socrates was right: even though John had practically witnessed the fountain's birth and been near it time and again since then, he knew next to nothing about the sculpture. Until very recently, that hadn't bothered him. And even now he thought he'd survive if he never found out what the sculpture was all about. Still, it had been an interesting observation on Socrates' part.

But John felt no inclination to think about it anymore. Not now. He was tired. It had been a long day, after all. More importantly, the recent incidents had left him exhausted. He hailed a cab and gave the driver his address. When he got home, he headed straight to bed without even considering turning on the TV as usual.

He awoke hoping that he'd slept late into the afternoon and would miss several hours of work again. To his disappointment, he realized he'd woken before his alarm. Irritated, he turned off the alarm and got up. He didn't get dressed, though,

but started up his computer to research the fountain. There were lots of pages with images or references to the fountain, but most of them were for shops in the mall or some other kind of commercial websites.

Finally John came upon an article about the mall opening ceremony that described the fountain in some detail. As it turned out, the sculpture did refer to the city and its founding fathers. Its centerpiece was a real, historic waterwheel that had once powered some industrial plant on the canal that, as many of them, had been torn down to build the mall. The wheel was intended as a reminder of the city's glorious past. The statues to the sides of it depicted two of the city's founders. One of them stood upright, holding a weaving bobbin in one hand and a scroll in the other. This was supposed to be Lord Byron Munchhausen, builder of the canal and founder of the city. The scroll in his hand then had to be the city charter or a blueprint for the canal. The other, smaller figure stood bent over towards the waterwheel. It held some tools with which it repaired something. The pool surrounding the sculpture symbolized the canal, which had been "the city's lifeline".

The author of the article was enthusiastic about the "glorious past meeting an even greater future". Where once had stood industrial plants, there was now a modern shopping emporium that catered to all needs and had something for everyone. The

mall's website said more or less the same thing - how the mall had been built at this site of historic importance and how it would be a priority to honor the significance of this place. How the officials meant to commemorate the heritage of the founding fathers and develop the city following their vision so that the proud past would be followed by an even better future.

The rest of the article focused on the owner of the mall, his exceptional character and the visionary entrepreneurship that would benefit the city and bring its citizens wealth and what so ever.

That was all John could find about the fountain and sculpture. He turned off his computer. All these articles had sounded a little too much like sales pitches. Anyway, now he knew what the sculpture was meant to represent. He doubted, though, that the founders' vision of the city's future had included a gigantic mall where thousands of people gathered every day to buy some useful things and a huge lot of stuff that nobody really needed. If John had any say in the matter, he'd much rather have the waterwheel turn its rounds in the canal water than sit smack in the middle of that fountain.

The thought of turning wheels reminded him of work and he groaned. From the moment he'd opened his eyes he had felt this resistance to go to the office. Maybe he should go anyway. But upon very short deliberation he decided that he didn't

have a too bad conscience about it, so he called in sick. While he dialed John thought about an explanation for him staying at home, something like a feeling of malaise, but he needn't have bothered. When he called, the assistant didn't ask any questions but only told him to get well soon.

Instantly feeling better, John went to the fridge for one of the protein drinks he'd bought as part of his new fitness regime, sat on the couch and picked up the remote control. He was about to switch on the TV when something stopped him. Rolling his eyes, he muttered a curse. Whomever those statues in the fountain represented, none of them could be a founding father. The founding fathers wouldn't have had weaving bobbins or any of those other tools.

John dropped the remote. The city had been founded long before the age of industrialization, long before the canal was built. Its cradle was in Oldtown, the historic part of town up north where the first canal work had begun much later. Building the canal had taken decades, at least that's what John had been taught at school. He slapped his forehead. It was so obvious. He should have seen it right away. Oldtown was like an open-air museum, with historic buildings everywhere. You couldn't walk through it without learning some fact about the city's history and the times it was founded. John felt stupid for failing to remember this earlier. The fountain seemed to be a complete

fake. Or maybe not the fountain but its supposed meaning, the version of history they tried to sell with it.

John picked up the remote again, trying to imagine what Socrates would say to him. Did he know something about the sculpture now? Or was he still ignorant. He did know what its components were. He knew what people thought it represented. And he knew the meaning it was supposed to convey. He'd heard that at the opening ceremony and read about it just now. But the real meaning of the waterwheel and the figures – what their time was like, where they came from, their stories, and what they really represented: that he didn't know.

John threw the remote onto the sofa. He was playing hooky, so why not go outside and get some fresh air. He got dressed, stepped out onto the street and started walking north, up to Oldtown, where the city had been born.

He felt certain that he'd once known a lot more about his city's history. As a kid, he used to go on weekend daytrips to the northern part of town with his family. Up north was not just the historic part of town but also the park area, a popular spot then and now. At the center of the park was a large hill, a solitary foothill that formed the end of the mountain range to the east. Oldtown was located at the foot of the hill, to the other side of it from where John lived now. By now, it was no more

than a quarter – a small, albeit one of the most interesting ones – of a city that had grown considerable over time.

All in all, John loved his city. Safe for a few weeks' vacations, he had never left it. And why would he? He liked it here. It was perfectly located. The city's landscape was defined by the foothills of the mountains in the north and the river that literally cut through the range, flowing as it did in a deep canyon that made the foothill appear like a cut-off toe. The river, which formed the Island's western limit, was the by far the largest in this part of the country. It rose from a source deep in the heartland and was fed by smaller rivers and streams that issued into it, swelling it to a stately body of water. It meandered for hundreds of kilometers, cutting valleys between majestic mountains, before flowing through the city, leaving the Island behind in an elegant swerve and running further to the southeast where it issued into the sea.

Before eating through the hills in the north, the river bent one last time to the west, flowing along the foot of the hill on Oldtown side as if looking for the best place to break through. It was at this bend that the first recorded settlement had been and here, too, was where the canal had started, which formed the Island's eastern limit starting at the end of the 'cut-off toe'.

The city had long since spread and now encompassed numerous quarters with their respective centers, but the Island remained the true heart of the town. It didn't cover a large area and had a pretty clear structure. To the south, where the canal met the river again, was Newtown. Izzie's bakery was located there. Next stop up the river and the canal was the Financial District with its imposing office buildings and hotels. Interspersed between the steel-and-glass structures were a few older buildings that evoked nostalgic times John was too young to remember. Next to the Financial District lay the northern part of the Island, a huge residential area. This was where John lived.

Walking to the top of the hill would take him about two hours, John thought. From there, he just needed to go down to Oldtown.

After walking a while, he realized that he didn't remember the way or ways to the hill as precisely as he'd thought. He would just follow the road north until it ended. There were bound to be some smaller alleys or secret paths to the large park, where he would find walkways leading up the hill. The park offered numerous sports facilities, hiking and biking trails, meadows, groves, gardens, artificial ponds, kiosks, and cafés.

It was a long time since John had been up there. His parents would take him to Oldtown and up the hill. They had lived outside of Oldtown, further up the river, in one of the northern suburbs

back then. The closer he came to the hill, albeit from the other side now as with his parents back then, the more memories from those days bubbled up. He remembered, when he was old enough to be outside by himself, without his parents, he also had spent some of his afternoons after school up there.

John had now passed the entrance to the park. There were numerous ways up the hill, all of them clearly marked. John picked the shortest one. He didn't want to explore the hill but reach Oldtown as quickly as possible. It was a pretty steep climb. The path led over loose cobbles and earth, then past meadows and smaller and not-so-small groves. John started feeling hot after a few minutes. His panting grew louder with every step. It wasn't long before he had to pause, catch his breath and loosen his leg muscles. Embarrassed, he pretended that he just stopped to get his bearings. Just in case somebody saw him stop every few minutes. The ascent was much more exhausting than he remembered.

Finally, he reached a small plateau with a little playground John hadn't seen before. It looked fairly new, no more than a few years old. There were swings, slides, a jungle gym and a lawn where the kids could play football or catch – if they had enough energy after hiking all the way up here.

John could only drag himself over to the kiosk and souvenir shops that had been cleverly set up here so that people could get refreshments before tackling the last leg of the incline. There were no kids here, only a few joggers and hikers doing stretching exercises or just standing around. And of course the people who worked here. Nobody seemed pay attention to John. He bought a snack and drink and sat down at one of the few tables that had been set up outside. He was glad to lick his wounds, as it were, without being disturbed. After a little while he felt better, ready to continue his hike up the hill.

Rested and refreshed, the rest of the ascent felt much easier. It wasn't too long, either. Still, he felt breathless as he finally reached the hill's summit. His thighs were burning, but his joy and pride at having made it was stronger. He definitely had to tell Izzie about this, though he'd leave out the part about all his stops, his picnic break, the wheezing and his aching legs.

He took a few deep breaths and looked around him. Once again, he wanted to pick the shortest way down to Oldtown. He finally took the path that felt most familiar.

As he trod along he decided not to tell Izzie of his little outing after all. Not before he'd gone jogging a few more times and was in better shape. She might decide to go up with him. He needed to be prepared for that if he didn't want it to be a similar

disaster as their first jogging round. That girl wasn't easy to impress.

Thus lost in thought, he followed the path that still led him along the ridge of the hill and through a patch of forest to a clearing, where John all of a sudden stopped, feeling a smile spread over his whole face. The smile lit him up from deep within. He was standing before an old ruin. He'd forgotten about the ancient fort that had been built as protection for the first settlement – the part of the city that was now Oldtown.

John took a few careful steps into the stony remains of the fortress. Like a kaleidoscope of his youth, images of days long gone bubbled up. Playing knights' quests. Imaginary kingdoms. John, the dragon slayer. All the stories he had read and then acted out right here. For whole afternoons he had created, conquered, and ruled dozens of worlds and then, when it was time for dinner, left them, knowing that he had rescued the princess who would love him, her hero, for all eternity. Standing between the ruins of the fortress, John smiled inwardly. It had always been about the princess. For all the thrill of the adventures he needed to survive in his imagination, the princess had been the true magic of these imaginary worlds. It was she who made the stories complete. This had been an enchanted place. He had felt at home here.

After waiting a while to see if the characters of his old stories might just be hiding and decide to

venture out, John shrugged and continued on the path.

It led through another patch of wood and up to a lookout tower John had never seen before. He started to walk past it towards Oldtown but then stopped. The tower was a metal construction with stairs leading up about 65 feet to a platform with a railing of high metal bars. John wasn't fond of heights. But he had the tower to himself as there was no one else around. The view over the city from up there should be spectacular. After a few moments hesitation, his curiosity won and John started climbing the metal stairs, swiftly at first and growing slower the higher he got. For the last few steps he had to hold on tightly to the metal scaffold but he made it all the way up to the platform. Standing up there, he realized to his dismay that the floor was made of metal grille so he could see all the way down to the ground. He started feeling queasy. Concentrating on the tips of his shoes, he shuffled over to the edge of the platform and hugged the railing. Relieved to have made it, he looked up.

The view was breathtaking. John instantly forgot his trembling knees and rolling stomach. Facing south, the city stretched out before him, all the way to the horizon. He'd never seen it from this perspective. It looked like a beautiful mosaic of buildings and streets, brimming and humming with life. The river and canal stood out clearly.

From up here they seemed to hug the hill and the Island like two arms. And down there in Newtown, beyond John's neighborhood and behind the tall buildings of the Financial Districts, they shook hands. Though it wasn't visible from here, John knew where.

He walked a few steps to the right to look over the hill range. In the distance he could see the beginning of the gorge through which the river had eaten its way to the city. The gorge was an impressive natural monument. The city planners of all times had been aware of this and taken care to leave it and its surroundings untouched. It was a wild and raw place, mighty and untamed. It was part of the city and yet utterly different. And yet, the biggest and most beautiful mansions weren't all that far from it. A fascinating area.

John took another few steps to the right. The Island behind him, he let his gaze follow the river as it flowed past Oldtown and further north. Somewhere quite a distance in that direction he had grown up. The city had grown bigger and changed considerably since. The suburb where his parents' house had been was now no more than one city quarter he couldn't distinguish from the others. They anyway had sold the house and moved out of the city quite a time ago.

Oldtown on the other hand was pretty distinct. Where once the city walls had stood they had built a broad street that ran in a wide arch from one side

of the foot of the hill, near where the gorge started, to the river bend and the mouth of the canal and finally to somewhere to the right of where John stood. Oldtown was right below the fortress or what was left of it.

Back down from the platform, John followed the path that eventually led him to the foot of the hill and into Oldtown. So much here looked instantly familiar. It was surprising. While the rest of the city had grown, been redeveloped, with buildings torn down and new ones erected, Oldtown remained unchanged.

John considered walking toward the big avenue, which led past a few of the old historic stone archways, the formed gates to the city. A few remains of the old city wall were also still there, covered by large glass cases for protection, with multi-language plaques describing their historic significance. John kind of remembered his parents reading the plaques to him when he was a kid. They must have taught him quite a lot about Oldtown, but he couldn't recall much of it.

He continued walking toward the avenue, passing numerous tourist shops selling pieces of the city wall, photos and pictures of Oldtown from various decades and centuries, and other souvenirs that looked like attempts to keep the past alive. His father had several coffee table books on the history of Oldtown. He had bought them during their out-

ings at one of these shops while John waited impatiently for them to go on. His father was still proud of his local history library. John had never quite understood why. To be honest, he felt a sort of dislike for these shops and their photo books.

On an impulse, he turned into a street leading to the heart of Oldtown, where the river bent westwards. The avenue with its stony remains of the old city wall had lost their interest.

The street was lined with several more souvenir shops and houses with plaques informing about their historical relevance. There were sure to be other tourist signs and markers with more general information about the city's past cultural heritage and customs. John didn't feel like reading any of that. He walked past and headed directly for the old city center.

He could already hear it - this was where the river changed directions, and due to the different strata of the bedrock, it had created a waterfall, which John had always considered one of Oldtown's prettiest sights.

He followed the unmistakable rushing to the square bordered by the river as it flowed from the waterfall. There were terrace-like platforms from which you could see the falls, and John joined a group of tourists on one of them. Kids were gazing down into the thrashing water, held tightly by their parents. Absent-mindedly, John followed

their gaze. He had never stood all the way at the front with his parents. They always stopped a little way back on the sidewalk and explained to John why the river turned before eating its way through the solid rock.

Smiling, he wiped the fine spray of the waterfall off his face and walked back across the square. He stopped at one of the cafés lining it. His parents had always stopped here after touring Oldtown and admiring the waterfall. It must have been the highlight of the trip for his mother, who was convinced that the café served the best cream cake in town. They sat at a table outside when the weather was nice, had coffee and cake – hot or cold chocolate milk for John –, watched the people walk by and listened to the waterfall.

John turned to face the platforms again. The cream cake at this place had been excellent. And the selection in the window looked pretty good, too. However, John didn't feel like cake. Anyway, he doubted it could ever have been better than the one at Izzie's bakery.

His parents were good people, John thought. So they hadn't taken his hand and gone all the way to the platform railing with him, where you could feel the spray of the water on your face. But they had always been there when he needed them. He had always come home to a warm meal, he had worn nice clothes, gone to a good school, and been

to the beach every year with them. They had done their best to give him a good start in life.

John was still staring at the platforms. The rushing of the water seemed to grow louder and flush away his thoughts. He remained still for a few moments. A strange feeling of calm had spread inside him. All of the sudden he did not want to be here anymore. He had seen enough of Oldtown and felt no inclination to follow the river upstream to where the canal started.

Without thinking about it, John walked back the way he had come. He did not turn around, nor did he indulge in memories he thought he'd lost forever. He just took one step after another.

Before long, he'd left Oldtown behind and was back on the hill. He sat down for a moment to rest. His outing to Oldtown had not been what he'd expected. There had been many sites and places he remembered from his childhood but they had lost their sweet sense of familiarity.

John shook his head, not understanding what had changed. Maybe he had stayed away from Oldtown for so long because some part of him knew that he might have more or less grown up there and visited all the time with his parents, that part of the city nevertheless had grown strange to him. Maybe it always had been more his parents' place than his. Well, at least now he knew again where the city had come into being.

He walked past the lookout tower and the ruins without paying either much attention. His legs and feet started aching as he walked down the hill. Still, John did not stop at the kiosk but hurried on downwards.

It was beginning to get dark. Glad to have an excuse to call a cab, John did so as soon as he left the park. Dusk or not, he was too battered to walk the rest of the way back home.

In his apartment John took a long, hot shower. His body thanked him with a wonderful sensation of relief and relaxation.

Thus refreshed, John felt his energy return.

He itched to go to the fountain and tell Socrates and Joanna of his adventure, but a glance at his watch told him he'd have to wait there quite a while before anyone showed up. On any other day, he'd still be at the office for several hours. He switched on the TV and settled on the sofa.

He awoke with a jerk of his arms and head. The remote control slipped from his hand and landed crashing on the couch table. Startled, John needed a moment to grasp what had happened. He realized he hadn't just taken a short nap but slept deeply. It was past midnight when he got up. But he felt that he'd needed the rest. His legs still ached, though. He took a few careful steps around the living room. The pain receded a little. There was still a little time before he could head out to

the fountain so he decided to have dinner. Or maybe breakfast. He wasn't sure which. He fried eggs, arranged them on toasted bread from the supermarket, and put a bag of crisps next to the plate. It was an unusual combination but it really appealed to him.

He ate at his living room table and relived his afternoon outing. Now and then a smile stole over his face, sometimes accompanied by a slight shake of his head. A few times he stopped eating, his gaze lost somewhere between his plate and the past. When he was finished, he automatically reached for the remote control. The images in his head had been so vivid that he hadn't noticed at all the telly was off all the time.

After cleaning up the kitchen, John started on his way to the fountain, his legs still aching. There was plenty of time before the others arrived but he wanted to get out of the house. Maybe Socrates and Joanna would be early. He couldn't wait to tell them about his trip to Oldtown. In fact, he was so excited that he walked with long, forceful strides once the pain in his legs had abated a little. His euphoria was dampened when he saw that he was the first at the fountain.

That at least gave him an opportunity to take a closer look at the sculpture. John walked around the perimeter of the fountain several times to view the sculpture from every angle. He still wasn't entirely sure what it represented or depicted, despite

his foray into Oldtown. The certainty that what he knew so far wouldn't suffice for a conversation with Socrates – or at least not one that he would enjoy – began to creep up in John. Socrates wouldn't have made such a big issue of it if the statues had just been misnamed or something. Feeling slightly nervous now, John took another tour around the fountain trying to see if there was something he had missed before. Just as he turned around the sculpture, he saw Joanna approaching. Seeing her made him feel relieved and happy.

As had become their custom, they hugged.

"So the Bearded One hasn't taken his bath yet, has he?" she asked, searching the ground for wet footprints.

"I don't know if he's been here. Haven't seen him."

"Have you been here long?"

"A bit," John said, looking once again at the sculpture in the fountain. "I wanted to take some time and check out the sculpture."

Joanna turned around and followed John's gaze.

"If I'm honest," John continued, "I still don't know for sure what it is supposed to be. I did some researched. Yesterday I even went to Oldtown to take a look around. I walked there. And yet, I haven't been able to find out much."

Johanna put a comforting arm around John's shoulder.

"Well, I have known Socrates and this fountain for years now and even I still don't know exactly why that thing there is such a big deal."

She sat down on the fountain ledge. "Don't sweat it," Joanna said. "If it's meant to be, you'll find out eventually. I'm absolutely positive. But tell me more about your trip to Oldtown. Did you enjoy it?"

John turned away from the sculpture to look at Joanna. She motioned for him to sit down next to her. He was about to do so when he suddenly froze.

"Shit!" he said, feeling his face go deep red. He gaped at Joanna wide-eyed. Over all the excitement about his trip and everything, he had forgotten the doughnuts and coffee. And what was worse, he'd just used profane language in front of Joanna. Hastily, John apologized on both counts. Joanna didn't seem to mind either. On the contrary - she smiled at him. He had the feeling that his embarrassment amused her. She finally turned the conversation back to his outing the day before. John told her how he'd hiked up and down the hill, about the fortress, the lookout tower, and Oldtown.

"Oldtown is really nice," Joanna nodded.
"That's where it all started. It's where the city once

took roots. And look at it now, so big. It is a pretty impressive place, isn't it?"

John glanced at Joanna and then turned his gaze back to the fountain.

"It's a wonderful city," he said thoughtfully. "Still, I feel that I don't know it nearly as well as I used to think."

Joanna slapped both hands on her knees and rose, startling John a little.

"I guess Socrates is a no-show today," she said.

She waited for John to get up.

"By the way, I will be pretty busy at the soup kitchen and the shelter this weekend. I won't be able to come here tomorrow or the day after. But I'm sure Socrates would enjoy seeing you."

John grunted involuntarily,

"Yeah, I bet he would."

Joanna slapped his arm playfully.

"Yes, he would. He may not show it, but he values your company. I know that for a fact. So promise me you'll be here."

John looked at her. She seemed to mean what she'd said. Reluctantly, he nodded.

"That's settled then. I'm glad," she said and took John's arm. "Come, let's walk together for a bit."

Taken by surprise, John allowed himself to be led down the stairs and across the parking lot to the canal, which they followed downstream. The path along the canal was narrow and lined by trees and shrubbery. Walking along it, you could easily forget the city around you. Most people here were joggers, but their dynamic pace didn't faze Joanna. She walked even slower than Izzie did.

John didn't care right now. He could still feel his long hike in his legs, and having slept before going to the fountain he was in no hurry to get home. Plus, he might get a chance to buy some doughnuts on the way. Feeling content, he trudged along beside Joanna and listened to her explain why she liked going for walks in the mornings. She loved the peace and quiet of the early hours, when you could almost feel the hopeful power of the newborn day. Now and then she stopped, took a deep breath and waited for John to do the same. The first two times this happened, he felt a bit awkward, but then it seemed more natural.

Finally they took a turn away from the canal and started walking aimlessly – or so it seemed – through the city. Again, Joanna stopped at irregular intervals. Now, however, she did not do any breathing exercises. Instead, she listened to the birds that had begun to greet the new day. Or she examined some interesting graffiti painting, house, monument, or tree that she decided deserved her and John's attention. John was certain that she

must have passed all these sights thousands of times before. Still, her enthusiasm was catching. More likely than not, he had seen it all several times before, too. But he'd never taken the time to really look at it.

At the first opportunity he bought a box of doughnuts and two coffees, passing one of them, and the doughnuts, to Joanna. She thanked him warmly and proffered John the open box. John declined, laughing.

"Without a certain someone around who grabs all the doughnuts, I think I'll restrain myself, too."

"Don't be silly," Joanna said, taking one doughnut from the box and placing it in John's hand. "It goes perfectly with the coffee."

"Only if you'll have one, too."

Joanna looked at him, then she smiled, nodded, and too took a doughnut from the box. They walked silently along, eating their doughnuts and sipping their coffees.

"Socrates, the thinker," Joanna said when she'd finished. "You know the story, don't you?"

"The Greek philosopher," John said. "A great man of a long-gone high culture."

Joanna smiled.

"Yes, that's right. Though I was talking about our mutual friend. Do you know his story?"

John shrugged and shook his head. Joanna seemed to make up her mind about something.

"Actually, I also only know what he told me over the years. But you weren't far off the mark - Socrates is a nickname that goes back to his university days. They named him that as a mark of respect, comparing him to the great philosopher. I don't know his real name. But I do know that he has two doctoral degrees, in mathematics and in theoretical physics."

"And despite all that he takes his daily baths in an ice-cold public fountain?" John wondered.

"Not despite but because of it. At some point, he'd founded a company with a bunch of other allegedly smart people - physicists, chemists, mathematicians, and others who belonged to the same kind of circles. It was a company for everything. Their mission was to 'save the world', he admitted. He said they were young and naïve. And infinitely idealistic. They wanted to promote the development of humankind. They proffered their knowledge and expertise to realize concepts that would make life better and drive humanity's advancement. And to pursue their own ideas. Especially their own. The whole thing was funded by harmless jobs for industrial clients. That's how he described it. They made statistical calculations for building projects, created future scenario simulations for large corporations, optimized concepts for recycling facilities, developed new raw materials,

and so on. They only wanted to take on 'harmless' projects. Projects that wouldn't cause damage to anything or anyone. Whatever that meant. In addition, as their main purpose, they started out working on constitutions, legal philosophies, policy systems, future technologies, and, most importantly, the world formula. The world formula, or theory of everything, is a formula that explains everything. That's what he told me. He was really serious about it. He still believes there's one formula for everything. That you can understand everything with that one formula – if you find it."

Joanna fell silent for a few steps before she continued.

"Anyway, that's not the point now. But finding that formula was their main priority. Finding the formula and promoting the development of humanity with scientific methods. And it's not such a bad idea, a self-sustaining, independent research institution that aims to help humankind. That at least was their premise when they started. Or maybe more than a premise. It was their deepest, most heart-felt belief. For Socrates, it was a calling. But most of his colleagues were made from weaker stuff. Soon, their industrial clients and work became more important. His colleagues began taking on more and more industrial commissions. They started offering risk and yield calculations for finance and insurance products. It wasn't long be-

fore they launched their own finance and insurance products. They worked on automation technologies for industrial companies. They researched new chemical fertilizers. In short, the good of humanity stopped being their main concern. Their success and the recognition they received changed them. They grew more and more dependent on the money they made and the comforts it bought them. They sold out bit by bit to the 'suits', as Socrates called their clients. To him, business suits were no more than particularly well-camouflaged combat uniforms. Those creatures with their expensive ties, false white grins, and fake-tanned faces. Strange creatures. He used to say that they had two special powers: one, they could convince anyone that the grey sky was really blue, and two, they were able to blank out any kind of human emotion and offer up their whole lives to an unconditional greed for power and money. A fatal combination. The suits were geniuses when it came to presentation. But they couldn't solve equations. They never understood a single one of those. All the equations that Socrates and his colleagues solved for them, the simplest and the most complex, all of them had the same value on one side: more money for the suits. That was the one single thing the suits were interested in and understood. Then one day, the unavoidable happened. One day, the suits knocking at the door of Socrates and his colleagues came from the military. Socrates' colleagues let them in. Socrates immediately

handed in his resignation. Actually, he said that he just left. Without a word. That day, he walked away. From all of it. And ever since, he's been living the way he does now."

John didn't know what to say. Maybe half of what Joanna had just told him wasn't even true. But even so, the other half was still impressive enough. Listening to Joanna talk about Socrates, John thought he heard the very same mixture of admiration and repulsion he'd noticed on several occasions at the fountain. Maybe it was just compassion with him and his story. What was clear from her words was that she believed Socrates to be an exceptional human being whom she over all valued and respected. Maybe even more. But the same irresistible force that seemed to draw her to him also seemed to push her away. John did not understand Joanna's feelings for Socrates, but he did not dare ask her about them. He walked beside her in silence and was glad when Joanna started talking again.

"You need to try and understand him. He is all reason. He does not even trust his own intuition but thinks everything through to the very end. Just pure, sterile logic. That's his only comfort and the only thing keeping him alive, I believe. The day he decided to live on the streets of this city was the day he relinquished everything else that was human in him. To him, anything that wouldn't surrender to reason, or, worse even, tries to impact

reason, is evil. That's why he gave it all up. He had to give it up because he lost his faith. He doesn't believe in humanity. He doesn't believe in life. He doesn't believe in anything. He is unable to believe. He says it would be best never to be born. Isn't that horrible? Never to be born. He has given up on life. So sad. And yet, so admirable. He is so strong. And so sure. The way he just opposes anything and anyone with his views, walking the streets and bathing in this fountain. Against all odds. Because nothing seems to scare him. Because he is so stubborn and pig-headed. Because he's a fighter. He's been brutally beaten, without any chance to ever be victorious in his fight, yet he keeps fighting, unrelenting. So proud. If only he could be saved."

Joanna stopped. John, too. The sky had gone from dark blue to azure. Joanna smiled sadly.

"We missed the sunrise," she murmured, more to herself than to John. She squinted up into the sky and let the rays of the sun fall on her face. John waited patiently.

"It was nice walking with you," she finally said. "From here I'll set you free again and let you go alone. I'm just around that corner. As mentioned over the weekend I'll be busy, but you'll come to the fountain as promised, won't you? And be patient with Socrates. I'll see you Monday morning, okay?"

"Sure. And thanks for the walk."

"Try not to miss all of the sunrises," Joanna whispered in his ears as they hugged goodbye.

John watched her disappear around the corner. Then he tried to get his bearings. He had no idea where their walk had taken them so he looked for a major road with some helpful signs.

It wasn't long before his surroundings became more familiar and he knew which part of New-town he was in. He got another cup of coffee and sat down on a nearby bench to rest and think about what he should do with the rest of the morning.

Hunched over the steaming paper cup, he watched the stream of people passing by. It was a chilly morning but the coffee cup in his hands and the hot liquid in his stomach kept him warm. The ache in his legs had also abated. John yawned. The city around him was noisy. For the first time he noticed its many early-morning sounds. He heard cars go by on the thoroughfare. Horns blowing, brakes shrieking. Occasionally, the sound of sirens. Doors of nearby shops and residential buildings opening and closing. Car doors being slammed shut. And the constant, mumbling jumble of voices. John even noticed the sounds of heels on the pavement and the swish made by the clothes of passersby.

At one point he notices that he was the only one just sitting there. Everyone else was rushing past in a hurry to get someplace else. If they stopped it was only at the red light or to hail a cab. The morning was loud and busy.

John looked down to the cup in his hands. He faded out his surroundings, a soft smile on his face. He would usually be at home in bed at this time. Once, he had been part of this early-morning rush, but he'd since forgotten what it had been like. Watching the spectacle now, as an outsider, he couldn't see why he'd ever taken part in it.

After a while, the noise surrounding him had faded to a distant buzzing. He felt his body relax even more. Or maybe it was the tension he felt – the tension that had been there all along and was just now dissolving. Slowly, he let his lids drop. Images of the fountain and his trip the day before blended with the coffee cup in his hands before all sensual perceptions disappeared as a last colorful glimmer on the night sky of his mind. For just a moment, he was all alone in this pleasant, dark silence.

It was the same moment he jerked back to consciousness, spilling his coffee. The dark liquid drenched his coat and pants. He must have dropped off to sleep. A few people who'd seen his mishap sniggered, some shook their heads.

John dropped the almost empty cup in a nearby trashcan and used some Kleenex to clean up the mess as well as he could. His jacket looked okay, the coffee hadn't soaked in, but it would leave a stain on his pants. Fortunately, it had cooled off. John threw the Kleenex away, too, and walked back to the little shop to get another coffee.

This time, he did not sit down but kept walking and drinking little sips. After a few steps, he stopped and turned around. The cars were still there, as were the people rushing by, some of whom bumped into him as he was standing in their way. The noise was still there, too. But this outside world didn't affect him as it had done before, when he was sitting on that bench. He felt like he had done years before, when he had walked along busy streets every day without thinking about it. It was as if he could flip a switch in his mind so that he stopped noticing the noise and the throngs of people.

He kept walking but turned into a small side street. Maybe that was just the way it was supposed to be, he thought. Wasn't it normal not to notice the things you saw and felt every day? Maybe it was just because he was tired. It was a strange kind of tiredness he was feeling. His lids were heavy, sure, and his whole body felt kind of sluggish. But his mind was very alert. His thoughts weren't sluggish at all. Actually, they were highly

focused. In his mind, he went through his conversation with Joanna, wondering about Socrates story. What was surprising about it, John had to admit, was that he hadn't expected something along those lines. Why, though, did Socrates care so much about that sculpture in the fountain? It annoyed John how little his research on the sculpture had revealed. He could walk back to the fountain. But he wouldn't see anything there he hadn't already seen that morning. Getting a cab home would be the smart thing to do. It was only a few hours before he had to be in the office. He should get some sleep before then.

He looked for a cab. Not that he expected to find one in this back street. And even if there'd been one, he wouldn't hail it. He did not want to go home and sleep. And he certainly didn't feel like working today. John decided to call in sick again. Actually, he wouldn't even call the office. Nobody there seemed to care either way. And they would notice soon enough when he eventually chose to get better and show up again.

No sooner had he thought this that he felt a pang of guilt. Letting others believe in a lie wasn't the decent thing to do. It was as if he'd let them live in a false reality. John grinned. Had he just created a parallel universe? An office universe in which a sick John existed and was lying in bed at home. Or another one in which John went to work anyway? John shook his head. Crazy thoughts.

Feeling relaxed, he walked along through Newtown towards the canal. Somehow, it was a beautiful parallel. The day before, he had been in Oldtown, today, he walked through Newtown. If he remembered correctly, the names of the two quarters were connected. Oldtown had been the birthplace of the city, as it were. Newtown had been the second major settlement, founded by people who had left Oldtown. It must have had something to do with the canal. Down here, the canal reconnected with the river. This was where the first settlements of Newtown had been erected.

John recalled the little museum located where the river met the canal. The small collection consisted of artefacts and other objects from the times of the first settlement. Maybe he would be able to find out more about his sculpture there as well.

He walked to the canal and followed it further downstream. It was amazing to see how the city had grown. From Oldtown as starting point to the new settlement down here and the large, beautiful city of today.

He recognized the museum from afar. It was a stone and wood building, much smaller than the more modern structures surrounding it. A sign at the door labeled it "Newtown Museum" and stated that the building wasn't in fact old, but merely a reconstruction based on historic blueprints. The only true originals were the artefacts within, which John would not be able to view as

the museum only opened on weekends. It would be closed until tomorrow. Feeling disappointed, John continued reading the sign next to the closed museum door. The collection comprised old textile industry machinery and objects. The building was modeled after the old customhouse, which had stood down at the river but looked like this one. John took one last look at the building's façade before turning back to the canal and walking aimlessly through the Newtown.

Maybe there was less of a mystery about the sculpture in the fountain that he'd thought. The waterwheel had been one of the textile industry's main success factors. It powered the old machines. It all made sense. The machines down here in the museum, the waterwheel in the fountain, and the nearby canal that had driven both. The canal made the textile industry possible, helping the city grow and prosper. And Lord Byron Munchhausen, whose statue supposedly formed part of the fountain sculpture, might well have had something to do with the canal, even if he most certainly had not founded Oldtown. Considering that the city owed much to the canal, the sculpture and his statue did have a point. What remained unclear was the fuss Socrates had made about the whole thing. The sculpture's meaning seemed pretty obvious. Maybe Socrates just didn't care for it. Maybe he didn't like the city and what had become of it.

Recent events had taught John that Socrates wasn't the only one. Alexander surely hadn't liked the city. He had left it for milder climes, retreating for the rest of his life to an island somewhere else.

Actually, Alexander hadn't been the first who had expressed this desire to John. John's own parents had said pretty much the same thing when they moved from the city to the coast. Thinking of it now, John was surprised how casual they'd been about it when they mentioned it at one of his visits – which, he had to admit, had been few and far between. "What would you say if we sold the house and moved someplace else?"

What did they expect him to say? Not only had they taken him completely by surprise, which of course had been their purpose, also at that point he did not care much one way or the other. Let them sell up and move away. The house was far too big for the two of them. The only concern that popped up in his mind was that they might want to move closer to him on the Island. Fortunately, he didn't blurt that out but only shrugged and said something noncommittal like "okay".

At that they told him that the sale of the house was almost final. They had also picked and made the down payment on an apartment in a building on the coast. John remembered the broad smiles on his parents' faces as they told him. He'd felt offended that they hadn't consulted him. After all, it was the house he'd grown up in.

But that moment passed quickly. His main feeling was relief that they didn't plan to move on the Island. John loved his parents. He was their son. But the Island felt like his sanctuary, his turf. It would have taken him a while to get used to having them suddenly so close. After that conversation, he hadn't thought much about the whole thing.

Though he didn't mind his parents living near the coast now, John wondered why his parents felt they couldn't "enjoy what's left of their lives", as they put it, in the city.

He'd never really thought about how specious their argument for their move had really been. They said they'd worked enough. They wanted to leave to enjoy the rest of their lives together. Thinking of it now, it sounded to John as if they hadn't much enjoyed the lives they had so far. But they had been the ones who'd dragged him around Oldtown and made him care about and appreciate the city.

John stopped in his tracks. He was standing before the bench where he had drunk, or rather, spilled his coffee earlier. Frustrated, he frowned. He'd either been going round in a circle or unwittingly retraced his steps from before. There were so many little streets and alleys and yet he always took the same ones. He shook his head and plopped down on the bench.

Before moving away for good, John's parents had visited him one last time on the Island. They had brought some money. "Your share," his father had said and winked. "Sales revenue for your room." Obviously, John had not wanted to accept the money. His parents of course insisted he take it. They told him to buy something nice for himself or start a college fund for his kids. Kids he didn't have back then. Kids he still didn't have. His parents would sometimes needle him about it but seemed to have come to terms with the idea that you may wait to have kids or even decide never to have any. Maybe they'd just resigned themselves to John's way of life and gave up on him ever making them grandparents. They had realized that the rules had changed since they were young. Back then, you more or less had to have a family, a nice house, and a dog. John's grandparents had died when he was very young, but his parents had told him that the values they had taught them had been very different from what was commonplace today. And the ways they had imposed their values on their children, John's parents, were unthinkable these days.

Thinking about it John realized how his parents seemed to have changed ever since moving out the city anyways. They still called him, but their calls weren't the regular occurrences they had once been, when John had to offer a detailed explanation whenever he missed a Sunday phone call with

them. They didn't insist on him visiting them anymore, either. He had been at the coast to see them for a few days a while back. The beach was beautiful, no argument there. And his parents sometimes drove down to the city. When they came for more than one day, they always booked a hotel or stayed with friends. It all felt more casual than before.

Their birthday card to him still always arrived on time, though. They also sent him postcards from other places they traveled to. Recently, they'd even written from some yoga and art retreat they'd been on or still were on, at an island somewhere. John had forgotten which one.

He'd always thought it had been an age thing. If you were old, with the better part of your life behind you, you just retreated from the hustle and bustle of the city. Alexander's departure had cast a new light on the matter. John never once thought that his parents had just lived the kind of life that was expected from them or that they had been presented to them as the only choice.

Feeling heavy and tired, John rose up. He looked around, unable to decide where to go next. Should he walk past the bakery and see Izzie? The thought of freshly baked buns made his stomach grumble. However, he did not want to face Izzie's questions about Socrates and Joanna. And she would certainly ask him about them. Anyway, he was exhausted. He bought a sandwich to go and took a cab home.

John spent the rest of the day on the sofa, either sleeping or watching TV. When it grew dark outside he walked over to his favorite bar. He hadn't had a chance to visit there this early on a Friday night for a long time. Usually, he would be at the office at this time, his weekend still hours away.

Consequently, his friends were surprised to see him walk in. The only difference to his usual routine, as he turned out, was that the others weren't drunk yet. Their conversations revolved around the same topics, though. They followed the games on the various TV screens. Soon, the general alcohol level would rise to what John knew as normal.

John was nursing his beer in front of a screen showing the game he'd seen live just a short time before. He couldn't say exactly why he'd picked that screen when there were numerous others with games he hadn't watched before. Somehow, it felt comforting to know how it would end. He had another beer or two and let the images that held no excitement or thrill wash over him. It really was strangely soothing.

Before long, the ruckus surrounding him grew louder. Several times, someone tried to involve him in their conversation or just bumped into him accidentally. Now the atmosphere was exactly as it was when he arrived here after work. John concluded that it must be pretty late. The game on the

screen in front of him had been replaced by a different one. John grew restless. He'd never felt more out of place here.

Without saying goodbye or attracting attention in any other way, he left and walked back home. On his way he picked up some doughnuts at a late night coffee shop.

Back home he made a thermos of coffee and put it in a bag with the doughnuts. He'd promised Joanna he would go to the fountain without her. Still, the thought of being alone with Socrates made him uneasy. Rough as life on the streets might be, John did not care too much for Socrates' social graces. Plus, he did not know what to make of the new intel Joanna had given him about the eccentric.

Before heading out, John zapped through the channels and watched pretty aimlessly whatever appeared on screen. He knew it was later than he usually left for the fountain. That was okay with him. After all, he couldn't be sure whether Socrates would even show up. And John didn't mind if his stint at the fountain this morning was shorter than usual.

Walking up the stairs to the mall courtyard he could see Socrates stepping into the fountain. Socrates had noticed him too and, to John's surprise, waved him hello. At that moment John decided that all he knew about Socrates was what he himself had told him or would tell him. He waved

back a bit desultorily and crossed the courtyard to the fountain, where Socrates stood in the water, waiting for him.

"Hello, John."

"Good morning, Socrates."

"It'll be just the two of us today. Our saving angel is busy this weekend."

"Yeah, I know. I met her yesterday and she told me. Just us guys then, huh?"

"Exactly. And since there are no womenfolk present you might join me for a bath, right?"

John gaped at Socrates, who was grinning back. Then John tested the fountain water with one hand that he drew back immediately.

"Wuss!" Socrates laughed and shook his head. "Come on, I want to show you something," he added quickly. "It's about the sculpture."

John looked at him suspiciously. But the glow on Socrates' face seemed to stem from genuine, almost child-like anticipation. He really looked as if he could hardly wait to tell John something.

John sighed, took off his shoes and socks, rolled his pants up over his knees, and stepped into the fountain. The water was freezing and he had to suppress a scream. He was just about to say something to Socrates when he saw that he had turned

around and was wading off toward the center of the fountain.

John followed him and felt the legs of his pants getting wet despite his efforts. He should have taken them off.

Socrates had stopped in front of the sculpture. John joined him. Both looked intensely at the object before them.

The waterwheel was turning slowly. It couldn't be powered by the weak little stream of water running over it into the fountain. There was probably some hidden mechanism inside that powered it. The two statues to the sides of the wheel stood stiff and motionless.

Finally John turned to Socrates.

"I tried to find out what all this is supposed to represent. Lord Byron Munchhausen, founder of the city and canal builder. But I couldn't fact-check all of it," he said.

Socrates gave him a look. "Good."

"Good?" John was confused. No tirade, no rebuke, no lecture?

"Yes." At that, Socrates took a deep breath before plunging headlong into the water and jumping back up again with a shout of joy. He shook like a dog shaking his fur and grunted.

"Makes you feel awake!" He gave John a wide-eyed look and motioned for him to follow his example. John just shook his head.

"No way. My feet are freezing as it is. That's enough for me."

Socrates rolled his eyes theatrically and shrugged. He then grinned, took John by the hand – much to the younger man's surprise – and led him around to the back of the sculpture. When they got there Socrates pointed to a plaque at the base of it. John had to bend down to read it:

"In memory of Lord Byron Munchhausen, builder of the canal and co-founder of our modern town. His vision and entrepreneurial spirit continue to secure our wealth and progress for many generations."

John had just finished reading when he felt a thin jet of liquid pass close to his head and hit the plaque. Instinctively, he turned around and jumped back when he saw what it was. Socrates was standing close to him, peeing. Swearing, John got out of the fountain as fast as he could.

"What the hell was that for?" he asked.

"Morning toilette," Socrates answered calmly, taking care to drench the entire plaque, left to right and top to bottom.

"Shit."

"No, I wouldn't go that far. There are boundaries, John, boundaries one shouldn't cross."

When he was done, Socrates waded back to the fountain ledge where he'd placed his clothes, got out of the water and began dressing. John walked around the fountain until he reached him.

"Why on earth would you do such a thing? You can't just piss in the fountain!"

"I did not piss in the fountain. I pissed on the plaque," said Socrates unperturbed and continued putting on his clothes.

"What are you talking about? Fountain, plaque, it makes no difference!"

At that, Socrates stopped what he was doing and gave John an indignant look.

"No difference? There's a huge difference! I would never piss in the fountain." He grinned. "But I do piss on the plaque every morning I get here."

John stood there, his jaw dropped. Then he composed himself and started putting on his socks.

"You do this every morning? Does Joanna know?"

Socrates smiled. Before answering, he buttoned up his shirt, sat on the ground and helped himself to coffee and a doughnut.

"Of course she knows. Why do you think she always sits on this side of the fountain?"

John threw up his hands in defeat. Then he rolled down his pant legs. Socrates held out the box of doughnuts to him. John took one but didn't bite into it. Instead, he gesticulated wildly.

"Kids play around this fountain. They might even take a sip of the water now and then ..."

"Don't be ridiculous! The kiddies are fine. There's a water filter system here. By the time the first mall shoppers arrive, the water is so pure not even fish would be able to survive in it."

Socrates handed John a cup of coffee. More confused than ever, John took it, sat down next to Socrates, finally took a bite of his doughnut, and washed it down with coffee.

"You did read the plaque?" Socrates asked.

John nodded, his mouth full.

Socrates raised his index fingers, opened his eyes very wide and paused dramatically before pronouncing: "That guy never existed."

John didn't understand. "What guy?"

"Byron Munchhausen. Lord Byron Munchhausen. There never was such a person. He's made up." Socrates giggled like a schoolboy. "Completely fake. Manipulation, disinformation,

deception, infatuation. And nobody seems to notice. Even though they pass here every day. It's right in front of their noses but they don't realize it. Maybe they don't want to."

His giggle turned into a grin, then a sad smile and finally, a silent shake of his head. Socrates grabbed another doughnut and devoured half of it in one bite.

"Just a minute." John was still trying to catch up. "So if there never was a Munchhausen - who's that guy in the fountain?"

Socrates looked at him.

"What exactly did your research on the city reveal?"

"Well," John said, "I went up to Oldtown. It looked pretty much the same as it did when I was a kid and my parents used to take me there. Birthplace of the city. First settlement. It's where the canal starts. On the other side, where the river and canal meet again, is where Newtown was built. That's kind of the starting point from where the whole rest of the city grew and became what it is. Yesterday I went to Newtown. They have a museum there but it was closed."

"Not bad at all. You were on the right track. But Newtown precedes the canal, though. Did you find any mention of Munchhausen anywhere?"

"Only online," John said. "There was some article on the fountain and sculpture."

"Precisely. That's about all there is to find."

"Even if that's true - why would anyone just make up a historic figure?"

"Oh, John. You've been exposed to Joanna's influence too long. I told you she's out to save you. And you're letting her."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that you shouldn't believe everything you see or hear, even if they build a sculpture in a fountain for it. That's why it's so important to be awake."

"So the sculpture is a fake."

"Depends on how you look at it."

John rolled his eyes. Then he gave Socrates a sharp look. He wanted to reply but held back, offering Socrates one more doughnut instead.

"How many ways of looking at that sculpture are there then? And what do they look like?"

Socrates accepted the doughnut.

"Thank you. Two. Maybe more. But only two that are relevant. One is the creator's perspective, his vision of what the sculpture should represent or what he's trying to sell us as its meaning. And

then there's the perspective on what the sculpture actually represents."

"And those two are not one and the same?"

"In this case: absolutely not."

"Fine. So what does the creator of the sculpture try to make us believe it represents?"

"That it represents the zeitgeist. The spirit of the times. It represents what we want to see. Or are supposed to. Great leaders as visionary representatives of industry, economy, and progress. The sculpture makes it seem as if this zeitgeist were rooted in the past and about to bring great things to all of us in the future. This is, of course, utter nonsense. They don't call it zeitgeist for nothing. Spirit of the time. This time, the present. And that zeitgeist is something worth pissing on."

"Okay. I have a follow-up question, maybe more than one, but let's start with this one: what does the sculpture really portrait?"

"The real past. A city founded. A canal built. Industry. A city prospering."

"So? Where's the difference?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Well, no. It isn't."

"This representation is being distorted and abused and taken completely out of context – all

for the sake of politics. And if that weren't enough, it is surrounded by a big, fat lie."

"Because there never was a Munchhausen?"

"Because the sculpture exploits the past, a distorted, twisted version of it, to represent not the past but only the present zeitgeist and to sell this zeitgeist to all of us as the only possible future. It's not a sculpture or a monument. It's a sentinel. A watchdog. Made by us and for us to keep all us little sheep running in the same direction. Because then we'll think we're following a good shepherd, no matter how stupid, wrong, and illusionary our journey may be. If we all do the same thing it feels right. But it can be very wrong." He stressed the "very".

"Hold on, you've lost me. So what you're saying that what the sculpture portrays is basically true. The settlement, the canal, the city. But the plaque is wrong. Right?"

"Yeas, I guess that's the abbreviated version. Very abbreviated."

John smiled and poured himself more coffee.

"So what should the plaque say?" he asked Socrates, who had just swallowed the last bite of his doughnut and reached for the only one remaining in the box.

"That's not relevant at all. What is relevant is why they put this bullshit on there. The city deserves better. It deserves better than that sculpture in the fountain. Such vileness will only make it an ugly, broken thing."

John wasn't entirely sure what Socrates meant by that. But the older man looked both excited and dejected. John sipped his coffee and decided to wait for Socrates to continue.

"The first settlement was up in Oldtown on the waterfall. Waterways were key routes for commercial transportation and logistics back then. The waterfall obviously prevented ships from going further downstream. Moving the freight to ships waiting below the waterfall wasn't an option, either, because of the gorge downstream, which is also impassable. From the waterfall onwards it was strictly overland. The freight was driven south on oxcarts or horse wagons, past the hill to the river, where they could once again be loaded on ships. It wasn't long before the first loaders and haulers settled in Oldtown. Soon, they were joined by farmers, who provided the settlement with produce. The settlement grew, more and more people lived there. At some point they build the fortress on the hill and the city wall, and finally, the new settlement Newtown down south at the river, home of the traders and the customhouse for the commodities that were shipped further downriver. So Oldtown and its spinoff, Newtown, as it were,

clearly existed long before the canal was built. You've been to Oldtown, haven't you? I wonder whether you've come upon a very ancient well with a statue of an oxcart and a plaque reading 'Our prosperity and progress is due to the ox. He takes over land what cannot pass the water'."

John grinned and shook his head. "Sorry, haven't seen it. Maybe it fell into ruin or was replaced by some new building."

"Possibly. I'm sure there must have been a well somewhere. But certainly not the plaque. In any case, building the canal was never the industrialists' idea. It was a handful of ferrymen who came up with the plan to create a navigable connection from above the waterfall to downstream from the gorge, basically just following the oxcart route. That way, they could literally circumnavigate the two obstacles and make the river passable all the way down to the coast. Work on the canal progressed very slowly. The construction was very expensive, and not everyone in town believed in the project. The oxcart drivers, for one, must have been dead set against it. They had reason to be suspicious of the whole enterprise. Whatever the reason, the builders finally gave up and stopped digging somewhere midway down the Island. The rise of the railroad will certainly have played a part in it as well. It provided an alternative transport route and there was more money to be earned working on the railroad than the canal. It was the end for

the oxcarts and the canal alike. Finishing the canal wasn't on the agenda until much later, when the textile industry got interested. They didn't need a shipping route but wanted to power their machines with the water. So they completed the canal. Soon, textile mills mushroomed on its banks. Some of them are still around, at least their ruins. The textile industry did not prosper long, though. And it did not bring the city much prosperity, either. Production was much too expensive. Building the canal had eaten up a lot of capital and the plants were too small. The owners miscalculated severely and underestimated their outside competitors. What remains of the industry are the large workers quarters they built east of the canal. A sector that did very well though was engineering. The mechanics who had moved here to build and maintain the machines for the textile plants were sought-after specialists. When the textile mills had to close down, they took over the buildings for machine engineering, which became the new, and very successful, industry. They built the machines here and shipped them on the canal and river to the coast and from there, the whole world. Because machine engineering requires a lot of capital and shipping was risky, more and more banks and insurances cropped up. As the technology progressed, many companies moved on to highly sophisticated machinery and control software, and new enterprises settled here. That's how the city grew and became what it is."

Socrates refilled his coffee cup from the thermos. He seemed to have finished his lecture for he didn't say anything more.

"So the sculpture in the fountain isn't all wrong," John finally said to end the silence that had become uncomfortable. "Water power and the canal have been important factors for the city's growth. It's just all the rest of it that's a little far-fetched or concocted."

Socrates responded with a contemptuous grunt.

"A little far-fetched? It's a big, fat lie, that's what it is. But what the sculpture depicts or doesn't depict is not the point. I've said it before: It's the fact that we erect monuments to make ourselves believe that our present is the result of a visionary past and the source of a glorious future. Not only do we look back and forth in time from our very own zeitgeist's perspective, we also do everything, like building fake monuments, to make ourselves believe, that our zeitgeist is a kind of eternal spirit. That's just wrong. So very wrong."

Socrates took a hasty bite of his doughnut and started to cough. John clapped him on his back and waited for the coughing to subside.

"It's wrong?"

"Yes. And very human. The past has been totally distorted, the present is a dictate of irresponsible belief in the ruling system, and the future is most certainly not put down on any plaque."

“But isn’t the city what it is today because its past was what it was then?”

“Of course. But tell me: what part of the past did actually determine our present? The canal, sure. But is it the canal that was meant as a navigable route, the canal that was built to bring water power, or the canal used to transport machines downriver? There’s no doubt that the past is the foundation and sets the conditions for our present. But we always bend the past to suit our view of the present. In other words, the present is usually not the continuation of what we believe to be the past. The past is just the sum of long gone random events. Luckily for us, in fact. The present doesn’t even have to be a continuation of any kind of past. Otherwise there might still be oxcarts hauling freight around. And who can say that our present should have any kind of future? The sculpture and its plaque are pure present, our present as we understand and experience it. And that present is what it is. But it is not the past. And it definitely does not have to be the future.”

“Well, there’s no proof that your version of the past is right either, is there?”

No sooner had he said it than John knew his words had been a blunder. Socrates stared at him, narrow-eyed.

“What I mean is that nobody can tell for sure what exactly happened back then, what is and isn’t

true," John hurried to amend, hoping to defuse the situation. But Socrates was visibly irritated.

"Fine. "Let me show you a true monument. Come."

Before John could reply, Socrates jumped up and marched straight toward the stairs leading down to the parking lot. John hastily picked up the empty doughnut box, put the thermos in his bag, and ran after Socrates. He reached him halfway down the stairs. Socrates didn't slow down, nor did he explain where they were going. They crossed the parking lot in silence, walked down to the canal and followed the same path John had taken the previous day with Joanna, only in the opposite direction, upstream. It was still dark and Socrates was walking so fast that John had difficulties keeping up. He stumbled along, almost falling several times.

"Is there a reason for this rush? I mean, do we run the risk of missing something? Or is there a chance we might take it a little slower and actually enjoy our walk?"

Socrates stopped in his tracks and waited until John, who'd stumbled again, caught up with him.

"Jesus! You almost sound like Joanna. She's also a great fan of sitting down on a bench somewhere to enjoy nature, smell the spring air, or maybe vice versa. Next thing you know, she starts asking me

how I am and wants to talk about my feelings. Are you planning on asking me how I feel, too?"

"Not really. But if you feel the need to talk about them ..." John stopped talking and grinned demonstratively as he noticed Socrates darkened face.

"Sorry, just messing with you," he said. "But actually, I do have a question along those lines, if I may." He looked at Socrates, waiting for his reaction. Socrates remained calm, his expression blank.

"You seem different today. With me, I mean. You're ... well, almost nice. How come?"

Socrates mouth twisted into a lopsided grin.

"I was asked to be more agreeable."

John eyes widened.

"By Joanna?"

Socrates' grin froze and he narrowed his eyes.

"She asked you the same thing, didn't she? That woman!"

The two men looked at each other and started smiling. Both shook their heads.

Socrates set off again.

"She's just worried about it, that's all," John panted when he was abreast of Socrates again.

"Yeah, I know. She wants to save us all and make the world a better place."

"Well, I for sure kind of had to get used to those hugs."

John hadn't quite finished his sentence when Socrates stopped again.

"You know nothing about her, do you?"

"What?" John had stopped to and turned to face Socrates. "Whom are you talking about?"

"Joanna."

John was about to respond when Socrates rushed past him. With a roll of his eyes, John hurried to catch up.

"What's with all the sprinting? Can't we slow down a bit?"

"No. I got things to do and places to be. If I want to show you the monument I'm late as it is. So come on, hurry up."

John did not show his surprise at hearing that Socrates had places to be and was obviously late for something. He was more interested in hearing about Joanna.

"So what about Joanna?"

"Why, what about her?"

"You said I didn't know anything about her."

"That's right. You don't."

They marched on in silence for a few steps.

"So? Are you going to tell me about her? Like, why she seems to be so intent on hugging people?" John asked.

Once again, Socrates stopped. John groaned and shook his head. "Walking anywhere with you is really a challenge."

"Don't you ever make fun of her hugs again, you hear?" Socrates said, his finger raised and quivering.

"I didn't make fun of them. I just ..." John tried to justify what he'd said, but Socrates just marched past him again.

John caught up again and they kept walking along silently for a while.

"She's the only pure-hearted person I know," Socrates finally said. "That's about all there is to know about her. Her heart is pure. She is all heart. She can't help it. As far as I recall what she told me, her parents were very wealthy. She had a nice childhood. As nice as possible in those circles. I guess her parents treated her like a princess. She certainly did not want for anything. All her wishes were fulfilled. She lived her childhood life in a world where everything was good and seemed to remain forever good. At the cusp of adulthood, all that changed with a bang. Or rather, a car crash. She survived, with severe injuries. Her parents didn't. It was a terrible shock. The first thing she heard when she awoke in the hospital was that her

parents had died. Nothing would ever be like it had been before. Her whole world had been shattered. But she did not. Instead of growing bitter and hating the world or whatever she felt was responsible for her loss, she made a choice. She would accept her survival as a gift. A gift that allowed her to be there for others. To lessen others' pain and suffering. She decided to help make the world a place where nobody needs to suffer. That's the world she longs for. And that's why she lives the way she does."

John didn't know what to say. Maybe half of what Socrates had just told him wasn't even true. But even so, the other half was still impressive enough. Listening to Socrates talk about Joanna, John thought he heard the very same mixture of admiration and repulsion he'd noticed on several occasions at the fountain. Maybe it was just compassion with her and her story. What was clear from Socrates' words was that he believed Joanna to be an exceptional human being whom he overall valued and respected. Maybe even more. But the same irresistible force that seemed to draw him to her also seemed to push him away. John did not understand Socrates' feelings for Joanna, but he did not dare ask him about them. He walked beside him in silence and was glad when Socrates started talking again.

"You need to try and understand her. She's all feeling. Everything else is blocked. Irrationality

and emotion is all there is. Pure spirituality. She couldn't have it any other way. Accidents cannot be just coincidence, otherwise life would just shatter her. Everything makes sense. It has to. Why else would her parents have died so young? Why else had she been allowed to survive? That's the basis for her absolute determination to take everything life throws at her, everything she can't change or even understand. She has to believe in a purpose; otherwise she wouldn't be able to do that. Sounds unbelievable, right? She just ignores all the evidence to the contrary surrounding here. Facts, connections, world events – it all just bounces off her. She's living in a world of make believe and she'd love to take this illusion and place it over the whole real world. She believes this way she could make it a better place for all of us. She's so strong. So courageous. So infinitely lost. If only there was a way to set her free."

Socrates halted. John, too. The world had grown light.

"We're here," Socrates suddenly said. He left the path and headed down toward the canal.
"Come on. I haven't got all day."

John was still struggling with the transition from Joanna to the stark reality of Socrates' sullenness but he did as he was told and followed Socrates down the embankment.

Socrates was pointing impatiently to a rock protruding from the ground at their feet. It was some kind of marker. Squinting, John was able to discern a year and two letters.

"This is where the first canal builders stopped digging when they aborted their project. Long after the city was founded and before the textile industry came in," Socrates said.

The marked stone looked old and weather-worn enough to date back to that time. It had obviously been placed there on purpose. But that wasn't proof that it was a marker for the discontinued first attempt at digging a canal.

Socrates seemed to notice John's doubt because he added: "It's okay, you don't have to believe me. But two things are important. First, the sculpture is a lie and a fake. It's nothing but a memorial to the present zeitgeist. Second, the canal still was a god-send for this city."

"Yeah, sorry, I still don't quite get what you're saying."

"Well, try harder! The past was not quite what they want us to remember. We're twisting it to suit us. In consequence, our present and its maxims are just as artificial. They are products we're cleverly selling to ourselves. And as for the future - the future is nothing but the time when our present becomes the past. You need to be awake and alert if

you want to understand those siblings, past, present, and future.”

“Jesus, does it have to be that complicated, Socrates?”

Socrates just shook his head and climbed back up the embankment towards the path.

“It means that we need to be careful with our present. We mustn’t screw it up. We need to model it so that it will become a past we like to look back upon. A fountain with a sculpture does not necessarily accurately determine the past, nor does it dictate the future. It only represents our vision of the present. Great leaders, economy, infinite wealth. Just because something seems to have worked and helped people for a little while in the past doesn’t mean it was right or that we should hold onto it in our present or future. Or in simpler terms you might understand: the plaque in the fountain is bullshit. Humankind deserves better.”

John had followed Socrates up to the path and was standing beside him.

“But the canal that someone built for whatever reason at some point in the past, that canal is okay?”

“When the canal was built, it was part of the present. However, it had a great impact on the city’s future. The river led to the first settlement, but the canal influenced the city’s growth. There would be a city without it, no doubt. But that city

would be a different one. So that's a fact – the canal was an important factor for the city's development. Whatever else, the canal made the city boom. What we make of it now is our problem, though. The people who initiated the first attempt at building the canal certainly did not know what their project would lead to. They ran out of resources and motivation and abandoned it. And yet, it is hard to imagine what would have happened had the canal not been built eventually."

With this, Socrates headed back to where they'd come from. John hurriedly followed him.

"So where are we going now?"

"I am going to cross that bridge there and finally tend to my own affairs. Where you go is your own concern."

They walked together until they reached the bridge. Socrates gave John a short nod and turned off the path. John stopped and watched him cross the bridge.

Uncertain where to go next, John continued retracing his and Socrates' steps all the way back to the mall, albeit at a much more leisurely pace.

By now, the mall was open. John crossed the parking lot, which was already pretty full, and walked up the stairs to the crowded and busy courtyard. It was thronged with people like bees in a beehive. Standing on the top step, John could see the fountain but not hear it. The babble of voices

and other noises canceled out all subtler sounds. John walked over to one of the small cafés, sat down at a table outside, and ordered coffee.

As he was waiting for the waiter to return with his hot beverage, he stretched out his legs and closed his eyes. He felt sleepy and knackered, yet somehow good. It had been an exhausting and also wonderful walk with Socrates. John smiled and shook his head, hoping no one was watching him. They would think he was not quite right, sitting there with his eyes closed and gesticulating. That thought didn't really bother him, though. He might be exhausted and confused by the events of the past days and he felt like he was slowly losing control over his life, but still he hadn't felt this good in a long while. Maybe he was going insane. At least with a smile then.

His coffee arrived. John took a sip. Over the rim of his cup he watched the many people hanging around the fountain and sculpture. Some kids were bent over the ledge, their hands in the water, splashing around. A group of tourists – at least John assumed they were tourists – stood near the sculpture, watching the waterwheel and possibly reading the plaque. John grinned. If only you knew, he thought as he sipped his coffee. If only you knew.

He imagined Socrates sloshing around in the fountain, standing tall and facing the startled crowds with his glinting stare before turning

around with a triumphant howl and pissing on the hated plaque. Involuntarily, John laughed and choked on his coffee. He coughed, put his cup down and shook his head violently as if to shake off the image. This of course didn't work.

John leaned back in his chair and resumed watching the fountain, a content smile on his face. His morning meetings with Joanna and Socrates had turned this place into something more than just his regular Saturday shopping and coffee spot. And thanks to Socrates, he would from now on forever look at the fountain and sculpture with different eyes. That bastard.

John stretched once more. His hike with Socrates had exhausted him just as much as if he'd been running, if not more. He'd had a hard time keeping up with the older man. It had been like his run with Izzie. That had been along the canal, too. He remembered that he had promised to call her so they could arrange a meeting. He could also just walk by her bakery. John glanced at his watch. If he hurried, he might catch her there. But more likely than not, she was already gone. Good. He felt a little guilty but he just didn't want to talk to her. He was too tired. Having made up his mind, he ordered another coffee.

When the waiter placed the cup in front of him, John remembered his first date with Izzie. It had been right here, at this café.

A hot summer day, Saturday. The fountain had been thronged with people cooling off their hands and faces with the fresh water. Kids had jumped into the fountain and splashed around in it. Crowds were moving in and out of the mall. The only motionless groups were those standing in line for ice cream or snacks. People crowded around café tables shaded by umbrellas. Chairs were in high demand and only a newspaper left by someone on the second seat at John's table had prevented a gaggle of laughing women from snatching the chair. Seeing that some of the women were still standing, John picked up the abandoned newspaper and waived it in the air to signal to them that the seat was free. They didn't notice him, and, feeling awkward, John sat down again and started browsing the newspaper, something he rarely did back then.

He had just reached the sports section and was about to skim the results tables when he saw out of the corner of his eye that someone had approached his table. He assumed it was the waiter. He looked up from his paper and froze, literally. Standing there before him was Izzie. And she was smiling at him.

She sat down on the free seat. As she put down her shopping bags, one fell over and few oranges and a head of salad rolled out. Immediately, the waiter rushed over to catch the fugitive fruit and return them to their rightful owner. In fact, he

seemed a bit over-eager to help her put everything back in her bag. She of course thanked him profusely. Then she ordered coffee. John fully expected the waiter to leave without paying him any notice, but the waiter finally looked at him and took his order almost reluctantly.

No wonder. She was a woman, and an attractive one. She'd probably pushed the bag over to get attention. Having scrutinized her over the edge of the newspaper he was now merely pretending to read, John didn't blame the waiter. Despite or maybe because of that, John decided to keep ignoring Izzie for the moment. It wasn't easy. He had to control himself not to look at her. When he finally succumbed to the urge, she caught him out. Of course.

She smiled at him. Nervous and a bit embarrassed, John smiled back before hiding his blushing face behind the newspaper again, which he was holding up like a shield. He heard her rummaging around in her handbag. To snatch a glance at what she was doing, he turned the pages of the newspaper like you would when you don't have anywhere to put it down. Instead of just turning the page with the left hand, he brought his two hands together, thus closing the paper completely for a short moment that gave him clear view of the other side of the table. Izzie had taken out a notebook and pen.

The waiter came and served their coffees. He hardly acknowledged John but asked Izzie very politely whether she would like anything else. She gave him a dazzling smile and thanked him, much too expansively for John's taste.

John strained to focus on his paper but only a moment later his gaze strayed over the paper's edge. He looked just long enough to see that Izzie had looked at him too and caught him watching her yet again. Panicked, he pretended to be watching someone or something at the fountain, faked an amused smile and shook his head. Then he returned to his paper, silently cursing himself. When he recalled his coffee standing there on the table, he felt instantly reassured. Casually, he put aside his newspaper, took a sip from his cup and glanced over its rim. Izzie was writing something in her notebook. She was right-handed, with beautiful hands. When he noticed that her pen had stopped moving, he automatically looked up into her face. She had caught him out again. He blushed, again. She smiled. Then she continued writing as if nothing had happened.

It was incredible. She was practically ignoring him. She flirted with that waiter as if there was no tomorrow, but him, John, at whose table she had sat down without asking, him she ignored. If there was ignoring, then for sure it was his role to ignore her, not vice versa. John would have liked to tell

her what he thought of that but he controlled himself. Not only did she not talk to him, she also made him feel sheepish with all her fuss and affectations. John considered leaving. He could just get up, say a short, noncommittal goodbye, and walk away. Or not say anything, just leave. Even better. A friendly nod at the most. He thought about it a while longer. His coffee cup was still more than half full. Slowly, he took a sip. The coffee was luke-warm by now but John didn't care. He would not waste this coffee – certainly not because of her. He could leave when he was finished. He took another sip and looked over to Izzie.

At the same moment, she stopped writing and looked up. Their eyes met. She smiled, picked up her cup and drank, never breaking eye contact. John didn't care anymore that she'd caught him looking at her. He just kept doing so. She put down her cup, ran her fingers through her hair, and smiled at him. Then she, as if nothing happened, picked up her pen and started writing again. It was outraging!

John took a deep breath and then, the initiative.

"Are you a restaurant critic?", he asked, his voice lower than he'd intended.

Izzie stopped writing and looked up at him. His heart seemed to miss a beat. He held his breath.

"Really now? A simple 'Hello' wouldn't do for you?"

John's jaw literally dropped. He tried to analyze what just happened and, more importantly, what options he had left now. Getting up and racing off was out of the question. His legs felt like jelly.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally uttered a shy "Hello." His next thought was that he also could have chosen to drop dead.

Izzie must have thought the same. But to his surprise, she started smiling.

"There you go. A bit shy, but you didn't fall off your chair or run off. Hello."

A whirlwind of intense relief, embarrassment, and a host of other, unspecified feelings threatened to plunge John into even greater emotional chaos. He tried to compose himself and distract her with some innocuous chatter until he had himself under control again.

"I just thought, since you're taking notes ..."

"I know exactly what you thought. 'There's an attractive woman all on her own. How can I hit on her in a way that makes me appear smart and witty and attractive and interesting?' Am I right?"

Dropping dead seemed by far the most appealing option to John now.

He took a deep breath. He couldn't make matters much worse now. Also, she hadn't left or thrown her coffee in his face. Although admittedly

he felt like someone had punched him in the stomach.

"Hi, I'm John. And yes, it's not easy to talk to women who know they're attractive and sit alone in a café because they don't like to be hit upon."

"See, John? That wasn't so hard. And it even showed some spirit. Not bad for now."

"Thank you. I did have a lot of time to prepare."

Now they both smiled.

"Izzie. That's me. It's an abbreviation."

"Huh. Of what?"

"My first name."

John grinned.

"This isn't going to be easy, is it?"

"Not a bit," Izzie pronounced.

"Fine."

"Giving up already?"

"Never. I like a challenge."

"Well, let's hope you're not out of your depth."

"We'll see."

"Yes, we will."

"Does that mean this is the beginning of a wonderful friendship?"

"Persistent. I like that."

"That doesn't answer my question."

They shared a long, intense look.

Then Izzie leaned back in her chair and laughed softly.

"We'll see."

John nodded.

"Yes, we will."

They both laughed. They stayed long there at that small table. They ordered ice cream and talked. It seemed like Izzie wanted to know everything about him. John had no right answers to most of her questions. But talking was just a welcome reason for him to keep looking at her and enjoying her company.

She hadn't revealed much about herself. John hadn't bothered ask her either. All the bigger his surprise when he tried to give her his number and she suggested going to her place. Once again he was dumbstruck. He tried to act normal as they walked side by side over the canal bridge and to her apartment. But the tension he felt was immense. He tried to prepare himself for whatever might await him. A kid, ten cats, a band of thugs ready to rough him up and rob him - anything seemed possible. And none of it would have stopped him from going home with her.

To his relief and extreme pleasure, it was his hope, not his fear that came true – all that happened was “just” sex. The only thing that struck him as unusual as he stepped into her apartment was the books. Izzie had a great many of them. They were stacked everywhere. Especially at the place most people reserved for their television set. Izzie was the only person John knew who didn’t own a TV. Not even a small one. Not even stacked away, as a backup option.

That evening, he couldn’t have cared less. After they had slept together she kicked him out. Though that irritated him, he hadn’t dared to suggest they have dinner instead, or maybe drinks.

Walking home, John had no clue what to make of his recent encounter. It all had been pretty extraordinary and sleeping with her was the undisputed pinnacle. So, basically, a great Saturday that had ended quite satisfactorily. Literally. If it was to be a one-night-stand, or better one-evening-stand, then at least a wonderful one.

Still, he could not stop thinking about Izzie for a while. After a few days, though, John decided to put the whole thing in the past. Then Izzie called. She wanted to meet him. On Saturday, at the mall. Just like the first time, they started out having coffee and ended up in her bed.

The difference was that Izzie talked about herself a little. John learned that she worked at the

bakery and what her usual schedule looked like. It became clear to him why she kicked him out so early in the night. Izzie had to work Sundays.

From then on, they met more or less regularly. Not just on Saturdays and not only for sex, either. They were definitely more than friends with benefits, albeit less than a steady couple. For she obviously still dated other guys. He'd witnessed that recently when he stood looking up at her window. John stared at his coffee cup, his mind miles away.

A loud commotion at the fountain brought him back to reality. To be honest, he had no idea at all what the deal was with Izzie. He spent a lot of time with her. And he enjoyed being with her. She was a fascinating and very attractive woman. Though he knew hardly anything about her, he still had this feeling of familiarity around her, as if they'd known each other for a long time. Maybe that was an illusion. After all, what he did know about her was just what he'd inferred from her responses to anything they had experienced together so far. The whole thing seemed a bit suspicious. Though she did like to talk. Mostly, little inconsequential anecdotes and stories from work that he listened to without digging deeper. Alternatively, she asked him questions. She loved doing that. Lately, she'd fixated on his visits to the fountain. He never should have told her about Socrates and Joanna. Izzie seemed almost obsessive in her curiosity about them. She wanted to know exactly what they

were like and what John talked about with them. He had no intention to explain, even less so as he was still in the process of working it out. No, he definitely wouldn't drop by the bakery today. He wouldn't even call Izzie. She had just become too demanding lately. He didn't have the resources and motivation to deal with her right now. Maybe it was time for a little detachment. Or not just a little, maybe he should abandon the whole thing with her.

John sat up straighter and finished his coffee. Before he got up, he stared into the crowds around the fountain. Then he slowly walked home, slightly stooped like someone who felt dejected. He was probably just tired and growing more so with every step. And hungry. He hadn't eaten anything since the doughnuts that morning and it was afternoon when we arrived at his apartment.

On most days, he wouldn't even be awake at this time. His rhythm was completely out of whack. Still, he needed to eat something right away. His fridge and pantry did not contain anything that could serve as a meal. He had to go out again and buy something. At least that would keep him awake.

Going back to the mall was out of the question. There were enough options closer by. John walked to the little pizza place a few streets down and ordered a pizza to go. Back home, he grabbed a beer and settled in front of the TV. There was a boring

game on. Good, that meant he could eat in peace. After finishing the pizza, he got another beer, sat down on the sofa again and tried to concentrate on the game. His lids were heavy.

The next he knew, he jerked up from the sofa cushion, feeling panicked. He had fallen asleep, that much was obvious. The game was still on. Drowsily, John watched a few moments. The weird thing was that the teams seemed to wear different jerseys. He soon calmed down. He must have slept longer than he thought so this was another game. He made some coffee and watched a bit more. Then he took a cab to the bar. It was Saturday night, after all.

John could see the flickering screens through the large windows of the sports bar. The typical bar noises – a tangle of voices, music, and glasses clattering – were audible from the outside. The bar seemed pretty busy. Like every Saturday night. John just stood there for several minutes. People walked past him into the bar. Others exited. Every time the bar door was opened a waft of inside air came out and enveloped him. He breathed it in, smelling the familiar odors. The bar air was like an invisible tongue trying to pull John inside. And why not? He knew the place, site of many and agreeable evenings. A woman had stepped out of the bar and approached John. She was holding a cigarette and asked him for a light. Automatically, John reached into his jacket pocket, took out a

lighter and lit her cigarette. She smiled, thanked him and asked John if he'd like one too. John shook his head and turned around. He didn't smoke. The lighter was just a night-life prop. He by habit took it along so he'd be able to offer a light to women. Women like this one. After lighting their cigarette, he would ask if he could buy them a drink or two.

Not today though. Today something was keeping him from entering the bar. No, he wouldn't go in there tonight. It didn't feel right. John started strolling slowly down the street. He felt tired. The long walks and his irregular sleeping pattern these past few days had left their traces. He walked just a short way before hailing a cab home. Back in his apartment, he sat down in front of the TV, ate the leftover pizza from before, and drank a few beers. As he dragged himself over to his bedroom he knew that he shouldn't. He had to get back to his old rhythm somehow. But not now. Now all he wanted was to sleep.

Somebody's voice on his radio alarm clock awoke John and he cursed himself for setting the alarm early enough to go to the fountain. He could have slept in instead. It was Sunday, after all. He turned off the radio and rolled over. Unable to go back to sleep, he finally dragged himself out of bed. Still feeling like a sleepwalker, he took a cab to the mall. When he got there, he sat on the fountain ledge. He was alone.

He waited awhile before he remembered that Joanna wouldn't come. The realization did nothing to improve his mood. With the tiredness came the cold. He should have stayed in bed.

Suddenly he cursed loudly. Coffee and doughnuts. He'd forgotten everything. He kicked the fountain wall in frustration. Nothing seemed to go right. Nothing at all. Now furious, John stomped off toward the street. He would take a cab home. But then he stopped after a few steps, took a deep breath and trudged back to the stairs on the other side, from where he had a good view of the parking lot. A few minutes passed. John knew that Socrates wouldn't show up. He still stayed where he was, watching the world - or the parking lot - go lighter and lighter. The spectacle of dawn was strangely soothing. Yawning, John finally turned around to walk back across the courtyard, to the street beyond, and home.

But regardless of the chain of command after a few steps his feet decided to already stop in front of the fountain again. It took John a second to realize he was staring at the sculpture. He still wasn't sure what to make of it. He'd walked past it so many times, looked at it so many times in the past few days, and learned so much about it in one way or another. And yet, the sculpture remained a mystery. Despite, or maybe because, all of it.

He looked at it attentively. The wheel was turning. The water gurgled. One of the figures stood

slightly stooped. The other one erect. They seemed to watch him. John walked a few steps around the fountain without taking his eyes from the sculpture. Then he stopped. The figures' gazes had followed him.

"Who are you?" John heard his own voice say.

He stood still for a second. As if waiting for an answer.

"What are you trying to represent?" he asked next. "What is it you want to be?"

He walked all the way around the fountain until he was standing in front of the sculpture again.

"There's something about you that has me hooked. The way you're standing there, enthroned in the center, ruling the little streaming empire that surrounds you. Amusing, the way you gurgle along. You're a pretty sight for walkers by. But who are you truly?"

John squinted as if trying to scrutinize the sculpture even more closely.

"There are those who claim you're not what you're supposed to be. No good for the city. They even say you're pointing us to the wrong future. Are they right?"

Again, he seemed to wait for an answer. None came, so John took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants as far as they'd go, and stepped into the water. Feeling determined, he sloshed over to

the fountain. Hand on hips, he stood before it, confronting it. He fixated the figures with a hard stare. They were covered in bird droppings. John had never noticed that the varnish on them had faded and was beginning to come off in flakes. He bent forward to take a closer look. One of the figures was even missing a finger. Also, one corner of the document in the other one's hand had fallen off. The waterwheel wasn't in much better shape. It seemed about to crumble apart.

"Everything all right over there?" John suddenly heard a voice behind him ask.

He whirled around. A man dressed in blue work overalls was standing at the fountain, looking at John with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. It was early-morning mall guy. He was a bit late though. And shorter than John thought to remember. Probably just one of many of the mall's janitorial staff. There must always be someone on site before the mall opened, even on Sundays.

John waved to the guy and waded over to him. "Yeas, thank you, I'm fine. I was just looking at that sculpture in the fountain. It's beautiful. Do you know what it's supposed to represent?"

The guy in the overalls shrugged. "A waterwheel and two figures. Obviously." At that, he turned around, walked over to a side entrance to the mall, and disappeared inside.

John had climbed out of the fountain. He smiled. A waterwheel and two figures. John had to admit the guy wasn't wrong. Just a few days ago, John would have agreed with him. Just a few days ago he would have been perfectly fine with seeing just a waterwheel and two figures. But those days were over.

He sat down on the fountain ledge, put on his socks and shoes, and rolled down his pant legs. They'd gotten wet anyway. John didn't care.

The first rays of the sun blinded him as he walked down the stairs from the courtyard. He closed his eyes, stopped where he stood, and felt the warmth on his face. The sun wasn't strong yet but it was enough to create the pleasing sense of a soft touch on his skin. He decided to enjoy the sun a little while longer. He would walk home. Though tired and yearning for his bed, he felt that the few more minutes this would take him were worth it.

When he reached the major road, he even turned into a smaller street that led down to the Financial District and Newtown instead of taking the direct route home. His rhythm was shot anyway so it didn't matter if he indulged in a little detour on his way home.

He stopped at a kiosk to get a cup of coffee and took careful sips as he walked aimlessly through the city, noticing once again how beautiful he

thought it was. There were so many different streets and alleys, none of them quite like the others, that underlay the orderly pattern of the main axes as a fine network of crooked, chaotic connections. There were unusually wide, suffocating narrow, very crowded, and eerily empty streets. Streets made of tar, concrete, dirt, or cobblestones. Some were residential streets, others shopping streets, thoroughfares, one-way streets, bike paths, hidden paths, walkways, pedestrian streets, stairs, dead-ends, or driveways. It was a wonderfully diverse universe of streets waiting to be explored.

John turned into another small side street, then the next. He had lived in this city his whole life but it had taken him until these past few days to realize how full of nooks and crannies and little secret places it was. There were so many roads you could walk through this city. Maybe more than he'd be able to cover in his lifetime. And that was just the Island, where he lived. As for the rest of the city - that almost defied his imagination.

He had reached another major road and stopped. The towers of the Financial District seemed to be standing guard along the street in front of him. Tall, elegant glass structures stretching toward the sky and gleaming in the morning sun. They were lining wide sidewalks that were swept every morning. Between the sidewalks lay the flawless pitch-black of the street with its white markings. A remarkable sight.

John walked on. He passed through another small park, where he considered resting on one of the benches but then decided to keep moving. After two more turns he reached the stadium. He paid it little attention. It felt strange to admit to himself that he knew the stadium more from TV than actual visits there.

After a while, John reached city hall, a building well worth a tour or at least a few admiring glances, but he didn't slow his pace and walked past it to the next street. Here stood several other official buildings, mostly courthouses and embassies. It was another pristine street, lined by many magnificent buildings that represented a wide spectrum of historic architecture. Richly adorned, some featuring unusual ornaments, they seemed to outbid one another with their opulence and uniqueness. John was all alone there. He hurried to get away from this street. Without even a furtive glance through the massive gates and onto the forecourts and inner courts of the palace-like structures, he hastened past, his eyes cast down. Once or twice he almost fell in his rush to flee this deserted, intimidating splendor that made him feel so completely out of place.

Not until he reached a wide street with lots of traffic and bustling crowds on the sidewalks did he slow his pace and his breathing got back to normal. He was now on one of the major shopping

streets in Newtown, right below the Financial District. Many popular fashion brands had stores here. There were also a few gigantic department stores that sprawled out over a dozen or more floors and carried everything from bobby pins for pets to complete bedroom furniture sets. Sprinkled in between were stores selling the latest "trend foods", or whatever it was called nowadays. John had never noticed how many of those there were. They were matched in numbers by restaurants and tiny eateries offering the usual fare. In just a few steps, you could take a culinary tour around the world. And then there were the inescapable upscale stores selling mobile phones, consumer electronics, and shoes, all of them displaying only a few selected items on their spacious retail floors. They looked almost like art galleries. But there were so many of them that you barely noticed them. The street was one of the city's major hubs. It was always busy, especially Sundays, when people had the time to go shopping.

John tried to stand still and immerse himself in that atmosphere but each time he slowed down or tried to change directions, someone bumped into him or pushed him along. He could hear people cursing him under their breath or even to his face. He worked his way through the crowds to the outer limits of the sidewalk and stopped at a corner. From here he could watch the hustle and bustle fairly undisturbed. Yet there was an unpleasant smell. It came from the alley behind him. Turning

around, he saw a huge pile of garbage bags. The smell was horrendous.

John rejoined the stream of people on the shopping street sidewalk and let it carry him to the next major intersection. The pedestrian light was red. He stopped and waited with the crowd. Some people jostled past him. It was so crowded that you could hardly breathe without taking in someone else's scent. Cars came rushing by from both sides. John was used to this from his daily commutes. He'd resigned to all of it as part of city life. But now he wasn't on his way to the office and had no intention to submit himself to this ordeal. Using his elbows, he pushed his way through the crowd standing at the red light and down the street. The cars continued to rush by. The traffic noises and exhaust fumes nauseated him. He started to walk faster, looking for a quieter and, most importantly, less malodorous street.

Soon he was able to turn into a small park, happy to leave the traffic roar behind. However, it wasn't completely quiet. He knew the steady buzz and drone of distant traffic, car horns, sirens, and screeching brakes. Of course he did. But he rarely heard it the way he did now. Maybe it jarred him because his tiredness and exhaustion made him oversensitive. Keeping his eyes on the ground before his feet, John walked through the park and exited onto another street.

He started counting cigarette butts as he passed them by. There were so many that he nearly had to stop to count them all, so he gave up. He couldn't believe how many people seemed to just drop their stubs without a second thought. And all the other scraps of trash everywhere! In the ditch, on sidewalks, at the corners of entryways – everywhere. There were flattened chewing gums, candy wrappers, empty cigarette cartons, crumpled paper coffee cups – some of them still half full when they'd been dropped on the ground.

John raised his eyes to look at the buildings that seemed to move past him. He had left the Financial District and the center of Newtown behind. Here, there were mainly apartment and office buildings. And of course the obligatory grocery stores and supermarkets. All the buildings were multi-leveled, though no shining towers. Their facades were a lot less spectacular and well-kempt. The paint had faded and was flaking off here and there. Some were blackened by pollution. The windows were normal sized and regularly spaced. The general impression of the architecture was uniform and dull. Utilitarian structures build at sort of sensible prices. The only diversion came from the countless placards and posters pasted on every available surface. Walls, tree trunks, lamp posts, and whatever else provided space was covered to an arm's length above John's head with some sort of notices. John began to march on with long strides.

From somewhere came a scream, but it was immediately drowned out by the general noise. When he came to another park, he saw children playing, their nannies sitting on benches and talking on their phones. Some of them might even have been mothers.

There had been an accident at the next intersections. Two cars had crashed. The drivers were standing on the streets, shouting angrily at one another. The argument seemed about to escalate. John walked past a small crowd of pleased-looking onlookers that had gathered.

He passed the doors of a church. They were covered in graffiti and chained shut. By now John was almost running. He did his best to ignore the city and everything around him.

Finally, he came near the river. There were paths along the riverbank, just like on the canal opposite the Island, lined to one side by trees and bushes that kept out the pressing noise and chaos of the city. John followed the river upstream for a while. He soon felt calmed by the steady flow of the water.

He stopped and turned to face the river. He admired the mass of water flowing slowly and indifferently past him and past the city. Unimpressed by it all, the stream meandered along in his natural riverbed resolutely toward the ocean. John felt his lids drop. For a moment he imagined himself just

letting go, falling into the water and letting it carry him along. He would be drift along, held up by the waves, under a wide open sky. All the way to the ocean. To the coast. Where his parents lived. John blinked his eyes open. He softly shook his head and smiled inwardly. Then he bid the river a silent goodbye and took the next path that led away from the riverbank and into the neighboring city quarter.

It was quiet here, the streets almost deserted. This, the upper north of the Island, was almost purely a residential neighborhood. This was why there were so few pedestrians and only a few cars, all of which drove slowly. Near the river stood the nicer houses. Some of them even had little gardens out front. Clean, well-kempt, orderly, and mostly protected by picket fences. The further John walked, the more functional the buildings. Soon there were no more gardens. The structures grew wider and higher. Finally, they had transformed into apartment blocks standing in rank and file along the street. The sight was almost depressing. All the streets were pretty boring. But John paid little attention anyway. He had enough of this walk and was so tired and hungry that it felt impossible to focus. Just staying on his feet and walking straight was hard enough.

Looking for a busier street where he could find a cab, he came upon a large, bustling square. There was a market going on, with stalls for vegetables,

fruit, and flowers, and a few that offered clothes and other merchandise. Most stall owners were already packing up, however, loading their equipment and unsold wares onto vans. It must be around noon or later, then.

John crossed the square, strolling past the leftover displays. He would have liked to buy some groceries but did not want to keep the vendors from packing up.

He was about to turn around when he saw, through a gap in the last row of stalls, a fountain in the center of the square. His curiosity piqued, he walked over but stopped in disappointment. Not only was the fountain dry, it was also badly battered. Though there was a pedestal in the middle, just like the fountain at the mall had, the sculpture that belonged on this one was lying in pieces on the ground of the waterless pool.

John turned around and watched the last of the activities at the market. Nobody seemed to care that the sculpture was broken and the fountain had run dry. Most of them didn't even see the fountain. Or they took care not to look.

Slowly, John sat down on the fountain ledge. It was good to get off his feet after hours of walking. His legs and feet ached, he was very tired. He could hardly believe what had become of his city. This wasn't how he'd remembered it. His daily ex-

periences had little in common with what he'd witnessed these past few hours. He turned around to look at the broken sculpture again and thought of the fountain at the mall.

Then he dragged himself up, crossed the square, and walked down the nearest street. He just wanted to go home and get some rest. At least he understood Alexander a little better now. Just now, the city seemed to John like a place he would like to leave behind, at least temporarily. He could go and see his parents on the coast. John wondered if they had never really liked the city or just came to a point where they realized it wasn't what they wanted anymore. Wasn't life good in the city? John tried to mull this over, but try as he might, it was just too exhausting. His mind was blank. Feeling numb, he walked on.

At some point he reached another red light. As he waited for it to turn green, he recognized his surroundings. He just needed to cross the street and take a turn after the next block, and he would be only a few minutes' walk from the mall. That meant that he hadn't taken the route home from the market square at all. Almost like a sleepwalker – conscious, but not fully awake – John managed the short stretch and almost crawled up the stairs to the courtyard of the mall.

He passed the inviting restaurant tables and walked over to the fountain. He felt strange. It was as though he could watch himself looking at the

sculpture. It was kind of funny. He smiled inwardly but his face remained impassive. Of course it did, John thought. *His* face wouldn't change. For it was the other one, John the observer, who was smiling. His twisted thoughts made him grin. Immediately, though, he called himself to order and focused on the sculpture again. The same faded colors, the grime, the broken bits. Maybe you aren't that bad a match for our city, after all, John thought. At closer look, neither of you is as attractive as I thought. You should both get a makeover. It would do you good. Otherwise, you may fall to ruin completely. John felt his lips curve into a soft smile.

It felt weirdly light and carefree. He wasn't cold anymore. Hunger and thirst had retreated into the far distance. His legs had stopped aching. The ambient noise seemed to come from far away. He almost felt as though he was all alone there at the fountain. Maybe he had been worried and upset too often these past few days. Everything was fine. He himself, John, was fine. John. His name echoed in his mind. John. He smiled. That was him. John. John.

His smile froze to a grimace. Suddenly the broad expanse in his mind zoomed in, narrowing down to a focused and startled stare at the sculpture in front of him. John. Horrified, he gaped at the sculpture. It had called his name. He instantly

felt the ache in his legs again, heard the noise and saw the people around him.

The next moment he realized that someone was tapping him on the shoulder. He whirled around. And was relieved. He must literally have fallen asleep with his eyes open.

"My goodness, what's wrong with you? Didn't you hear me call your name?"

Still a bit dazed and struggling to clear the last fine veils of confusion, John was unable to answer.

"Are you okay?" he heard Izzie ask and saw her hand waving before his eyes. "You don't look very well, you know. Miles away."

John finally got a grip and nodded. "I'm here. Just a bit tired and hungry."

"Long night, huh? Aren't you getting a bit old for that?"

He smiled and took her arm. "Come, let's have coffee."

They walked side by side to one of the little restaurants and got a table inside. They ordered coffee and two slices of cake. Both of them for John.

Izzie just shook her head as she watched John wolf down the cake.

"Feeling better?" she asked when he was finished.

"Kind of. I'm just a bit tired," John said and took a large swallow of coffee.

Izzie waited until he'd put his cup down. Then she looked him squarely in the eyes. "Are you still talking to your new friends?"

It took John a moment to understand whom Izzie was talking about. Then he laughed sheepishly and gave a dismissive gesture. "Socrates and Joanna? Well, I wouldn't exactly call them friends."

"So what would you call them?"

"I don't know. I hardly know them. Acquaintances, maybe."

"Do you see them often? Are you seeing them right now? Are they here with you?"

John took another sip of coffee. Just as he'd expected and feared, she had started grilling him. He didn't care for it.

"I wouldn't say I see them often. We meet now and then. But I never thought I'd meet you here! What time is it, anyway?"

Izzie did not respond immediately but stared into the cup she was grasping with both hands. After a few seconds, she said: "It's still early. I cut my shift short today."

"Oh. Slow day at the bakery?"

"No. Pretty busy, in fact. Sunday, you know. Everyone wants fresh buns." She smiled gently and sipped her coffee.

John realized she was waiting for him to ask for an explanation. But he just did not feel like talking to her. Somehow he couldn't. He picked up his cup and met her gaze. The way she was watching him, her eyes a bit misty, reminded him of a door standing ajar. Not wide open and beckoning, but still open for him to enter without knocking and asking to be admitted.

John looked down into his cup and took another sip. He hated seeing her like that. He hated himself for letting her sit there like that, even if just for a moment.

"So why did you leave early?"

She seemed to hesitate before she spoke.

"The bakery may close."

John didn't know how to respond to this news.

"Is business that bad?"

"No. That's not it. The owner and his wife want to retire. There's no one to take over the shop."

"No children?"

"They do have children. But they have moved away from the city and have no interest in running the bakery. It's a lot of work. You have to get up before dawn. And in the end it doesn't seem to

bring in enough to be worth all the effort. Too little profit. Too much work. Though you'd think there'd be quite the demand for fresh bread."

Izzie kept on talking about the many different kinds of baked goods that would soon be a thing of the past. She imagined the disappointment of the bakery regulars and the loss for the city, which would have to do without the excellent, home-made bread and cakes. It made her sad, she said, to think that so many people would have to settle for bland, mass-produced bread packed in plastic bags instead of biting into warm, fresh-from-the-oven buns. There of course were several potential buyers already for the bakery building and the lot it stood on, Izzie said. Supermarket and fast food chains had shown great interest. John just sat there, trying to fight off his drowsiness. He tried his best but was unable to pay much attention.

After a while Izzie fell silent. They faced each other over the table with their empty coffee cups. Finally Izzie asked John to accompany her home. John declined politely. He was much too tired. Izzie nodded. They hugged goodbye outside the café. Izzie handed him a bag of buns she'd brought from the bakery. John felt a pang of guilt. He certainly didn't deserve them.

Still, he ate all the buns on the cab ride home. Arrived there, he did not even bother to undress before sinking down onto his bed.

The blaring of his radio clock woke him. He must have set the alarm at some point, though he couldn't remember doing so. Drowsily, he sat up and checked the time. It was early Monday morning. Fountain time. He fell back onto the pillow. He had slept through the afternoon and the night but still felt absolutely whacked. Grunting, he labored to roll over and started to doze off.

Seconds later, he jerked awake. Joanna would be back at the fountain! He had promised her he'd come. That's why he'd set the alarm. Nearly panicking, he realized he had fallen asleep for more than just a few minutes. He jumped out of bed. He did not want to disappoint Joanna.

In no time, John got dressed and rushed out of the house to hail a cab. He asked the driver to stop at a coffee shop and bought a box of doughnuts and several cups of coffee, which the barista put in one of those holders that looked like giant egg cartons.

When he finally reached the mall he raced up the stairs to the fountain. One of the coffee cups shook loose from the carton and splashed to the ground. John didn't care. He kept running. When he reached the courtyard he could see that Socrates and Joanna were still there, sitting on the fountain ledge. Feeling relief, John slowed down to a fast walk. Joanna hugged him when he reached the fountain.

"Good to see you. We were starting to get worried."

"We' weren't, you were," Socrates grunted as he reached for one of the cups and a doughnut.
"Can I go now?"

Joanna looked sternly at Socrates. "If you think you have to go now, just go. The coffee and pastries stay."

Socrates stared at her for a moment, his eyes narrowed. Then he shrugged and sat down next to the box of doughnuts on the ground.

"Sorry I'm so late. I overslept."

"You do look very tired, John. Aren't you feeling well?" Joanna asked solicitously.

"No, I'm fine. Really," John hastened to reassure her. "Just a bit tired. My sleeping pattern is all messed up."

"Would it help if we moved our meetings to a different time?" Joanna said.

"Excuse me?" interjected Socrates from his position on the ground. "What is that supposed to mean - 'a different time'? Do I look like I've nothing else to do but wait around until it is convenient for him?"

"Well, your schedule probably is a bit more flexible than mine, I guess." John couldn't suppress a smile.

Socrates jumped up and would have strangled him if it hadn't been for Joanna.

"Stop it!" she barked at both of them. Both men retreated a step.

"I'm sorry, Socrates. I didn't mean to offend you. I'm just tired. I can hardly think straight."

"As if you ever could."

"Socrates!" Joanna took a step toward the older man. "He said he was sorry."

"I had to sit here beside you on the fountain ledge all morning because our young master here overslept. I think I have reason to be a little disagreeable."

"You did not have to wait long with me. The sun hasn't even come up yet. So pull yourself together and have a doughnut."

Joanna turned to face John, who was standing there, shoulders drooped and eyes moist. She gave him another hug, whispering softly and calmly in his ear:

"Don't worry, John. Everything's fine. He's actually glad you came, just like I am. I would never have been able to make him stay and wait if he didn't want to."

Finally, all three of them sat down on the ledge and had coffee and doughnuts. Joanna made sure that John sat between her and Socrates.

Joanna asked John what he'd been up to, so he told them about his walk around the city the day before. He described the wide variety of impressions he'd had. The countless streets and alleys. The buildings and sculptures. The crowds of people. His companions listened, Joanna attentive and almost rapt, Socrates soon grabbing his second cup of coffee and devouring doughnuts.

After a moment of hesitation, John also mentioned the traffic and how it had irritated him at intervals. Not just the traffic but all the noise, the garbage everywhere and the smell you could not help but notice. He had to admit that there were parts of the city he did not particularly like. Though he hastened to say what a wonderful city it was, by and large, and how glad he was that he had explored it.

"It is a wonderful city", Joanna agreed. "With lots of wonderful people."

"How can it be wonderful if there are so many places to dislike?" Socrates argued.

"By and large, it is wonderful," Joanna repeated her previous verdict.

"By and large? By and large we're all dead. That doesn't mean we haven't lived awful lives," Socrates insisted.

"Can we not do that today, please, Socrates?" Joanna said.

John was about to say something but Socrates was faster.

"Look at the time," he said as he jumped up.
"Time to skedaddle."

Joanna and John got up, too. There was one more cup of coffee in the holder. John had meant it for Joanna as his own second cup was lying on the stairs. But he knew she wouldn't take it so he offered it to Socrates. Socrates didn't hesitate to grab it, screwing up his nose and mumbling something about cold coffee. Joanna, who was holding out the doughnut box with the last two remaining doughnuts to Socrates, gave him a little slap on the head with her free hand. Then she took the empty cups and carton over to the bin.

"Well then," she asked after returning to the two men. "At what time shall we meet tomorrow?"

Socrates rolled his eyes.

"It's fine, we can meet at the usual time," John tried to placate him. "I just need to get my day rhythm straight."

Joanna was unimpressed by Socrates obvious displeasure and John's shy attempts at appeasement. "When would be a good time for you, John?"

John hesitated. Joanna remained firm and looked at him with patient kindness. "When would be best for you?"

"Around noon would be perfect. I could go to the office afterwards."

"Noon works for me too," Joanna said. "It would mean I could sleep a bit longer, and they can handle things fine without me during lunch at the soup kitchen. What about you, Socrates?"

Socrates gave her the evil eye. "You always get up early, so what do you care when we meet?"

"Yes, but if we met later I wouldn't have to leave the house so early. So is noon okay for you?"

"Do I have a choice, woman?"

"You always have a choice."

Socrates looked at Joanna, who was looking back at him with a kind, yet confident smile. At last he nodded, grinning resignedly. "Noon it is. But the young one here will provide the catering. And I don't mean coffee and doughnuts."

"Of course," John confirmed instantly.

"Only if he wants to. There's no obligation," Joanna said.

Socrates uttered a soft grunt but seemed to deliberate another matter. He looked around.

"We can't meet here. It will be much too crowded at lunchtime."

Joanna nodded. "What do you suggest?"

Socrates' outstretched arm pointed somewhere into the breaking dawn. "There's a building on the canal, an abandoned industrial building. Part of it is fallen down but that doesn't matter. The rest is pretty safe. It's easy to spot, there's a large, blue graffiti out front."

Joanna nodded and turned to John. "I know the one. I'll lead the way tomorrow. Let's meet down at the end of the parking lot, where the canal path starts. Tomorrow at half past eleven."

John nodded his thanks.

They said their goodbyes, Joanna took Socrates, and together the two walked off towards the parking lot. John looked after them until they started descending the stairs, then he walked the stairs on the opposite side and toward the street, where he took a cab home. He was glad he had gone to the fountain, even though it had been a short meeting. Adding to his good feeling was the relief that they would meet at another time from now on. Joanna and Socrates could have lunch while he ate his breakfast. This reminded him that he hadn't eaten anything but a few doughnuts.

He asked the cab driver to drop him off a few blocks from his home and bought a sandwich at a little deli there. Back home, he ate his sandwich in

front of the TV. A rerun of a game was on. With surprise John realized that he hadn't seen it and didn't even know the outcome. He'd missed quite a lot these past few days. Through he watched the full game, it was still too early to go to the office when it was over. However, it was too late for a nap. As there was another game next, John just watched on until it was time to head out for work.

Several colleagues asked about his wellbeing, stating that he didn't look all that healthy. Otherwise, it was a work day like any other. At first John was glad to be back to his usual routine. Though neither exciting nor particularly interesting, it was what he knew and was good at. Everything was back to normal. His routines and habits formed a protective cocoon around him, which he did not mind at all. He felt safe.

At least for the first few hours. Then he started to get restless. His work began to feel boring. When he thought about it, he realized that it wasn't so much boredom he felt but a sense that he was wasting his time there in the office. He didn't know why he would feel that way. It wasn't as if he had to be somewhere or do something else. But that obscure feeling of restlessness grew stronger. Unable to comprehend or explain it, it made him increasingly frantic.

He called Izzie, hoping she wasn't asleep yet, but wishing she would answer even if she was. And she did. She was a bit annoyed at being

woken by him but agreed to meet him at his place when he got home from the office. He rang off, feeling a little better, his inner turmoil subsiding.

Still, he couldn't summon the motivation to work. Instead, he trawled the internet for information about the bakery business and its current market situation. It was the first thing that had sprung to mind. John opened a tab for an online city map and searched for bakeries. He wanted to find out where to get his fresh buns once Izzie's bakery closed down. It was amazing how few bakeries remained in the city. Not a single one located near him. How could it be that there weren't more bakeries in a city as big as theirs? John recalled the countless trend food stores, fashion chains, department stores, and other businesses he had walked by during the past days. It seemed almost inconceivable that there could be such an overabundance of unnecessary plunder while something as essential and wonderful as fresh bread had virtually disappeared. Those responsible for this development should be held accountable. But who was that? The city planners? The landlords? John guessed that at the end of the day it was all the idiots who, out of laziness, and because it was cheaper too, bought the poor, pre-packed excuses for bread supplied by the supermarkets. That explanation fit in with what he'd recently seen of the city. Whenever he'd scrutinized something a bit more closely it had turned out not to be what it should. Or at least not what he'd wanted it to be.

Maybe he was part of a dying breed, one of the last bakery bun aficionados.

Feeling frustrated, John searched for an online stream of the latest game. Watching internet sports in the office was of course prohibited, but he didn't care. He found a streaming site and watched until it was time to go home.

Izzie arrived late, long after midnight. Still, she had got up earlier than usual to seem him, and he was grateful. Izzie had brought breakfast, including, of course, freshly-baked buns that smelled wonderful. He put butter and jam on the table and watched her as she ate. She even offered him a few bites of her jam bun.

She talked about her job, asked about his, talked about her latest runs, asked how his workout regime was going, told him about some recent movies, and suggested they catch one together sometime soon. John answered in little more than monosyllables. There was little interesting to report on the job front; his workout regime was pretty much nonexistent; and as for the movies, that was a simple yes or no. Anyway, he hadn't asked Izzie to come by so that they could talk about their lives and current affairs. They both knew this, though Izzie did complain that John was too uncommunicative, as she did virtually every time they met.

When she'd swallowed the last of her breakfast, John took hold of her chair, pulled it towards him

with her on it, and started to kiss her. Izzie didn't even feign resistance but kissed him back wholeheartedly. A few minutes later, they were in bed.

"I missed you," whispered Izzie, her head in the crook of his arm, as if she was afraid to wake him. She knew of course that he was awake. Anyway, their lovemaking had been so intense, had even resembled a battle at times, that neither had thought to turn off the lights.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? I missed you too. But I was somehow very busy this whole time," John said.

They just lay there side by side in silence for a while. She caressed his stomach with her thumb, circling it around his bellybutton. He stroked her hair tenderly.

"Do you still go to that fountain in the mornings?"

John stopped touching Izzie's head. There she went again.

"What fountain?"

"The fountain by the mall. The one you told me about."

"Oh. No, I don't." Strictly speaking, that wasn't even a lie. Starting tomorrow, he would not go to the fountain anymore.

"Are you sure?"

John slipped out his arm from under her head, rolled on his side, propped up on one elbow, and looked at her.

"Yes, I'm sure. What is this, Izzie?"

Izzie snuggled up to him under the duvet until her head was almost underneath his. She looked him straight in the eyes. Her gaze looked both troubled and curious.

"But are you still meeting with those characters?"

"Characters?" He looked down at her and did his best to smile. Better not engage!

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right? Whenever you need me, I'm here."

By now, John was truly irritated. "Izzie, I'm perfectly fine. I'm not seeing any 'characters'. Are you worried because of yesterday? I was really very tired then. But I'm fine now."

She lifted her arm and started caressing his cheek with her fingertips.

"Let me know if you want to talk about it. Anytime. Promise me."

"You're the first person I'd come to for help. Promise."

Izzie moved her hand around the back of his neck and pulled his head toward hers until their lips met.

After they had made love one more time, Izzie got dressed and left for work. John fell asleep almost immediately.

He awoke shortly before noon. Izzie's scent still lingered on the sheets. She always smelled so wonderful. However, right now her perfume drove him from the bed. Feeling irritated, John went to the bathroom. Last night's discussion still bothered him. Hadn't she been the one who'd encouraged him to return to the fountain that very first time? And now she acted as if he was losing his mind. Maybe he should now really stay away from Izzie for a while. Fortunately, there was no time to think about it any longer. He had to leave for his meeting with the 'characters'. But this wasn't morning and he wouldn't go to the fountain.

John stepped onto the street. He took a cab to a block with several eateries and restaurants where he bought lunch for Joanna and Socrates as well as a breakfast of pancakes and scrambled eggs for himself. Then he went on to his meeting place with Joanna. She led him to the building on the canal Socrates had described the day before. Joanna looked stern when she noticed the lunch bags he carried. John merely shrugged and assured her that he enjoyed buying them lunch, all the more so as he had little else to contribute. Joanna shook her head in wonderment but helped him carry the bags.

When they finally stopped in front of the building it looked like a small factory. One half was just a ruin, as Socrates had told them. The front part they were facing, however, did not look as solid as he had promised. The walls were covered in graffiti tags, the windows smashed. Bits of plaster had been broken off or fallen down, and the collapse of the back part had left the roof clearly crooked. With a feeling of unease John stepped toward the entrance. After automatically looking for a doorbell, he finally lifted his hand to knock. Then he saw that the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and stood still for a moment as if waiting for the building to tumble down around him. Nothing happened. John stepped inside.

"Hello?" he called a little shyly into the empty corridor stretching out before him.

Joanna slipped past him and pointed to the right, where a stairway led up to the floor above. As John hesitated she started climbing the stairs leading the way for him. This part of the factory building seemed to have been the administrative wing. The collapsed part to the back of it must have been the workshop. On the second floor, they walked along a short corridor. The floorboards seemed solid enough and John felt himself relax. The intermediate floors and walls in this part of the building probably provided more stability than the simple box-like structure of the workshop.

Joanna disappeared inside a doorframe without door. He followed her. He'd entered a large room with time-worn floorboards, yellowed paste remnants on the walls, and a strong, musty odor. John had to breathe shallowly at first to get used to it. Duty heaps of objects lay in the corners as if someone had swept them together. Two of the walls had windows covered with semi-transparent plastic sheets where the windowpanes were missing. Propped up against the wall underneath each window were large cardboard squares, probably used to cover the windows.

John imagined this room at an earlier time, when scriveners had sat there at desks neatly arranged in rows, working diligently until their twelve-hour shift was over, probably in flickering light of candles or lamps. He'd heard or read something along those lines once and the image fit well with the room they were standing in now. It might also have been a packing room, of course. Or whatever else.

In the center of the room stood a large, round table surrounded by five chairs. And on an old sofa on the fourth wall lay Socrates, who got up when he saw Joanna and John enter.

"Ever heard of knocking?" he snapped at them across the room.

Startled, John turned around to face the empty doorframe he had just walked through. "Sure, but there's no door to ..."

"He's just kidding," Joanna said. "And it's not even particularly funny." She walked over to Socrates and slapped him lightly on the back of his head. Then she put down the bag she had been carrying on the table and started to unpack it. John followed her example.

"Do you live here?" he asked Socrates as he was laying the table with plastic cutlery and cups.

"No. This is a boarding house for veteran citizens. I borrowed it from the city for our lunch." At that, he sat on one of the chairs and pulled over one of the takeout boxes. He'd gotten the one with pancakes and eggs and wrinkled his nose.

"That one's mine. Breakfast." John took the box, pushed one of the others towards Socrates, and sat down.

"That's better," Socrates grunted as he opened the box, which was filled to the brim with pasta and meatballs. He was about to start eating but Joanna held his arm.

"Slowly. And show some manners, please." She took a chair and sat. Socrates groaned.

"I thank Socrates with all my heart for inviting us to this place and allowing us to have our lunch

together where nobody will bother us. And I especially thank John for bringing all this fine food."

The two men nodded first at her, then each other.

"Now let us enjoy this meal together in peace, without arguments or niggling." Only now did she motion to Socrates that it was okay to begin.

Socrates ended the ensuing silence by explaining that he did not live there but had come upon the building in his exploration of the many abandoned structures of the city and did now use it for his purposes. John told the others where he had bought their lunch and what it was they were eating. Then he asked what they wanted him to bring next time. Socrates rather immodest culinary wishes and Joanna's protestations that sandwiches were more than adequate spurred an animated discussion. It wasn't until dessert - John had brought a piece of cream cake for each, sealed individually in plastic, supermarket style, and Socrates had harrumphed and asked for doughnuts, at which Joanna slapped him once again - that John felt confident enough to introduce a new topic for discussion.

"I've been walking around the city quite a lot these past few days," he said. "At times, I felt pretty lost. I've seen a lot of the city. Not all of it pretty ..."

"But a lot of it was pretty, wasn't it?" asked Joanna as she pushed her almost intact cake over to Socrates, who groaned softly.

"Yeah, sure," John said. "A lot of it was nice. It's a beautiful city ... by and large."

Socrates crammed the last crumby of his cake into his mouth, took Joanna's, and sat on the sofa. For a few second, Socrates's noisy obliteration of the cake was the only sound in the room. John glanced at Joanna, feeling almost fearful. She smiled and nodded at him. Thus encouraged, John continued.

"Socrates, what did you mean yesterday when you said that by and large, the city was wonderful and all of us, dead?"

Socrates looked up, still munching the cake.

"I never said that."

"You said yesterday ..."

"She" – he jutted his chin towards Joanna – "she said that by and large, the city was wonderful. And I said that by and large we're all dead."

"Okay then. It doesn't matter who said ..."

Socrates sprang up from the sofa, strode towards the table, almost dropping the last bits of cake as he did so, and fixated John with trembling eyes. "Yes, it does! You're not a sharp enough listener. You're not a sharp enough thinker!"

"Socrates," Joanna admonished him and reached for his hand.

He sat down on a chair and put the last bit of cake into his mouth. "It's the truth. Blind and deaf. He should be mute, too. That would be better."

"So explain it to him. In a way that he can understand."

"That would be casting pearls before swine."

"Socrates!"

Socrates looked at Joanna. Then he turned to John. "What I was trying to say is that statements from a 'by-and-large' perspective are useless. And distorting. Of course the city is wonderful, by and large. If you look at it from a perspective that's sufficiently remote, flying high above it perhaps, it is sure to look nice enough. Hence my reference to us – that is, our being dead, by and large. And our lives being absolutely unimportant, by and large."

"To be honest, I still don't quite get it," John admitted, speaking softly and feeling embarrassed.

"Of course not," Socrates said impatiently. "I'm not done explaining. The point is: when it comes to the city and our individual lives, it's the details that matter, precisely those details that get lost in a by-and-large perspective."

"But a general tendency," Joanna interjected, "that's something the by-and-large perspective can reveal."

Socrates looked at her with wide eyes. "You're not being particularly helpful here. First you want me to explain it to him, then, you go and confuse him."

"Why am I confusing him? By and large, meaning mostly, the city is wonderful."

Socrates shook his head. "She said before the derelict building she was sitting in collapsed and buried her. You more than anyone should be bothered by the ugly details. And you know I'm right."

Joanna didn't reply. She and Socrates just glared at each other in motionless silence. It was another of those moments John didn't know what to make of, so he thought he should change the topic.

"There's this colleague of mine – Alexander, I've told you about him before. He must have been bothered by the details too. He just up and left. Now he's living on some island somewhere, doing I don't know what. He told no one where exactly he was going and what he was planning to do there."

Joanna and Socrates had both turned to face John. "My parents, too, it seems," John went on. "They didn't feel the details were right for them anymore. They moved to the coast and plan to stay there and enjoy 'the rest of their lives'."

Socrates smiled. "Look at that. He did listen and he did see. And now he's even saying something."

Though I'm not quite sure he understands it himself."

"Of course he knows what he's saying," Joanna jumped to John's defense.

"Does he, though?" said Socrates, staring at John with narrowed eyes. "Does he understand why his colleague left and his parents decided to enjoy the rest of their lives near the coast?"

"Actually," John said and swallowed, "that's what I wanted to ask you. I've been meaning to talk about it for a while now. You know, because the two of you also kind of left or dropped out, in a way."

Socrates leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Are we now? That again."

John felt himself blush. His eyes moved nervously from Socrates to Joanna and back to Socrates. "Well, you live on the streets, don't you? And Joanna has dedicated her life to welfare, helping others."

For a few moments there was silence. Joanna and Socrates looked at John, seeming to wait patiently for more. John' voice trembled. "You could say that's like dropping out, right?"

Again, there was silence. John wished the ground would swallow him up. But Joanna rescued him.

"Dropping out of what?" she asked, sounding very calm.

John was confused. What a strange question. He stole a glance at Joanna. She smiled, put her arms on the table and shifted forward, hands outstretched. "What do you think we all dropped out of - your parents, your colleague, Socrates, and I?"

Another pause. John glanced at Socrates. He was fixating John with an intense stare. Unlike before, though, his expression was calm and open. John relaxed a little.

"From life in the city?" His voice sounded more uncertain than he wanted.

Socrates leaned forward. "But we live in the city."

John threw up his hands in a gesture of resignation. "I didn't mean to offend anyone. I just thought ... forget it. Let's talk about something else."

Socrates leaned forward even more and hammered both his fists onto the table. "No, we will not. And you should not apologize, damnit. Don't let yourself be intimidated. Questions need to be asked, not swallowed. So ask your question once again, but be precise!"

"What Socrates is saying," Joanna explained calmly, "is that you're onto something interesting here and have posed a good question. However,

your question wasn't put quite correctly. We're not offended. You couldn't offend us, on the contrary - we're happy that you would talk about this with us. So don't be shy; try again."

John shrugged and looked at the other two.
"Thank you, that's very kind of you. But I don't know what you mean. What about my question wasn't precise?"

Socrates rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Heavens, what's not to understand? We basically spelled it out for you. You're like an ox that is led to the pasture and still can't find the grass."

Joanna slapped Socrates on the forearm and shook her head scornfully. "Let's start with your parents and colleague. That may be easier." She nodded encouragingly at John. "You said they also dropped out or left?"

"Yes," replied John cautiously.

"Where did your parents go?"

"My parents moved to a house on the coast and my colleague probably to some island where it's warm."

"So what you were saying earlier is that they left or dropped out in the physical, or rather, geographical sense, right?"

"No. That's not what I meant. They ... went away. Away from the city. But they dropped out of their lives. They left their previous lives behind

and moved to the coast. Or an island, in the case of my colleague.”

“Does that mean that they ceased to have a life?”

John wanted to say something in reply but stopped himself. Joanna and Socrates were smiling at him.

“Of course they have lives. My parents live on the coast. But they gave up their lives here, in the city. So did my colleague. Unlike the two of you, they not only left their previous lives behind but also the city.”

Socrates said: “What your parents, your colleague, Joanna, and I have in common is that we do not care much for the life one usually leads in the city.”

John nodded his head, one hand scratching his neck. He looked out of the window through the dirty plastic sheet, lost in thoughts he could not put into words.

The others waited patiently until he turned back to face him. “So why didn’t the two of you leave, too?” John finally asked.

Socrates sprang up and waved his hand around dismissively. “Give up the city? Surrender it to you soulless duds? Never!”

Joanna also stood and started to stack up the empty lunch boxes, cups, forks, and knives. Happy

for the task, John hurried to help her. They packed everything in the bags it had come from.

"It's our city, too," Joanna stated as she knotted up the bag handles. "Who has the right to determine what life in the city should look like? Maybe it's the wrong people who left. Just because the vast majority does something doesn't mean that you should blindly believe you're on the right track."

John looked at her uncomprehendingly. "You think I and all the others should leave?"

"He still doesn't get it," Socrates murmured and plumped back down on the chair. "Do you believe I want to live on the streets? I may have chosen to do so, but that doesn't mean I cannot imagine anything better. But in this city I'd rather live wild and free as a stray dog than blunt and indifferent. My life may be far less than perfect but it's still much better than yours and those of all the others."

Joanna had taken the knotted-up plastic bags to the corridor and returned to sit opposite Socrates at the table. She looked at John, who had taken the sofa on the wall. "Do you really think I want there to be demand for welfare and soup kitchens and lives dedicated to charity? It breaks my heart. But this is my city, too, and if I can help make life a little better for everyone here, then it's worth it to me. I firmly believe we're on the right track."

Socrates took a deep breath and exhaled again.
“Well, I don’t know about it being the right track
...”

“It leads to where nobody has to live on the streets and we need no more soup kitchens,” Joanna said sharply and gave Socrates a hard stare.

“And who wants to be at that magical place? Maybe people would much rather go where everyone lives on the streets and the whole world is just one gigantic soup kitchen?”

Joanna rolled her eyes and shook her head. Then she turned to face John.

“You’re wondering why people around here lead lives they want to drop out of, as you put it, or the rest of which they’d prefer to enjoy on the coast, right?”

John nodded slowly.

“Don’t you think that it could be because of their respective expectations?”

“Oh, please!” Socrates fell in, his expression almost fierce. “Let’s cut to the chase. Obviously, there are always some who are consistently dissatisfied, for whom nothing can ever be right. But we’re not talking about these statistically necessary outliers. If a whole generation takes the liberty to ‘enjoy the rest’ at the coast and an increasing number of ordinary citizens get desperate enough to

flee to faraway islands, it isn't just about individual expectations. We're talking about fundamental life's blueprints that make life in the city as it is unbearable."

"When he says 'life's blueprints', Socrates means the ways in which each of us design our lives," Joanna explained. "Our individual life's blueprints accumulate to impact and interact with our collective living together. In other words, they shape life in the city and are shaped by it in turn."

Socrates' eyes widened. "Nicely put. Seems like after all you do listen to me when I talk."

Joanna smiled at him and shrugged with feigned indifference. "Only now and then when you say something moderately smart."

She went over to John and sat beside him on the sofa. "Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"That there's something wrong with our life's blueprints?"

"Exactly. It looks like your parents and your colleague got dissatisfied with the life's blueprint they followed – and probably had to follow – here."

"Okay, that's obvious, but ..."

"No 'but'!" Socrates erupted. He rose. "If all the life's blueprints rule city life and city life has an impact on all the life's blueprints, and if you grow dissatisfied with your life's blueprint, so much so,

in fact, that you have to move away from here - what does that mean? What is wrong with that picture?"

Joanna calmly looked into John eyes. "Don't be pushy, Socrates. I'm sure you would say it's good that they have the courage to change their lives so that they feel good about it, right John?"

John nodded.

"But don't you think it a bit strange that you would call them dropouts and they have to leave the city to do so?"

Again John nodded, though more slowly this time.

"And again, why do you call them dropouts? You used that word before."

"Because they want to live differently."

Joanna turned to Socrates with a smile. "See, there's no need to push. It just takes a little patience."

"Yeah, well. A little patience and a lot of help." Socrates moved his chair closer to the sofa and sat with crossed legs, both hands on his knee. He eyed Joanna and John on the sofa for several seconds. "So, you two geniuses, what is the one question that remains to be answered?"

Joanna and John looked at each other.

"You're not seeing the forest for the trees. The real question is: *Why* did his parents and colleague leave the city instead of just changing the way they live here? Joanna and I, we didn't leave. So why run off? Just because of a deep love of the ocean?"

John ventured an answer. "The ocean is beautiful, sure. But I guess that all of them just felt that life in the city had become too much for them."

"Be more precise!"

"Because they wanted to follow another life's blueprint"

"More precise!"

"Because they wanted to follow a life's blueprint they couldn't live in the city?"

With a satisfied smile, Socrates leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. "Finally. The ox is munching grass, and the sows the pearls. Who would have believed it possible? Lunch and entertainment."

"Socrates. Don't overdo it," Joanna warned.

"So are they right?" John said.

Socrates moved his hands back and folded them in his lap. The smile had left his face, he looked serious now.

"About what?"

"To leave because you can only live the wrong life in the city?"

Socrates' gaze wandered out the plastic-covered windows. After several moments he turned to Joanna, his expression hard to place.

"Right. Wrong. Those are strong words. The crux is finding out what they mean."

Joanna got up swiftly from the sofa and stood before Socrates. "There's no crux about it. There's right and there's wrong. Nothing to find out."

She and Socrates locked eyes. John stared at his feet and tried to breath as quietly as possible.

"Do you really want to go through that again? Here? Now? In front of him?" Socrates finally asked.

Joanna didn't move. "Yes, for his sake."

They turned to face John. John felt the glances of the others on the back of his neck. Cautiously, he lifted his head. "What is this about?"

Socrates made a dismissive gesture. "Nothing. It's much too complicated."

Joanna's head whipped around to face Socrates. "It isn't complicated at all. Unless you make it so. Some life's blueprints are right, others, wrong."

Socrates gaped at her, his eyes wide, and was about to take a deep breath and reply but Joanna

stopped him with one raised hand and turned to face John.

“The question is this: how can we design our life’s blueprints and, consequently, our coexistence, so that nobody in this city has to live on the streets, there is no need for welfare, and nobody has to drop out. Unless they really want to live near the sea.”

“So you mean more money and less work for everybody?” John gushed happily. But his laughter died when Socrates jumped up from his chair and growled:

“Good Lord! Listen to this! That’s exactly what happens when you won’t heed me, woman.”

“Don’t bark at me, Socrates! And don’t you ever tell me what I can or cannot say. I will talk whenever I want to and about anything I want to. Understood?”

And, turning back towards John: “No, that’s not what I mean. Not more money and less work for everyone. What I mean is that we have to live together in a way that allows each of us to be happy and satisfied with our life’s blueprints and the corresponding lives we lead. Wherever we may choose to live.”

Socrates had sunk back down on his chair and sneered. “Try telling that someone whose life’s blueprint involves blowing himself up, along with

everyone else who happens to be around him on a crowded town square.”

Joanna gave Socrates an angry look. “Why don’t you keep silent if you don’t have anything smart to contribute.”

Socrates leaned towards her. “There will always be conflicting life’s blueprints. We’re just human beings.”

John sat up a little straighter on the sofa. “So what we’d need is a city that would tolerate all kinds of life’s blueprints, right?”

Socrates looked over at him and leaned back in his chair. “Something like complete anarchy? Great idea ...”

“Socrates!” Joanna shot at him.

“I told you not to start with this, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Joanna shook her head and addressed John: “Basically, you’re right. But as Socrates’ colorful example shows it won’t do to tolerate all life’s blueprints equally.”

“I guess life’s blueprints involving killing one another are out then. Makes sense.”

Joanna turned to face Socrates. “See? He does get it.”

Socrates rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

Joanna looked at John. "Just ignore him. You sense that there are life's blueprints that can't work. In other words: that are simply wrong. Don't you?"

John nervously glanced over at Socrates, who was drumming his fingers on his thighs, shaking his head side to side. When he couldn't take it anymore, John jumped up from the sofa. "It's getting pretty late. I need to leave for the office."

The others kept still for a few seconds, then Socrates pushed his chair under the table and started doing the same with the other ones. Joanna stepped towards John, touched him lightly on the forearm, and smiled warmly. Then she started placing the cardboard squares over the windows.

When they had finished cleaning up, all three of them walked down the stairs. Nobody said a word. John had picked up the plastic bags with their lunch refuse. He would throw them in a trashcan on his way to the office. Joanna pointed into the direction she wanted to walk with Socrates. John's office lay in the opposite direction. Before they said their goodbyes they agreed to meet the next day at the same time and place.

John took the first cab he could find and gave the driver his office address. This time he didn't procrastinate at all but immersed himself in his work. He needed to take his mind off his lunch with Joanna and Socrates, or, to be more precise,

the discussion they'd had. One thing that bothered him was that he still often felt he couldn't quite follow their argument. Also, those moments of tension between the other two made him uncomfortable. There were times when a fight seemed about to erupt. Then again it seemed like they spurred each other on and talked one another into a frenzy.

As the day went on, his mind went pleasantly calm. His work routines kept him occupied until it was time to head home.

He settled in front of the TV with a paper plate of reheated pasta. His team was playing. John recognized the stadium he had walked past only a few days ago. He should get tickets to a game sometime. Then again, it was more comfortable to watch sitting on the sofa. His beer-filled fridge was closer and the beer colder than at the stadium booths with their stale, lukewarm offerings. He leaned back and stretched. The game held no suspense. It was a good thing he wasn't in the stadium. Here, he could just change the channel. Maybe there was a program somewhere on how to design the right life's blueprint.

Feeling suddenly irritated, John went into the kitchen to get another beer. Leaning against his kitchen island, he heard the TV noises drift over from the living room. Life's blueprints. As if such a thing even existed. It was probably just the latest fad, the must-have item, flavor of the month. No

different from yoga or meditation or organic, socially responsible and sustainable coffee, brewed with pure well water and served in cups that are later upcycled into nutritional paste that would finally help end world hunger. Nobody had ever taught him anything about life's blueprints, yet it seemed to be all his parents and Alexander seemed to think about these days. Plus, there were obviously right ones and wrong ones.

John went back to the living room, left his beer on the dinner table, and sat on the toilet lid in the bathroom. He felt undisturbed here. The TV noises didn't reach.

Let them just leave if they didn't like city life anymore. If the city wouldn't tolerate their life's blueprints. Whatever that meant. Life in the city was life in the city. John automatically flushed the toilet before he got up. He washed his hands and went back to the living room, where he zapped through the channels dispassionately. Then he went to bed.

Driven from bed by his alarm the next day – it was before noon on Wednesday – John went out to pick up lunch for Joanna and Socrates as well as breakfast for himself. He stuck to Socrates wish list to keep the discussion triggers to a minimum. For dessert he got doughnuts.

When he stepped into the room on the second floor of the dilapidated factory, Joanna and Socrates were standing at one of the windows. They had already taken down the cardboard window covers. He'd heard them before he saw them. As far as he grasped from the corridor, they were talking about the new development on the canal, which seemed to involve the demolition of some buildings that could be seen from the window.

When they noticed John they interrupted their discussion and greeted him, each in their own fashion. They picked up where they had left off while Joanna and John set the table with the food containers and they all started eating.

John was a little annoyed that the others would just continue their conversation about the development project as if he wasn't there. He pushed his plate of pancakes back. For a few minutes he tried to follow Joanna and Socrates' discussion and muster up some interest in it. But he couldn't.

"So you were talking about the right life's blueprints yesterday," he finally burst out. "What exactly is that?"

Joanna and Socrates stopped talking and turned to him, looking surprised.

"An element of utopia," Socrates said in between bites.

Shaking her head, Joanna boxed Socrates lightly on the arm. She looked at John and then at his

plate, which he had pushed away. "Don't you like your breakfast?" she asked.

John shrugged and stabbed his pancakes with the plastic fork.

"Why doesn't Joanna bring us something tomorrow?" Socrates teased with his mouth full and sneered.

Joanna gave him a suspicious sideways glance. She hesitated, seeming unwilling to engage. "Sure," she then said. "I'd love to. What would you like, Socrates?"

Socrates looked back at her triumphantly. "Well, I thought maybe you could serve us the right life's blueprint."

John pulled his pancakes closer and started eating hastily. There it was again, that indeterminable tension. And this time, he was partly to blame.

"The right life's blueprint," Joanna said, her voice calm, her eyes never leaving Socrates, "isn't something that is served to you. You need to go search for it. If you do, it will be revealed to you."

The two of them stared at one another. John watched them, frozen, his fork in the air, waiting for the argument to continue. The tense silence persisted. John couldn't bear it any longer.

"It gets revealed? I don't understand."

"Don't worry, nobody has ever understood that. That's because there is nothing to understand," Socrates promptly replied without breaking eye contact with Joanna.

Joanna pointedly turned away from him to face John.

"Basically, each of us has a deep-rooted feeling of what the right life's blueprint means," she said. "We all must find out for and in ourselves what every one of us had been given. This is why you need to be open for it and willing to believe. If you let it, this certainty will reveal itself almost as if by itself." She turned back to Socrates. "Unfortunately, most of us do not do this. But that doesn't mean it is not the truth."

Socrates shook his head violently. "Really now? You want to feed the poor guy this nonsense?"

"It is what I believe with all my heart and I'm living quite well with that belief. Believing, having faith in something – that's what makes us human, after all."

"Reason is what makes us human, Joanna."

"Is that so? Tell me, then, why religion is as old as humankind?"

"Religion? Not only are there more than one of those, which is reason enough in itself not to draw any conclusion whatsoever from them, no, if that's not already sufficient enough to convince you of

their worthlessness, how about this: as long as there have been religions, unspeakable atrocities have been committed in their names. Care to take a look at recent and current world affairs?"

"Religions and their teachings have done more for the advancement of humankind than anything else. No law, no weapon, much less any war has brought humans this far, turned them towards good, created communities. It's all due to religious teachings and writings."

"So it is. And they all originated in the human mind, human reason. All those teachings were written by humans. That's what makes us humans. And from day one religions have been used for unholy purposes. Human as well."

"A great many good things are happening in the name of religions too. But anyway, you know perfectly well it isn't religion I'm talking about but that ungraspable greatness that has inspired humankind throughout the ages."

"Oh, call it what you will."

Joanna turned towards John, her expression serious.

"You know, John, I believe that there is more out there than we can comprehend and explain. Even more than we could ever imagine. There is something that connects us to each other and to everything around us. It is everywhere. It also glows deep within us."

"God?" John' voice was soft as he asked this.

Socrates jumped up from his chair. "Hallelujah! You'll corrupt him and turn him into a disciple."

Joanna whipped around, one finger raised warningly, signaling Socrates to keep his mouth shut and sit back down. Grudgingly, his face red, Socrates obeyed. He stabbed at his food with his fork. Joanna looked at John, a soft smile on her lips.

"Not God. Or maybe God, yes. 'God' is a word that can mean a lot of things to different people. Like most powerful words, it gets used by many people even though you'd be hard pressed to find two who agree completely on its definition. And yet all these people and all their definitions or concepts have one thing in common: no matter what terms they use to describe it, they confess their belief in an ungraspable power. A power that doesn't reside somewhere 'above' us but simply is everything, permeates everything. Above us, all around us, inside us. This power, this entity, is the origin of everything, the absolute truth. There is, of course, only a single one. But comprehending or grasping this one entity in its totality exceeds our capabilities. It is too great and too wonderful. And much too complex for our understanding. That's why we have trouble finding the right words for it. I've chosen to call it 'Omnium'. But that's just semantics. What's important is that each of us can experience what I call Omnia if only we allow

ourselves to do so. You need to open up and surrender yourself to it. If you do, it will reveal itself and guide you to the right life's blueprint."

This was when Socrates, seemingly choking on a bite of his lunch, started coughing. He gasped for air and jumped off his chair when he finally could breathe again.

"Unbelievable! You cannot go and tell the boy such nonsense! He'll imagine himself living in fair-
yland."

Joanna remained unperturbed. "Socrates, I am just telling him about my belief and perspective on life. He can make of it whatever he wants."

"Actually, I think it's fascinating and quite interesting," John said conciliatorily.

Socrates leant across the table and bore down on him with his piercing stare.

"Fascinating and interesting, huh? This glorified elevation of life that is all faith? That's not real life she's talking about. It's her idea of life. She's pushing the edges of reality. She's making much, much more of it than it actually is. Beautifying inventions that make it bearable. It's a deeply human concept. Shut up your intellect so you can forge reality to suit your hopeful ideas of beauty, safety, and security. That's what 'belief' is. Human pipe dreams. And you expect those to be the guide to the right life's blueprint?"

Joanna, now also standing, took one step back from the table. She waited for Socrates to let up on John and turn to face her.

"I'm not elevating anything. Quite the contrary. I just allow myself to experience the manifold fullness of reality. Yes, I believe. Reality is more than we can grasp with pure reason. The Omnia is reality. But reason cannot cope with the Omnia. You cannot understand reality. Reality, the Omnia, will reveal itself to you in ways that far exceed the boundaries of reason. And thus, it will show you the way to the right life's blueprint."

Socrates moved closer until he stood only inches from Joanna.

"So why doesn't anything reveal itself to me? If it was really there and so significant for my life, if reality was more than my intellect can understand - wouldn't I be unable to withstand this incredibly powerful force?"

Joanna shook her head. "We again and again keep going in circles, Socrates. And my answer for you remains the same as always: open up. Show a little humility and allow it to bloom inside you."

"And my objection remains the same, too. I am open. Maybe there is more than I can grasp. But it can't be something relevant or even remotely noticeable because it isn't making any kind of impression on me."

"Open, you? You fight tooth and nail against anything you cannot explain rationally. Just try surrendering to it. Just once. Trust and believe. Just to see what it feels like and whether it really doesn't suit you. What's the worst that could happen? Nothing! So what are you afraid of? That you might actually feel overwhelmed and excited?"

"Just surrender, just try," Socrates echoed Joanna's words acridly. Then he looked intently at her, his expression serious. "It really is that simple for you, isn't it? You kneel down, bow your head, and hey presto, the inspiration for the right life's blueprint just comes to you out of nowhere. Sorry, but that sounds too much like cult propaganda. Cheap one, at that."

"It is most certainly not propaganda. This offer does not need propaganda. It's just your fear and arrogance speaking, trying to ridicule anything you do not understand. Honestly, Socrates, a little respect and humility in face of the vastness of life would do you good."

"I have respect for life and its manifold vastness. What I do not respect is your shaky belief construction. I do not *believe* there couldn't be more to life than I can see and understand at this moment, nor do I *believe* in dangerous human elevations of life. I will not turn into reality what I cannot grasp with all my powers of perception or, worse even, what needs to spring from my imagination. I certainly do not know everything. But just

as certainly do I refuse to fill this gap of knowledge, however colossal it may be, with some faith or belief and bow down to it."

"Nobody's asking you to bow down. Not out of a feeling of coercion. However, you shouldn't shut yourself off, either. All I'm asking you is to open up, to allow in whatever wants to reveal itself to you and what you may accept if you feel it works for you. Then, you will bow down of your own free will. You will bow down in gratitude for this guide to the right life's blueprint."

"Oh, stop it. That's all just slanted to fit your concept. And I'm not saying it's impossible that there is more. That would just be another belief. Maybe there is something, maybe not. But this whole picture your painting with your Omnim and everything, that's nothing but ridiculous."

"And again, you go hiding under your rock of vanity and cynicism. But to keep with your preference for logic: if the Omnim may or may not exist, the choice should be easy for you, shouldn't it? Let us assume, first, that you decide against the Omnim and against following it to find the right life's blueprint. That wouldn't make a difference if all what I've been talking about doesn't actually exist. If it does exist, however, you would probably regret your decision. Now let's say you lead your life as if the Omnim existed. You'd choose the life's blueprint the Omnim pointed out to you. Let's also assume that it turns out all the stuff I've

been mentioning does exist - you would be glad about your decision. If however, all of it was just an illusion after all - would you have any cause for regrets?"

Socrates sighed deeply and plumped down on the sofa. He looked at Joanna and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

John was standing now and stepped over to the other two. "What does she mean?" he said.

Joanna smiled at John. Socrates rolled his eyes. Then he looked at John.

"She's clever, John. That's what it looks like on the surface, at least. She's invoking Game Theory to corner me. What she's forgetting, though, is that we're not talking about actual options where her Omnim is concerned. She's misinterpreting the axiom that you cannot prove or disprove such a thing as the 'Omnim' and derives from it the hypothesis that her Omnim may or may not exist. Unfortunately for her, the correctly derived hypothesis is, however, that the Omnim, or whatever you want to call it, does and does not exist. Both at the same time, in fact, and for as long until there is certainty that it either does or does not exist. There's no 'may exist' or 'may not exist', there is no 'either-or decision option' about it. As long as the uncertainty persists, both possible answers are 100 and 0 percent probable. Simultaneously. Until one of these probabilities can be defined as zero.

To be fair, you could make the important objection: how do I know whether or not the Omnim exists? How can I exclude one of the two potential answers? Well, that's the salient point, isn't it? I can't claim either one answer is right without voiding my previous statement. But there are no subjunctive clauses in my statements because this has nothing to do with Game Theory. Rather, it is a problem along the lines of Schrödinger's Cat in the box."

"Schrödinger's Cat?" John asked.

"Quantum physics. Read up on it. What it comes down to is that as long as you haven't reached certainty one way or another, the answer to a question can be both 'yes' and 'no', equally and simultaneously. The box in Schrödinger's thought experiment does not give you a clue whether the cat inside is alive or dead. The cat in the box is either alive or dead. But since you can't see from the outside, the cat is alive and dead for anyone who cannot look into the box. And this for as long as you open the box and check whether the cat is alive or dead. Obviously, the little problem in the case of our Omnim box is that we cannot just open the box and check if it exists or does not exist. Or at least we can't without irreversible consequences."

Socrates looked over at Joanna, his expression expectant. She returned his gaze and shook her

head. It was obvious that she was biting back the words on her tongue.

"If this is so," John said, "what Joanna said should apply. Game theory or whatever it is. You may not know for sure but you can assume that there is an *Omnium*, there being a fifty-fifty chance?"

Socrates stood.

"No, no, no. You cannot, that's the point. There is the *Omnium* and there isn't. Both at the same time, not fifty-fifty. Because we do not know. Until we see. Until we open the box."

Now it was Joanna's turn to sit on the sofa.

"Speak for yourself, Socrates. *You* do not know. I do. Maybe John does, too."

Socrates' eyes were on Joanna, who ignored him and gave John a nod of understanding. Socrates sat down next to Joanna and crossed his arms.

"Well, then, *I* do not know. And until I do I refuse to subject my life, much less the laws of a correct life's blueprint, to a hypothetical, all-too-human construct. I am not like you. You want to believe. You want to believe you know, by all means."

John approached Socrates and said: "I don't get it. You were saying that the *Omnium* exists or does not exist. So why not assume it does and make sure - just in case you do find out at some point

that it really does – that you don't screw up? Just to be on the safe side.”

Socrates turned to face Joanna. “There, see what you've done? Now he is totally confused.”

He turned back to John.

“You're not thinking sharply enough. If you're going to use my arguments, do it correctly. The only admissible conclusion to be drawn from my arguments is that you would need to live a life that allows for the Omnim to exist and not exist. In other words: like Schrödinger's cat from a perspective outside the box, to be both alive and dead at the same time, which means, to exist in two states simultaneously. That's only possible if we follow the many-worlds interpretation. And even then we'd be talking about parallel lives. Dead in one, alive in the other. One with an Omnim, the other, without. So the only question is, which one is the one we're living right now right here, right?”

Joanna got up from the sofa. “Heavens! All this baloney is sure to confuse John much more than anything that was said before.”

John looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before taking her place on the sofa. “Let's leave physics aside for a moment. Since this cat thing obviously can't work, as you've just admitted ... since we cannot look inside the box ... and clearly can't be both alive and dead at the same time ... even though that would be the only viable option

... Doesn't that take us back to square one? Doesn't it mean that, from a purely practical standpoint, it would be smarter to live as if this Omnim existed?"

Joanna bowed her head and smiled. Socrates bounced off the sofa.

"Why would you bring your whole life in alignment with something you know either exists or does not exist? And strictly speaking, we have no clue what it even is, if it does exist. It's like the box. Only the cat knows the answer! It's not a matter of odds, whether it be 50/50 or 60/40 or 90/10. It's 100 *and* 0. Both at the same time. In all these debates about undetermined issues, which cannot be proven or disproven, Game Theory just isn't applicable. It's not a matter of weighing pros and cons. It's not a matter of speculation. Obviously, you can believe one or the other. That's why these questions are so ancient and eternal. They are always essentially unsolvable in the here and now."

"Oh, come on! That's just totally irrelevant theorizing!" Joanna fell in. "Even if you were right, Socrates - we happen to live in the here and now, so we have to choose which option should be 100 percent probable and which zero. Regardless of our ability to provide conclusive proof. Choosing that the Omnim exists is the better choice, naturally."

"Wrong. That's just it. There is no choice. There is just one answer. The most obvious one. The most logical one. The simplest one. Not for or against, but just this: *I do not know.*"

"Still," John interrupted, frowning, "doesn't that mean that the Omnium might just exist after all and it would be better to ..."

"That's just the point," Socrates stopped him. "'It would be better to ...' - Game Theory is nothing if not proof of how a religious construct manipulates our free will and reasoning, reason itself. The question is not whether the Omnium does or does not exist. That's the question you ask. But the answer you give belongs to a different one."

Socrates took a deep breath.

"You answer the question: what possible consequences will the existence of my assumed form of an Omnium entail? You don't choose the Omnium because you simply believe that it exists. No, you choose it because you're hoping for all those wonderful promises of redemption or because you fear the negative consequences if you don't - which are, like everything else, strictly hypothetical. Threats of punishment. Paradise lost. All that jazz. Faith is never about mere existence. You believe in an idea of the form of a potential existence. And in the consequences of this form of existence. Only superficially does it seem as if you were actually pondering the existence of the Omnium in a

spiritual sense and then choose or reject it of your own free will. In a sober light, you just ponder your hopes and fears connected with your ideas of the Omnim, and that's what your decision is based on. And that, dear boy, is not the least bit spiritual. It is deeply human."

Socrates leaned towards John.

"That's how faith and religion work. All those Omnim constructs. They manipulate our free will according to their Omnim concepts. The only thing such an Omnim as far as being the guide to the right life's blueprint does prove, quite convincingly proves, is that it just cannot be the source of such a life's blueprint. Reflection and cognition not only reveal its seductive effect and expose it as a human pipe dream, they also uncover the only possible origin of a right life's blueprint, which is, precisely, reflection and cognition themselves."

John held his breath. Socrates sat up straight again and looked over at Joanna. She had been standing there very calmly all through his monologue. It looked like there were tears shimmering in her eyes. Moving slowly, she went over to the table and started clearing up their lunch paraphernalia. Socrates turned to face John and tried to smile encouragingly. The smile remained crooked, though, and he got up and started to help Joanna clean up. She seemed to have rallied.

"No one said anything about redemption or punishment, Socrates. That's not what this is about. I don't believe in any 'construct' – there is no construct. You only get wild ideas like that because you're trying to grasp the Omnim with your intellect. But you need to feel it, intuit it. There is no hidden agenda. Not manipulation. It is only and purely wonderful. Pure love, if you will. You don't need to understand in order to feel it make everything so much simpler and clearer – if you let it. Why are you so dead set against it? Why all the anger? Why the pride? I know that the path it shows me is the one that leads to happiness. You are free to choose a different one. But why would you want that? You're right, of course, you have a free will. But why would you even want to choose a path other than the one that makes you happy? Just to be defiant?"

Socrates started pushing the stack of empty lunch boxes into one of the plastic bags.

"Joanna, my doubts do not jeopardize the Omnim's possible existence, but neither does your faith prove it. But all the evidence, especially the fact that we can and must debate this, refutes your claim that there is an Omnim, however much you make of it. If it is all so vague and obscure it cannot have any significance for our lives. Otherwise it would be much clearer."

"The 'evidence', as you put it, does just as easily suggest that my Omnim exists. Why else would

we need to talk about it so extensively? And the fact that it isn't easy to surrender to it and that it won't just come over you and overwhelm you proves pretty clearly that it lets us have our free will – it doesn't try to manipulate or impact it. To believe or not to believe is a choice each of us has to make for themselves of our own free will, not based on rational justification.”

Socrates was holding the bag with the empty boxes in one hand. Joanna had put the used plastic knives and forks into the second one, which was placed before her on the table. Socrates bent across the table to grab it.

“Just listen to yourself talk, Joanna. Everything you're saying is so construed. You have just the right glib answer to any critical question.”

Joanna snatched up the bag before Socrates could take it.

“That's because I'm speaking the truth. Like it or not, ignoramus.”

Socrates stood straight.

Joanna mouth was trembling. She stepped closer to Socrates and raised an index finger in his face.

“Your reductionist view of the world is nothing but unbearably cold and bleak. It's cowardly at the most. Life is terrifying you as soon as it may holds

the slightest possibility of transcending logic and scientific causalities!"

Socrates pushed her finger to the side.

"The world and life don't suffice you as they are. You're terrified to see the true face, the only face of life. You're terrified of having to admit that it is just what it is, no more, no less, without any escape routes to your mysterious Omnim elevations, which you not only use to create the illusion that it may all be more than it actually is but also to console yourself for it being the way it is. Your Omnim allows you to bear anything. But you won't change the ugly mug of being human by putting a big, happy smiley-face mask on it. If anything, that ugly mug will just get more vicious hidden away."

There was silence. Socrates and Joanna stood facing each other, wide-eyed and with red blotches on their faces, their chests heaving. John hardly dared to breathe, let alone move. He feared that anything he did might provoke an even more violent eruption than the ones he'd just witnessed.

After what felt like an eternity, Socrates let go of the bag he was holding, took the unopened box of doughnuts from the table, turned around, and left. The sound of his steps grew softer as he walked along the corridor and down the stairs. Joanna had sunk down on a chair. She shook her head, her hands buried in her hair. Then she came over to

the sofa and sat down next to John. She turned to face him, a kind smile on her lips.

"Don't worry; it's not as bad as it looks. We both just feel passionate about this. That passion is the bond between us."

Then she hugged John, got up, and walked away.

John remained motionless on the sofa long after her footsteps had faded away. He felt frozen in shock, yet weirdly energized. For several minutes he was torn between laughter and tears, never knowing which of the two he might succumb to. After a while, this emotional whiplash subsided and he began to feel normal again.

He replaced the cardboard squares on the windows, picked up the remaining trash, and left the building. He strolled along the canal for some time, then he got into a cab and drove to the office. His legs felt heavy. The tension and agitation he'd felt before had turned into dull weariness. Sitting in the cab, watching the houses and people float past him, he almost dozed off.

No one at the office seemed to notice or care much that he was late. He sat at his desk, stared at the several computer screens, and focused on the job at hand. After a few hours, his mind drifted back to the factory on the canal and the day's events. Several times John tried to return his focus

to the screens in front of him. At last, he had to admit it was useless. With a shrug, he switched off his computer and went home. He spent hours in front of the TV before going to bed, where he spent the night twisting and turning.

Time crept along and John was relieved when Thursday morning turned into midday and it was time to get up and buy lunch for his meeting with Joanna and Socrates. He got dressed and hurried out, heading straight to the deli without even considering taking a cab, and then on to the canal. He was almost running. When he stepped through the empty doorway on the second floor, Joanna and Socrates were already awaiting him. They were sitting at the table and greeted him. Even Socrates was smiling.

"Thank you for once again bringing such a wonderful feast," Joanna said. "What a glorious variety of treats! By and large, it is a wonderful city we live in. You can have a wonderful life here if you just try."

John gaped at Joanna, who just grinned and winked. Both glanced at Socrates.

"What are you looking at? I'm having lunch. Your little jibes can kiss my ass."

John and Joanna laughed with some relief and started to dig in too.

"It really is possible to live a good life here, with the right life's blueprint and all, don't you think?" John finally asked no one in particular.

Socrates didn't respond but kept chewing wordlessly.

"Of course that's possible. Isn't it, Socrates?" Joanna said and nudged Socrates with her elbow.

Socrates looked up. "If you say so."

John insisted: "I mean, this does feel right, doesn't it? Nice people, a nice conversation, and good food."

Joanna nudged Socrates again. "See, he has a pretty clear idea what makes a good life's blueprint."

Socrates looked at her. "I don't care."

Joanna gave him a sweet smile. "Come on, Socrates. You do, too. There isn't anything you do not care about. You can't help yourself."

Socrates put down his fork and crossed his arms.

"What do you want me to say? Yes, the food is great; yes, the city is wonderful; yes, this is the kind of moment that would be part of the right life's blueprint. Or it was before you started talking about it."

"Hmm," said John. "So that means that one can find the right life's blueprint within oneself?"

Joanna smiled triumphantly at Socrates. "He's learning fast."

Socrates shook his head. "Haven't you had enough yesterday?"

"Well, yesterday you basically took the right life's blueprint away from us. Now we're just rebutting your argument," Joanna said.

"First of all, I never said there couldn't be a right life's blueprint. And second, this here is just one moment of it, as I mentioned before. A drop in the ocean, if you will."

"So there is such a thing as the right life's blueprint?" John perked up.

Socrates pushed his plate away.

"I'm telling you, you need to listen more closely. There could be such a thing. A lot of things are possible."

Now it was Joanna's turn to push away her plate. "What you said yesterday sounded quite different."

"No, it didn't. Not at all. I never said that there wasn't such a thing as the right life's blueprint. All I said was that it is the sign of a disastrous human weakness to wait for it to be 'revealed' in some way. We are alive because we are alive. Being alive, we're at the mercy of certain conditions and parameters. But until we know for sure there is nothing mystical above or around us. No destiny."

No fate. We are, as long as we are, alone and solely accountable. Everything else is just speculation, assumption, and elevation of reality.”

“Yeah, okay,” said John. “That's where we left off yesterday. But where could the right life's blueprint come from, if it isn't revealed?”

Socrates threw up his hands in a gesture of exasperation. “It doesn't come from anywhere, that's the whole point! We have to identify it all by ourselves. We are the ones who need to determine what a good life's blueprint for us should look like.”

Joanna resumed eating. “Ultimately, that comes down to what I said before. The life's blueprint that is right for us, the one that will reveal itself to us. It's inside us. What's right is already inside us. The Omnim shows us the way, all of us, even you.”

Socrates pushed his chair back a little further and turned to face Joanna.

“Really now? You actually believe that you'll just know what's right? You sense what's right? You just feel it? And your kind of right is right for everybody?”

“Of course. The Omnim is absolute and universal.”

Socrates glared at her.

"Do you ever listen to yourself? You, who holds such great store in niceness, tolerance, friendship, and feelings -How can you say such a thing?"

Joanna put down her knife and fork and pushed her plate back again. She turned to face Socrates.

"It is what I believe. Don't you think the world would be a better place if everyone saw and lived life like me or at least similarly?"

"That's not the point."

"It's exactly the point."

"What else would be the point?" John chipped in.

There was a moment of silence. Joanna and Socrates had locked eyes. Without stirring, Socrates finally spoke.

"The point is that there is no right or wrong. To be more precise: that you can only define 'right' and 'wrong' within a set frame of reference, by using applicable criteria."

Joanna snorted. "Can you say that in English, please?"

John gave her a grateful look, though Joanna was turned away from him. Socrates groaned softly. Then he addressed John:

"You two are being difficult today, aren't you? Right and wrong are always a matter of convention, an agreement between humans. Take us, here.

'Right' and 'wrong' among the three of us is whatever we implicitly or explicitly agree. If a fourth person came along we might have to adapt our concepts. But the point is--"

"The point," Joanna interrupted, "is that if we could take all humankind as a reference system and every single human could distinguish between right and wrong, the world would be a better place and we would all live according to life's blueprints that are right."

Socrates stood, visibly irritated.

"Your statements just underline my argument, and still you think you're saying something else than you actually do. Do you think you're the first and only person who believes what is 'right' has been revealed to them? We have nothing but contempt for those who saw no crime in slavery, or those who followed their Führer with arms outstretched. We look down on those who still worship a so-called superhuman or anyone who is ignorant of democracy. Yet how can you be sure that your world view has no blind spots? Are you the first human being to whom the knowledge of what is right came just like that? Just because something feels right doesn't mean it really is. You live here, in this city, and you just see as allies those who live like you or at least try to turn their lives around to resemble yours. So what about all the others? The ones who think differently? Darwinism of values? Colonialism of values? A globalized mainstream

mishmash of cultures and, consequently, of values? Even if – and it's a big if – one set of values, whichever one, could emerge triumphant as the only one – how can you be sure it's the 'right' one? It would, after all, have 'revealed itself' to someone at some point."

Joanna was standing now, too. "I have absolutely no intention of forcing my faith and my values on anyone. Nor do I claim that I understand completely and in detail what is right or wrong. I'm sure there are those who could do a much better job of explaining that. But at least I work hard every day to open up so that it can reveal itself to me more and more. All I'm trying to say is, if everyone just opened up a little bit to the Omnim, then everyone would come to the same understanding of what is right and wrong, at least to some extent. And they would all be led to the right life's blueprint."

"Joanna, I am not trying to dump on your way of life or your intentions," said Socrates, more kindly now. "I'm also willing to leave the question whether or not there is an Omnim open. But the wrapping you have built around it is dangerous. It's a danger to humanity. The way you live your faith in the Omnim – whether or not there is such a thing – turns it into a construct that allows you to shirk the responsibility to reflect on and establish what is right and wrong. Your life's blueprint may

be good but it does not originate in an external entity. We have to use our intelligence to deduce with reason by reflecting what the right life's blueprint should be."

Socrates sat down again, opened the box of doughnuts John had brought, and held it out to John. Joanna started to stack up the empty boxes and put them into the plastic bags.

"If what you're saying is right, Socrates, if we are able to identify right and wrong and the right life's blueprint based on reflection and reasoning - why, then, aren't we there yet? Some super smart genius should have figured it out by now, surely?"

Socrates proffered the doughnuts to Joanna. He hadn't yet taken one. Joanna hesitated before picking one of the doughnuts and sitting down again. Socrates emptied the rest of the doughnuts onto the table and chose the largest one.

"I said there could be a right life's blueprint. And if so, it can only be deduced rationally."

John gulped down the last bite of his doughnut, almost choking on it. He coughed and washed it down with his coffee before saying:

"Why do you say 'could'? Why haven't we found out long ago what the right life's blueprint should look like?"

Socrates chewed leisurely, visibly enjoying his doughnut.

"Because we are only human," he finally said. "We're too dumb, too lazy, or just too weak to deduce, let alone live it. Usually all of the above."

Joanna shook her head and put the rest of her doughnut down on the table. She gave Socrates a contemptuous look.

"So which am I? Too dumb? Too lazy? Too weak? Or maybe all three?"

Socrates stopped chewing for a moment. He seemed to consider.

"You are the exception to the rule. You are a dreamer."

He smiled at Joanna. Her lips curled up, too, but she quickly picked up her doughnut again and bit into it. John's eyes darted back and forth between Socrates and Joanna. He didn't understand and wasn't about to let this go.

"Socrates, are you really saying that we know the way to identifying the right life's blueprint but will never get there because we're unable to follow that way?"

Socrates glanced at him over his doughnut.

"Exactly. Just take a look around. See what's going on in the world. Doesn't that make it pretty clear that we're not getting it? As humanity, we are just ridden with stupidity, laziness, and weakness."

"Socrates!" Joanna looked at him sternly.

"What? It's the truth. Our modern society out there is my best witness. They want us to believe that life, the right life's blueprint, should be nothing but fun, partying, and material wealth. It should be fast and noisy. Full of variety and infinite. One sensation after another. A string of climactic mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical experiences. Always higher, higher, higher, like the stock exchange index. In this sense you are right, actually. There is an Omnim to which we have all surrendered and we serve. There is even one single global religion to which we have dedicated our lives and ourselves. Our almighty Omnim is called 'money', our single religion, 'beast economy'. Together, they rule our existence and coexistence, our thinking, actions, and salvation. Our entire lives. We hope they will bring us redemption. And there you have yet another reason why the Omnim does not come from transcendental insights or any higher being. This Omnim and this religion are based solely and exclusively on human character, our indolence and ignorance. Despite the evidence that all I've described destroys us, hollows us out, lets us rot inside - hell, we don't just know that, we can feel it, too! - we just carry on. Basically, it is unendurable having to live like that. Living like that is stupid. What's even more stupid is the hope that it will eventually lead us to a good life for all. We're just intelligent enough not to crap in every corner but far too

dumb to see and understand the human condition. Of course we want to be noble and sensible. We want to be good. We want to be the superior species. But we can't. Because we are human. When push comes to shove, each of us will choose our individual wellbeing over that of the community. That's human nature. Even if we could see that the sustainable collective good should have precedence over our current individual needs, we are still humans and that means there will always be moments in which knowledge and reason stand no chance. We fail as species. And we can't change this because we are human. Stupid, lazy, weak humans. And--"

Joanna interrupted: "I think John gets what you're saying."

But Socrates wouldn't be stopped. "And we're useless to boot. Just here to perpetuate our own species. That is pretty banal and boring. From a certain perspective, it doesn't even make sense. At least one thing's for sure: we will vanish. And to come full circle: the best thing would be never to be born. Okay. I'm done."

Shocked, John looked at Joanna, then back at Socrates. "Are you saying the right life's blueprint would be to commit suicide?"

Joanna almost pushed over her chair as she jumped up and almost screamed down at Socrates: "See what you've done!"

Socrates remained calm. He looked up at Joanna, who was still towering above him.

"What? Unlike so much of what he heard us talk about today and yesterday, death is an inevitable reality. It is always an option and a solution."

Joanna's pupils grew large. She stared at Socrates, crimson blotches spreading on her face. Her lips were trembling.

"Death is never an option and never a solution! We all need to go when our time has come. Choosing to die before that is just the coward's way out."

Socrates had stood up, too, but remained calm.

"A way out? Out of what? I've never understood that expression. Death is inevitable. Being born only means having to move towards death. Taking 'a way out' would in fact be quite the opposite, it would mean living forever or not dying."

"You're taking a way out of life! You're born and you die. But in between those two, you live."

"You do have a point. Death obviously isn't a solution. As far as I am concerned, death is just the other side of a coincidence. Just like each beginning and each end is the outmost point of a coincidence. Suicide would only pre-empt the end of a coincidence. In view of one's own insignificance, I think one should have the right to make that choice."

Joanna leaned forward until her face almost touched Socrates'. His hair moved in her hot, fast breaths. She was visibly struggling for composure.

"Nothing is just coincidence. Death comes when it is time. You have no right to inflict pain on others by killing yourself. You have no right to take the cowardly way out and make others suffer for it."

Socrates held her gaze.

"I have a duty to stay alive for others, so that they do not suffer because of my death, at least not yet, and that duty outweighs my right to end my own suffering? So why do not the others have a duty to be glad if I choose what's good for me? For without all the hypothetic consequences of an Omnia, death is pretty simple. If you die, you are like unborn again. You do not remember anything, miss anything, regret anything. To you, it's like you'd never been born. Therefore, it is pointless and unreasonable to stay if that would mean to suffer any pain."

Joanna bit her lips. There were tears in her eyes. Before one could escape down her cheek, she turned away from Socrates, clasped her hands before her chest, and walked toward one of the windows.

"So leave! Just leave! What are you still doing here? Why haven't you corrected that pesky coincidence of your birth yet? For that's how you seem to see it."

Her words were followed by silence. John held his breath for as long as he could, then breathed as shallowly and quietly as possible. Joanna still had her back on them and stood looking out the window. She fished a tissue out of her pocket, blew her nose, and dabbed at her eyes. Socrates sank back down on his chair. He stared unseeingly into space.

"The reason is that I am a coward," he said softly. "But I'm working on it."

Again, utter silence. Joanna stepped closer to the window and leant against the wall beside it. Her chest heaved a few times, then, her breath went steady again. Socrates got up and continued picking up the debris on the table. John helped him. Then they went downstairs to throw away the plastic bags of trash.

When they returned, Joanna was standing at the table and placing the leftover doughnuts on a clean paper plate. Socrates and John sat back down on their chairs. Joanna poured coffee for all of them, then she sat down too. John and Socrates helped themselves to more doughnuts. Joanna sipped her coffee. When she started talking, she seemed to be addressing her cup.

"All your rhetoric only proves one thing, Socrates: it is impossible for us to distinguish between right and wrong solely on the basis of our reason, much less reach a conclusion about the right life's blueprint. For if everything is just coincidental and death remains as the only 'right' there is, then everything you've said is void. You don't want to accept and surrender to life, so you go searching for flimsy loopholes in order to shirk your responsibility. The point is that we find the right way together, all of us. That's the plan. That's how it will be."

Socrates snorted and dropped his doughnut on the paper plate.

"The plan? You don't like the fact that we're unable to get this together by ourselves, so you just make up a plan? Sure, go ahead. But that won't change anything. Not one little bit. And it won't help, either. Au contraire. You're making everything so much worse. We are living our best possible lives. The lives of beasts: animals with a twist of intelligence. Moony enough to dream of a right life's blueprint, yet much too weak and lazy, and, most importantly, not intelligent enough to actually live such a right life. And then you come in with your elevation, your transcendence of reality, telling us we just need to believe in it and everything will be fine, eventually, somehow. But life is what it is because mankind is what it is. It isn't 'right'. It isn't 'wrong'."

Joanna looked at him.

"I never said it would be easy. It is a long, tortuous road. But it is the right one."

"Oh, stop it already! What you're going on about is nothing but instinctive behavior. Faith is the kill switch of our intellect. Nothing but our intellect's instinct. And our instincts turn us into beasts. All instincts are genetically encoded survival strategies, maybe with a little generational knowledge thrown in. Animals without intellect and the ability to reason need instincts to protect them from enemies and danger. Intrinsic, unconscious principles that prevent them from being devoured by other animals. To a large part, our character is still shaped by instincts. The same part of our human character that determines how we co-exist as societies. The instinct to assert ourselves, to build up stocks, defend our turf, expand our territory, all those things that are natural to animals, essential for their survival – we do them, too. But on top of that, through some whim of nature, we have been handed the mightiest of all tools: a whiff of intelligence, a smidgen of reason. Beasts. It is this mix that makes our lives what they are. The life of beasts. The only way out would consist in liberating our intellect from its prison of being just a tool and letting it rule over our instincts as guiding principle. But this humans cannot do. Why? Because the way things are is more convenient. And then you come along with your faith and belief!"

That is not only a psychological safety net that offers us solace and redemption, thus encouraging us to bear the status quo and not attempt to change a thing. It also implies or even demands a complete stop of reflection. Your faith wants us to stop thinking and excogitating. Why would we need to think about anything when it explains everything? With its alluring promises and convenient thought ban, it very elegantly shoves aside our intellect and keeps us from becoming better beings. That makes faith just another instinct. Just like there are physical instincts, there also must be an intellectual one. An instinct to ‘protect’ us from the potentially lethal dangers of our own intellect. Our smidgen of intelligence mustn’t cause us to tear ourselves apart with our intellect. All those big, unanswerable questions, all the ills and inscrutabilities that our intellect might want us to uncover and ponder would just make us insane – best case scenario – or even kill us. We’re not intelligent enough yet to handle our intellect. We’re too stupid to use our intellect correctly, to cultivate it. We’re too lazy to work on it and too weak to suffer this necessary transition phase that would without doubt be a horrid awakening. This is the one reason why our lives are as good as they possibly could be. And this is why we will never amount to anything more. There is no plan. There is just humankind, the result of a series of unfortunate coincidences. And as such, we are failing utterly, and we only have ourselves to blame.”

The coffee cup in Joanna's hand was shaking so she placed it on the table. She was visibly agitated.

"You make it easy on yourself, don't you? Hiding as you do behind coincidence, allowing it to render the value of life nil. Just to make things easier for yourself. You want to watch the world crash and burn because you can't cope with it being the way it is. But you're not to blame, Socrates. You don't have to carry the weight of humankind's failure all on your own. Nothing happens without a reason. Accept that. Life was created so that we all can live a good life without suffering. We'd be so much closer to that goal if only everyone understood. All your attempts to analyze and grasp intellectually keep you from seeing the bigger picture. All this, all that we are and are capable of, our free will, our sensations and perceptions, all this was made so that we could experience and enjoy life, the full gloriousness of it. And here you are, using this one little thing, your intellect, to shut yourself off from all of it and experience just a tiny fraction of it. But the plan, Socrates, the purpose behind is that we can be and be in awe of being, to experience it in all its many facets, through and through. Suffering was never part of the plan. Suffering is what people like you have brought into the mix. You cause it mainly to yourselves by using your free will and intellect against what is right in all of us, by shutting off and corrupting yourselves. Nothing here is coincidence. And the only thing that's self-inflicted is when humans follow

the wrong track. Like the one you're on, which is ...”

Joanna didn't finish her sentence. She covered her mouth with one hand. After a moment, she got up, walked over to the sofa, and huddled down on it. John and Socrates stayed where they were and waited for her to continue.

“If you see death as the only way out, then all is lost. There's no hope left, only pain and despair. How you must be suffering. And yet you cannot, will not, let me reach you. I am right here, Socrates, why won't you let me save you from your misery?”

Socrates leaped up. Joanna shrank back a little. Socrates turned to face her, scrutinizing her. She got up and searched his eyes as if for something to hold on to. She looked like she wished to stretch out her arms to him but couldn't muster the strength.

John was still sitting at the table. Torn between an instinct to flee the tenseness and his curiosity, he did not know what to do.

Socrates showed no sign of closing the gap between him and Joanna, who was standing near the sofa. Instead, he made an abrupt turn to face John.

“She's wrong, John. It's not the lack of spirituality that's causing my misery, as she chose to call it. It is seeing mankind and the way we live. Intelligence is what makes us human; our intellect is the

tool that could promote our advancement. That so few use their intellects is one ill. The greater one is that so many use it for nefarious purposes.”

Now he turned back to Joanna and looked her in the eye, his expression blank. Joanna's arms hung lifeless at her sides; her shoulders were hunched as if she was cold. Her head was shaking almost imperceptibly. Tears were shining on her cheeks. She turned her red and swollen eyes on John.

“He’s wrong, John. It is precisely his lack of spirituality that is causing his misery. The most powerful and wonderful trait of humans is our ability to open ourselves up to experiences that transcend our sensual and intellectual capabilities. To be able to experience all of it, if we just allow ourselves to do so. The ill is that so many of us are afraid and, like he, shut themselves off, hide, or even run.”

Now it was Socrates turn to shake his head. He did so slowly and deliberately. Joanna was looking at him. He stood up straight and crossed his arms over his chest. His voice was calm and steady.

“Why do you cling to this transfiguration, Joanna? It is nothing but deceit and manipulation. Why would you turn us into immature beings who can be sedated with fantasies and made to suffer their alleged ‘fate’ in lethargy instead of rising up and changing whatever is making this world such

a vale of tears? You're being ignorant and naive, if not hypocritical. Life is cold and cruel and we are little more than instinct-driven beasts. Yet you want to make us believe we could attain a perfect world if only we were willing to have faith, while in our deepest core we are being cast into the abyss and perish, screaming in silence. Shame on you."

Joanna swayed, jerking her arms as if she had lost her balance. She looked past Socrates out the window. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Why do you insist on living in a world that is so limited, Socrates? Why would you turn us into beings so pathetic and hollow that they can apprehend this wonderful world only through reflection and reasoning? You're being unfeeling and desolate, if not cowardly. Life may not be perfect, we may not be particularly good, but you want to take away everything that gives us the strength and hope we need to face and overcome our internal abyss. Shame on you."

The silence that followed seemed to last an eternity. At last, Socrates' firm voice rang out.

"To the very end, the two of us will never find peace together. You know that."

Joanna slumped down on the sofa. She buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with unrestrained sobs. Socrates stood motionless and looked down on her. When her sobbing abated, Joanna lifted her head and looked at his face as if

waiting for some kind of reply. When none came, she got up and rushed out.

As if in reflex, Socrates took two steps toward her retreating back, but she was out the door and down the corridor. John had been sitting at the table, his eyes glassy and his hands balled into fists. He stared at Socrates, who didn't acknowledge him but seemed lost in his own thoughts.

"She keeps doing this to me. Time and again. Even though she's always known. I've told her right from the beginning."

Socrates was looking at John now as if expecting him to say something. John felt panic rising inside him, choking him. He felt like he was expected to say something. But then he noticed that Socrates gaze wasn't focused on him at all. Instead, he was staring straight through him into the distance. John wasn't sure whether Socrates had been talking to him at all.

"Death is pure life. Such intense moments. Such a paradox. I will love it. I will fear it. So sad and disappointing, too. So infinitely solitary. I will be so scared. Tears will be rolling down my face, tears of infinite joy and infinite grief. At the last moment, the apex of life, the last moment before death, I will break down and beg for salvation, and at the same time, I will rise up and know it is accomplished."

Again, John was uncertain whether Socrates wanted him to respond. Socrates' eyes were still on him but who could say what they really saw? Socrates lips curled up into a smile. Then he gave John a short nod and started to leave.

He stopped in the empty doorframe and turned back to John.

"The reason I live on the streets is the same reason why we humans will never define, let alone follow, a truly 'right' life's blueprint, with or without help from an Omnim: as a species, collectively, we are dysfunctional; we let ourselves become ignorant slaves. Because we are weak and stupid. Wait for nightfall and walk up the hill. You will see the zeitgeist-ridden nature of humankind flicker brightly."

At that, Socrates turned and left, leaving John alone at the table. John sat there for quite a while. He felt like he did after a really galvanizing game on TV – you had to become adjusted to the calm that followed. Only this had been much, much more intense. No game had ever held him so in thrall. But then this had been anything but a game.

Maybe John should have been used to this intensity by now. It hadn't been his first encounter with Joanna and Socrates. Their dispute over lunch the day before had been quite heavy, too. But today had been clearly a new level of intensity. Almost brutal.

Still trying to impose some kind of order on the twisters of thoughts raging in his mind, he mechanically got up, closed the windows with the cardboards squares, and left.

When he reached the path along the canal, he started into the direction that would take him to the thoroughfare, where he planned to take a cab to the office. After a few steps, he stopped abruptly.

He did not care about the office after what he'd just witnessed.

Though it would distract him and help him calm down and gather his senses.

John smiled.

He'd never felt more in his senses than he did right now.

He turned and followed the path in the opposite direction.

It was the same route Joanna and Socrates had taken the day before. Maybe John could catch up with them. For all they had been saying, neither of them actually had told him how to find the right life's blueprint. Much less, what the right life's blueprint even was. They both had their respective ideas about it but did not agree. Ultimately, they hadn't helped him at all. They owed him some answers. Real, actionable answers, not some endless philosophical discussion that only confused him

and filled his head with even more questions. They shouldn't have left him sitting there like that. They needed to tell him whether he was living right. Whether he should bear city life or leave it behind. They had to tell him whatever it was that his parents and Alexander knew but he didn't. They had to tell him what the right life was and what the wrong one.

John took the next street leading away from the canal. He was walking briskly now but saw no trace of Joanna and Socrates. He couldn't be sure that they'd taken this route, of course. They might have gone anywhere. John chased down several paths and streets. He'd soon left the canal well behind and was walking the streets of the city now. He crisscrossed the grid of streets, turning each corner and entering each little park in the hope to spot at least one of his two lunch companions. He almost ran through the Financial District into Newtown before walking aimlessly from the river to the canal and back again. Joanna and Socrates were nowhere to be seen.

At some point he stopped looking for them and just kept walking around in the city. Dusk began to fall and John considered taking a cab home. Then he remembered that he needed to go up the hill.

Without giving it any more thought he marched north, cutting straight across the Island and hiking up to the plateau on the hill, just as he had done a few days ago when he'd walked to Oldtown, but

this time without stopping. The last of the kiosks and food stands were just closing as he arrived at the plateau.

With a feeling of unease John looked up at the top of the hill, which had almost been swallowed by the falling night, and particularly the unlit path up. Up there was where the lookout tower was. He needed to go up there. He kept walking.

He soon reached the fortress ruin and hurried to get past it as it looked extremely unwelcoming, even spooky, in the dark. He didn't stop until he stood before the outlook tower.

After pausing reluctantly for a few moments to catch his breath, he slowly and carefully groped his way up the stairs. With wobbly knees and a proud smile on his face, he reached the platform railing.

The view took his breath away. Like an ocean of a million little lights the city was spread out under him. It was awe-inspiring. Even more so than in daylight. The Island right below shimmered in countless little lights, an incredible spectacle. John couldn't imagine ever tiring of this view. All the colors of the spectrum seemed to sparkle up at him, accompanied by the soft background buzz of the city. There was hardly any noise. The traffic had fallen relatively silent, a stark contrast to the cacophony during the day. Now and then John

could hear sirens but he was so used to the sound that he hardly noticed it.

It was a stunning, flickering night. Whenever he focused his gaze John could see that the sea of lights was actually a mosaic - a large, dancing mosaic of signs, street lights and all those minuscule illuminated windows beaming their lights into the darkness. A view to remember.

John just stood there, taking it all in. One after the other, his thoughts and worries dissolved in the extravaganza laid out before him until finally, he focused only on the dancing splotches of color and felt a tender tiredness spread through his body. He was about to fall asleep on his feet and might have fallen over the low railing into the depth below if he hadn't come to full senses with a jerk.

He turned towards the stairs and was about to head down when he suddenly stopped dead and stared into the darkness. His throat felt instantly dry and his stomach ached as if from a punch. Slowly, John turned to face the flickering sea of lights once again.

Almost enthralled he gazed down at the spectacle that now seemed to consist only of nervous, jittering, glaring dots of lights. A feeling of bedazzlement and confusion gripped him. Each of those tiny, twitching dots of colors down there was governed by a TV set pulling the strings. It was as if

John could watch thousands of games simultaneously from his perch up here. And every one of those games was boring. That was what Socrates had been talking about. The nature of humankind was flickering up to him.

John took a few labored breaths. Then he walked down the tower stairs. On his walk down to the plateau he was deep in thought. He did not mind the darkness anymore. John felt surprisingly at ease. Though he felt tired and his body more prone to gravity, there was a strong and permeating sense of inner peace.

The plateau was deserted by now. John shrugged and walked on down the hill. With no urgency, feeling almost indifferent, he kept moving toward the flickering sea of light that lay before him. As he slowly approached the foot of the hill and descended deeper inside the glowing dome of illumination surrounding the city, he felt he could not breathe and needed to gasp for air. The feeling lasted only for a few seconds. He ignored it, and by the time he had reached the bottom of the hill he was calm again. Leaving the park behind, he walked straight down the next major street. He could see the flickering of television sets through some bar windows but there were so many other glaring and glinting lights that the night seemed almost as bright as day. It really is amazing, John thought, how you hardly noticed that down here, in the midst of it.

Maybe it was for the better. Maybe it was disastrous. He didn't know which. He had no idea what to make of the images that had come to him on the lookout tower. His stomach was growling. He had not had anything to eat since his lunch with Joanna and Socrates. Listlessly, he strolled past neon signs advertising fast food chains and restaurants. His usual dining preferences and habits failed him. He did not feel enticed to eat at any of those places. He felt like freshly baked buns. But he knew he didn't have any at home. He would have to go to Izzie. She would certainly be asleep at this time. But she would get up for him. She'd also warm up some buns for him if she didn't have fresh ones at home. And then she'd start worrying about him again. She'd ask questions and demand answers. John stopped at an intersection. He decided to let Izzie sleep.

He went into one of the small 24-hour supermarkets instead. He'd just have to cook for himself. He bought all the ingredients for spaghetti and salad, the only thing he knew how to prepare. It had been ages since he'd last cooked a meal all by himself.

Back home, after he had finished preparing his pasta and salad, he felt a tinge of pride. It was a simple meal but he'd made it himself. He caught himself automatically heading for the sofa in front of the TV with his full tray, and stopped. Tonight, there would be no flickering light coming from his

windows. John turned around and sat down at the dining table. It was a very unusual dinner but he enjoyed it tremendously. When he was done, he avoided the temptation to get comfy on the sofa after all by going straight to bed.

It was light outside when John woke up on Friday morning. He rolled out from under his blanket, sat on the edge of his bed, and rubbed his eyes. Whoever had said that sleep and death were brothers was onto something. He'd gone to bed as one person the night before, now he felt reborn like a completely other one. The images from the lookout tower he had been able to stow away so comfortably in some faraway corner of his mind yesterday were now dancing a happy jig inside his head. He had no idea what to do with them.

With a deep sigh he got up and went to the bathroom. When he was dressed, he cleared the dining table and washed the dishes. After he'd straightened up the kitchen he decided to get some fresh air. He had to get lunch for Joanna and Socrates, anyway. If he was planning on meeting them, that was. He wasn't so sure. In light of their almost violent altercation the day before it wasn't certain the others would show up. Well, he still had time to decide.

Once outside, John wandered aimlessly around his neighborhood. He couldn't shake off last night's images nor the bafflement they caused him.

Not even the fresh air and physical activity seemed to help. He started to walk faster.

To no avail. His thoughts wouldn't be outrun. Doggedly, they matched his pace and showed no signs of tiring. It was useless. John slowed down again. He had to meet the others. He had to get some answers.

First, though, he had to get lunch. He couldn't decide on what to bring them. He walked past fast-food and other restaurants but shook his head whenever one of their doors seemed to beckon him invitingly. All that ready-made food sitting in ugly plastic containers suddenly repelled him. He would cook something. There'd be doughnuts and home-cooked spaghetti for everyone.

Back home he prepared the pasta, sauce and salad and filled as much of it as would fit in separate Tupperware containers. His parents had given him the containers when he moved into this place, and they'd been sitting in the kitchen cupboard ever since. His parents probably thought that all bachelors just loved to prepare their own food and he would use the containers to take his lunch to the office.

Once he'd packed up everything, including plates and silverware, he took a cab to the canal and walked the rest of the way to the half-collapsed building. When he entered the room upstairs, it was empty. The windows were covered

with the cardboard squares. But this did not dampen John's spirits. In fact, he was glad to have some time to set the table.

Real plates and silverware gave off quite a different feeling from plastic plates and cups. He arranged the Tupperware containers with the food near the top of the table, buffet-style. Then he took a few steps back and eyed his work. He nodded in satisfaction.

He was just about to sit on the sofa when he heard steps coming up the stairs. It was Joanna. No sooner had she stepped into the room and seen John's feast that she turned at him and beamed. Then she gave him a hug, as had become their custom. She sat at her place at the table and was visibly giddy with joy over John's spread. She asked him how he'd come up with the wonderful plan, what he was thinking to go through so much trouble, and what exactly it was he had cooked. A little awkwardly, John admitted that the only thing he'd actually prepared himself was the pasta. But Joanna waved off his objection. He had done a great job, she said. A beautiful gesture. She could hardly wait to dig in. John blushed and smiled sheepishly. They began a conversation on cooking, recipes, and canteen meal preparation in the soup kitchen.

All of a sudden Socrates was standing at the table. John hadn't heard him come in. For a few seconds he just stood there. He eyed the table setting

and the food containers, which Joanna was now opening.

"It all looks very nice," he stated after they'd said their greetings.

"You have to thank John for that," Joanna said. "He prepared the food and brought everything else, too. Come, sit and let's eat."

Socrates took the place next to Joanna's and reached for his plate.

"Thank you, John, it looks great," he said as he held out his plate to Joanna, who was serving each of them a generous helping.

"I hope you like it," John almost whispered and stabbed his fork at his spaghetti.

Joanna gave him a smile and nodded her head towards Socrates, who was sitting beside her and shoveling a huge forkful of pasta into his mouth. The plate before him was almost empty. John smiled with relief.

"You know," he said. "This meal is also a way of saying thanks."

Joanna and Socrates stopped eating and looked at him.

"It means a lot to me that we have these lunches together. That we've become friends." John cast a quick glance at the other two and looked down at his plate again.

"Are you dying?" Socrates asked blatantly.

Joanna punched his forearm. "Socrates!"

"Well, one has to wonder when he's suddenly going all mushy on us."

John shook his head, laughing.

"Don't worry, I'm not dying yet. At least not that I know. I just wanted to let you know that I enjoy spending time with you. That's all."

Joanna put her fork down and took John's hand.

"Thank you, John. We like coming here, too. It is a wonderful thing to spend time together."

John gave her a grateful nod. Then they both looked over at Socrates.

Socrates rolled his eyes. "Really now? Must I?"

The other two just kept looking at him.

"Fine. Yes, yes. It's super to be here with the two of you. Can I get some more pasta now?"

Joanna let go of John's hand and turned towards Socrates. She looked like saying something but then just beamed at him. Socrates narrowed his eyes and handed her his plate.

After the main course the three of them reminisced over coffee and doughnuts how they had first met at the fountain. All laughed about John's drunken tumble into the water. Socrates worked out for John how many towels he owed him by

now. But he was smiling and rubbing his well-filled stomach.

They were stacking the plates and packing everything up in John's bags when John finally plucked up his courage and said to Socrates:

"By the way, I went up the hill last night."

Socrates just glanced at him and reached for the box of doughnuts.

"Good for you," he said.

John wouldn't be dismissed.

"I saw the city flicker."

Joanna was bent over to wipe the crumbs off the table. Now she stood up straight and looked at John.

"That's a beautiful sight, isn't it, John? Beautiful, and yet so sad."

John looked at Socrates in surprise, then at Joanna.

"You know what I'm talking about? You've seen it too?"

Joanna smiled and nodded slowly.

"Of course. He" - she nodded at Socrates - "sends everyone up that hill."

Socrates plucked the doughnut box under his arm and turned to Joanna.

"That's not quite correct. Not everyone. Just those who need to see in order to believe."

Joanna pulled a face. Socrates grinned and plunked down on the sofa. He had the box of doughnuts on his lap. Now he took one and looked at John.

"What exactly did you see up on the hill?"

John pulled a chair over to the sofa and sat down. "The flickering."

"The flickering of what?"

"Countless lights. Mainly television sets in windows."

"Good. And what does that mean?"

John gave Socrates a searching glance and hesitated. Then he said:

"That many people had their televisions on?"

"What it means, John, is that virtually everyone in this city was sitting in front of some television screen. And they'll do the exact same thing tonight. Every given night, every free minute they will spend in front of their televisions."

John shrugged inadvertently. "At least they won't do anything worse during that time."

Socrates choked on his doughnut and began coughing uncontrollably. Joanna sat down beside him and clapped his back. After he recovered from

his coughing fit, Socrates walked over to the table and rummaged in the bags for a bottle that still had a little water in it. He took a big gulp, paused, and emptied the bottle. Then he stowed it in the bag again and plunked down next to Joanna on the sofa. She was holding out the box of doughnuts to him, but Socrates just groaned softly and waved her off.

"I'm so stuffed I can hardly sit. Time to leave."

John jumped up from his chair.

"Okay. But could you please explain about the television sets first?"

Joanna rose and held out a helping hand to Socrates. He took it and pulled himself up with a groan. Then she tucked the box with the few remaining doughnuts under Socrates arm and turned to John.

"Why don't you walk with us for a bit? That'll give us a chance to talk some more."

John nodded and hurried to gather all his bags as Joanna and Socrates walked down the stairs and out the building. He followed them on the path along the canal. When the path grew wide enough that they could walk abreast, he caught up with Socrates.

"So watching television is a problem?" he asked.

Socrates turned to face John and just looked at him. He did not slow his pace, but his expression was untypically satisfied. He even smiled a little.

"Television in itself is not the problem," he explained. "It's that it stands for what society has become. Television helps prevent us from achieving true knowledge."

"But why is that? Most of the programs are just harmless entertainment. That can't harm anyone."

"Oh yes, it can. It harms the masses. The masses who would be better off searching for their right life's blueprints. Instead, they let television tell them how to live."

They left the canal path and followed a larger street. The traffic noise and hurrying crowds put a halt to their conversation and soon drove them into narrower, less busy alleys.

Joanna was the first to speak again.

"People spend too much time in front of their television. That cuts them off from themselves. And even more, from others. They are driven far away from the revelation of their right life's blueprints."

"What Joanna is saying," Socrates hastened to amend, "is that the people in the city have grown dull and passive. They aren't aware of what's happening around them and with them. They lead a

life that no one who isn't inhuman, stupid, or ruthlessly selfish would ever want to lead. However, when all is said and done it's the masses who define what life's blueprints are normal. And it is very hard to get them to stray from the path of least resistance. Which is exactly the path the sculpture in the fountain supposedly shows us."

"Slavery without masters. I think I once heard about it in school," murmured John, more to himself than anyone else.

"That's one way to put it, yes. But we are actually one step further. We have declared this alleged slavery to be the ultimate freedom. And everyone has to believe in it under penalty of disgrace. It's a freedom for the beasts inside of us to rule our very nature. But the masses will never rise up against it because instead of being watchful and alert, they virtually chain themselves to their television set after their day's work and let some entertaining nonsense dull their minds. Who needs opium for the masses when you have television?"

Joanna cleared her throat.

"Television also shuts people off from the Omnia," she said.

Socrates took a deep breath.

"Yes, it also shuts them off from the Omnia. Can we not go into that today, Joanna? Let's just say that television isn't helping to liberate the masses from their current inertia and get them to

find the right life's blueprint in whatever way they may. Or at least question the life's blueprints they are following. Quite the contrary. We have turned television into the colorful, flickering enforcer of a master-less slavery disguised as freedom. It is nothing but the tyranny of the unshackled inner beasts."

They walked side by side for a while. Nobody spoke. John didn't know how to keep the conversation going. Socrates' unexpected serenity worried him. There was an air of consensus about his two companions that confused him. Joanna had taken Socrates' arm and seemed content to just enjoy their walk.

In the end, John just stopped walking. When the other two noticed that he was no longer beside them, they turned around and walked back to where he stood. John told them he'd have to leave them now. They nodded. He hoped they wouldn't question him. They didn't.

"By the way," Socrates said instead, "did you notice the looks people gave us as we walked by?"

John shook his head in mild surprise.

"They don't like us. They studiously avoid us and give us funny looks. They feel the difference in our being and way of thinking. And they do not care for that at all. They much prefer those who move away to the coast or to a faraway island to those who, like us, stay here and dare to think and

live differently. It irks them. Not enough to start them thinking. But it bothers them. They would love it if we were gone, too."

They said their goodbyes. John watched them walk away and disappear behind the next corner. Then he turned around and walked in the opposite direction. He went home to drop off his bags and then on to the office.

A few of his colleagues asked him why he had bothered to come to the office one day before the weekend. John answered with a shrug. He didn't understand the question. It wasn't until later that he realized he had stayed away the day before so they all must have assumed that he'd been ill again. He spent the otherwise uneventful work day hunched apathetically in front of his computer screens. His thoughts kept wandering back to what Socrates and Joanna had said about television and the right life's blueprint. The image of the flickering city lights at night was etched in his mind. Returned home after work, he once again went straight to bed.

Saturday morning he awoke unusually early but feeling refreshed. Under the shower, he turned the water to cold to get fully awake. He jumped and couldn't stifle a cry when the icy water hit him. After the initial shock passed, John laughed heartily. He certainly was awake now. He dressed and sat at his living room table to breakfast on a cup of coffee.

It felt weird and strangely tedious and made him nervous. Just sitting there and sipping his coffee wasn't enough. Feeling irritated now, he went in search of an old newspaper to read. He didn't find one and cursed himself for throwing them all out. He sat down at the table again, took his cup and looked out the window. He was restless. There was nothing to be seen outside. The windowpane was like a picture, motionless and still.

John took another sip of coffee and shot a secret glance at his television set. Then at the remote control lying on the couch table. He turned his head to face the window again. Could it be that the flickering never stopped? That you just didn't see it in the daylight? Deep in thought, he drank the rest of his coffee. He'd make something other than pasta today. Rice, perhaps. That was pretty simple, too.

After taking his cup to the kitchen he went out to shop for lunch. Though he had plenty of time, he did not want to go to the mall. Instead, he did his shopping in a little store not far from his house he'd never frequented before. Following the instructions on the packets and some recipes he'd researched online, he cooked sweet chicken curry and rice. As side dishes, he prepared fresh vegetables, peas and carrots, and a salad. For desert he had bought another box of doughnuts and made a thermos of coffee. Once he'd stowed everything in bags it was time to leave for the canal.

Joanna and Socrates had arrived before him. They both seemed in a good mood as they greeted him. Together, they set the table and placed the various food containers John had brought in the center. Joanna thanked him, bright-eyed. Socrates nodded and grinned as he heaped huge servings on everyone's plates.

They did not talk much. Mainly because Socrates' attention was absorbed by the food, which he took with obvious delight in. Now and then, Joanna or John made half-hearted attempts to start a conversation, but they, too, just wanted to enjoy their meal.

This relative silence persisted until all of the curry and vegetables were gone, most of it eaten by Socrates, who rubbed his stomach and announced with a groan that he'd need to take a little nap. With that, he stood, walked over to the sofa, and lay down there. A moment later, he had fallen asleep.

Joanna shook her head with bemusement and started clearing the table. John helped her. As they put down the packed bags in the corridor Joanna suggested they go for a walk while Socrates napped.

They started off along the canal, walking silently side by side at first, just reveling in the sunlight and stopping now and then to watch the water flow.

After a while, John told Joanna about his struggles to follow a fitness and running regime. Joanna listened patiently. Then he chatted about food recipes and admitted that he did not really know the first thing about cooking. Joanna gave him an appreciative clap on the back, praised the results of his first attempts – which had been evidently wonderful and encouraged him to keep at it.

Eventually, they turned around and walked back in the direction of the building. They agreed that home-cooked meals tasted a lot better than pre-packed, industrial food, let alone ready meals. It was healthier and richer in variety, too. Plus, you knew what ingredients were in a home-cooked meal and where they came from. Last, but not least, they both concurred, cooking was fun. And you even got a nice, hot meal out of it that could make people happy.

"Well, that depends on the skills of the chef," John laughed.

Joanna nudged him with her elbow. "Home-cooked is always more wonderful and delicious than anything else. If you can't see that you should walk away hungry."

"Freshly baked buns, too," John continued, lost in thought.

Joanna nodded. "Buns are wonderful. Unbelievable what they're selling as bread in the supermarket."

kets. All wrapped up in plastic. Even more unbelievable that so many people would actually buy the stuff and eat it, too."

They had reached the building and were climbing up the stairs to the second floor.

"Soon, we won't even have a choice but will all have to eat that horrible supermarket bread," John said. "All the real bakeries in the city are vanishing." As if that was all there was to say about the matter, John walked on into the room, where Socrates still lay sleeping on the sofa. Joanna followed him.

"What do you mean, John?"

They sat at the table. John opened the box of doughnuts and poured coffee for both of them.

"The bakeries are closing down. Fresh buns are too much work and don't bring in enough profit. Nobody is willing to take that upon themselves anymore."

Joanna took a sip of coffee. "That is quite a pity," she said softly. "Something should be done about it."

"Something should be done about what?" Socrates' grumbling voice came from the sofa. He had woken up just then.

"About the disappearance of freshly baked buns," John said.

Socrates heaved himself up from the sofa and came over to the table. He looked at John and frowned. Then he shook his head, took two doughnuts from the box, sat on a chair, and accepted the mug of coffee Joanna handed him.

"Where are the buns disappearing to?" he finally asked through a mouthful of doughnut.

"John was saying," Joanna started in, "that the bakeries in the city are all closing down. They aren't profitable anymore and nobody is willing to make the effort."

"So?" Socrates grunted.

"So," John mimicked him a bit spitefully, "I think that's unfortunate because I happen to like fresh buns quite a lot."

Socrates looked at him in astonishment and took a bite of his second doughnut.

"So do something about it."

"Do I look like a baker to you?" John asked.

"Don't know. What does a baker look like?"

John grimaced and rolled his eyes.

"Besides, you shouldn't be the one talking about doing something, Socrates."

Socrates put down his doughnut.

"Well, well. And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

John took a gulp of coffee before he answered:

"You complain about life in the city but the only action you take against it is pissing on some plaque in the fountain."

Joanna seemed about to step in, but Socrates leaned across the table and held up a warning hand to her.

"Did you just compare some baked goods with a whole life in the city?"

"Buns," John insisted, "are part of life in the city. By and large, they may not be extremely significant for city life, I grant you that. But isn't it the details that count?"

Socrates leaned back in his chair and gave John an appraising look.

"You know, John, I would never have believed it, but I'm maybe beginning to like you just a little bit. You may not be quite awake yet but at least you've started to listen."

John's jaw had dropped. He felt his face grow hot. With a trembling hand he reached for a doughnut, took a bite, and started chewing.

Joanna pushed her shoulder against Socrates'. He turned to her, smiling, and pushed the doughnuts over to her.

They spent the rest of the afternoon reminiscing about their early meetings at the fountain, the

many doughnuts Socrates had devoured, usually without sharing, their talks and discussions, their walks in the city, and Joanna's hugs, which Socrates commented with a blank look and a shake of his head.

It was early in the evening when they finished clearing the table and Joanna and Socrates helped John lug the bags with the plates and empty food containers outside. As it was Joanna's shift in the soup kitchen the next day and Socrates had some other things to do, they agreed to meet on Monday for lunch. As they said goodbye, Joanna enclosed John in a long hug and thanked him for the wonderful meal. John was touched. He stood and watched Joanna walk away, her arm in Socrates', who had given him a short nod.

Then he headed back to his apartment, where he took his time unpacking his bags, cleaning the dishes, and putting everything away. He thought about Joanna and Socrates. As insecure and awkward he had felt in the beginning, he now enjoyed spending time with them. Coming to think about it, they had become very good friends.

Maybe he would introduce them to Izzie after all. John tried to remember when he'd seen Izzie last. He went to his phone and called her. Izzie was still awake but about to go to bed because she had to work Sundays. It was clear that she was happy he had called. Still, they kept it short and agreed to meet up for lunch after her shift tomorrow. John

considered cooking for her but dropped the idea and suggested one of their usual restaurants near the mall instead.

After he'd rung off he went outside. He walked the streets of the city for a while, deep in thought. The flickering of the television screens in virtually every window was, if he noticed it at all, no more than a harmless play of colors to him. He enjoyed his walk.

When he came upon a newsstand, he stopped to get something to read. He did not want a newspaper, though. He didn't feel like reading up on current affairs and the latest scandals. He wanted something else, so he turned to face the rack of magazines and let his eyes wander along the title pages. The selection was huge, his decisiveness, not so much. In the end, he just closed his eyes and grabbed blindly into the rows and rows of magazines, pulling out one at random. It was some special edition on urban development. John shook his head, grinning, but purchased it anyway.

Back home, he sat at the living room table and skimmed some of the articles. There was a lot about growing cities and modern building technology. Some contributions focused on tunnel and road construction. They described in some detail how underground pipelines and cable routes had helped enhance the cityscape. John only scanned the article. There was a historical section in the back of the issue that interested him slightly more.

It described how electricity networks and their planning had developed over the decades. The most interesting thing about the article was the many pictures. Photos from times when all the electric lines ran overhead, from pole to pole, seemed like images from a faraway planet.

John closed the magazine and wondered about the wide variety of special interests and the magazines devoted to them. One life would never suffice to keep up with all of them. Despite, or maybe because of this conclusion, John knew that urban development and power lines would not make the top of his list of priorities. He put the magazine on his paper recycling stack and went to bed.

John started the next morning as he had concluded the night before: he went for a walk. He enjoyed deep lungfuls of fresh morning air and went to a small restaurant to have a leisurely breakfast and read the newspaper.

On his way back home he passed a supermarket. He was about to go in and buy ingredients for lunch when he remembered his date with Izzie. Her shift ended after the usual lunch time so it would be a late meal for him. He walked home without getting any groceries and decided to go running.

Even after a, as he thought of it, pretty extended run, a shower, and a short nap, John was early for lunch. Still, he walked to the restaurant they'd

agreed upon and waited for Izzie. He passed the time browsing some magazines that the restaurant provided for its guests.

"May I interrupt?"

Izzie was standing at the table, smiling down at John. He put the magazine aside and greeted her. As usual, it did not take them long to strike up a lively conversation.

As they ate, Izzie told John about her work at the bakery. She said the mood was subdued because of the employees' uncertain future. Then she began explaining verbosely how it all had come about, the way of the world and how life had to go on. John only listened half-heartedly now.

The way of the world ... He could tell her a thing or two about the way of the world. Or at least what he, Joanna, and Socrates had discussed these past few days, which had a lot to do with the way of the world. But he did not want to sum that up for Izzie. Maybe he should just take her with him to the old building on the canal someday.

His mind still on the canal, John suddenly noticed that Izzie had stopped talking and was looking at him.

"Is everything all right, John?" he heard her ask.

Feeling a bit flustered, John pushed the remaining food on his plate around with his fork.

"Yes. Of course. Why do you ask?"

"You're awfully quiet."

"I'm listening to you."

"No, you aren't at all. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure," he said.

"Are you still meeting those characters at the fountain?"

John stopped pushing at his food, put down his knife and fork, and leaned back in his chair. Those characters. Now he remembered when and where he'd last seen Izzie. They had been lying in his bed and she had asked him about the 'characters' then, too.

"I haven't been at the fountain for quite a while."

"Does that mean they're gone, John?"

"Who?"

"Those characters."

"I'm not quite sure what you mean, Izzie."

"Are you still seeing those characters?"

"There are a lot of 'characters' walking around. What are you getting at?"

"Don't get upset. I was just asking."

They finished eating in silence. John was certain now that he would never take Izzie to the building

on the canal. He would not introduce her to the 'characters' at all.

They ordered coffee.

"Are you mad at me, John?" Izzie asked.

"No, why?"

"Well, because now you've stopped talking altogether. Plus, you're looking at me as if I were the devil incarnate."

John forced a smile.

"Who would want to go to heaven if you were."

"Flattery won't save you."

"That wasn't flattery, Izzie. You're temptation incarnate."

Izzie gave John an appraising look and drank her coffee.

"The question is, though: am I still temptation enough for you?"

John rolled his eyes.

"What is that supposed to mean? What is going on with you today?"

"With me? You're the one who doesn't call, you don't even return calls, you don't come by. And if we do meet you act as if you'd rather be someplace else."

John shook his head.

"You're exaggerating, Izzie. It hasn't been that long since we last met."

She looked at him. Her head was tilted a little to the side. Then she leaned a bit closer over the table and moved her hands forward, ever so slightly, toward John's.

"Do you want to go to your place, John?"

John took a long, slow sip of his coffee before putting down his cup and folding his hands on the table.

"I thought you didn't like my place, Izzie?"

"So would you like to come home with me?"

He stared at her for a long second. Then he tried to smile.

"I would like to. But today isn't a good day. There's so much going on at work and I've been out last night, too. I'm pretty beat and wouldn't be good company. Another time."

Izzie looked down into the cup on the table. She slowly pulled back her hands all the way to the edge of the table. Then she pushed herself away from the table and into the back of her chair.

"Why did you want to see me today, John?"

John gestured to the waiter.

"I was looking forward to seeing you, Izzie."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Maybe because you're having a bad day?"

Izzie gave a derisive hiss and shook her head.

As they were waiting for their bill, they both drank their coffee in silence. Kissing goodbye on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, their lips touched only briefly and the rest of their bodies remained separate.

Then they just stood there, close but not touching or breaking eye contact, as if neither wanted to be the first to leave. At last, Izzie turned around. She rummaged in her bag and came up with a small paper bag that she held out to John. John looked down at the bag. He had recognized the bakery logo right away. Slowly, he looked back up and into Izzie's face. She was smiling softly. John grabbed the bag with both hands and thanked her with another kiss. She nodded, turned, and walked away. John looked after her for a few seconds, then he turned too and marched off, bag in hand.

He hurried to put some distance between himself and the restaurant. A few blocks further, he felt considerably better at ease and slowed his pace to a leisurely stroll. He followed the street to the river, where he turned to walk upstream.

Narrowing his focus to his feet and the little patch of path before him, he reached the entrance to the gorge the river had worn into the mountains to the north of the city. The wild rush of the water, which ran faster and louder up here than lower

down in the city, drew John's attention back to the present. Fascinated by the spectacle, he walked further into the ravine. The rush of the water seemed all-encompassing here as its echo resounded between the high, steep mountain walls. John sat down on a large boulder at the side of the path. It was a monumental setting.

Nevertheless, his gaze drifted down to the paper bag in his hand. It took him a moment to remember where it came from, and he was surprised that he had obviously completely forgotten about it, just held on to it all the way up here. Though he was certain he knew what was inside, he opened it and peeked in. His lips curled up in a smile as he saw the buns. He took one and bit into it with gusto. Then he paused in silent reverence, closed his eyes, and sighed softly. Fresh buns from the bakery were such a glorious thing that each first bite still sent a small shudder of pleasure run down John's back.

He finished off the buns one after another, looking around at the ravine walls and listening to the noise and rush. The wild water up here was even more imposing than the waterfalls in Oldtown. He felt awe at the river's power to break through solid rock. A force like that was almost unimaginable. Inconceivable that a little bit of water had separated a mountain. No rock wall had been able to stop it on its way to the ocean.

John sat there on his boulder for quite a while before he decided to go home. It was a leisurely stroll back. Without noticing, he had spent the better part of the afternoon on his walk. It was early evening when he got home. John prepared himself a meal with the leftovers he found in his fridge and turned in early. Though he'd been tired when he went to bed he spent a restless night.

He woke in the early hours of the morning, feeling anything but restored. He was tired but unable to go back to sleep. Tossing and turning, he got annoyed at himself. He dragged himself out of bed and into the bathroom. A cold shower left him feeling more awake, yet still irritated. He wasn't sure why anymore. To cheer himself up, he decided to go for a little walk and have breakfast. He walked outside but got no further than the little vendor around the corner, where he got some breakfast to go. He returned home and finished half of it leaning against his kitchen island. It wasn't particularly good, which did nothing to improve his mood. With an outbreak of anger, he hurled the plastic box into the sink with such force that the remains of his breakfast splattered onto the floor. John didn't care. He left the mess as it was and threw himself onto his bed. He wanted to try to get a little sleep. And, hopefully, wake up in a better world.

To no avail – he still was unable to doze off. He shifted on the bed, turning this way and that. Not

knowing what had left him feel so agitated was making matters even worse. In the end, his restlessness drove him from his bed and out into the streets again.

John pounded through the streets until he felt a little bit calmer. He was about to get a cab home when he changed his mind. He waved the approaching cab off and headed to the half-collapsed building on the canal instead.

The stairwell was quiet. Cautiously, John stepped into the room where he'd met Joanna and Socrates not too long before. But it was deserted. With equal measures of relief and of disappointment, John sat on the sofa. He hadn't expected anyone to be here, not really. It was much too early. Now, though, he didn't know what to do there all by himself. He lay down lengthwise on the sofa. Soon, he was asleep.

"Where's our lunch?"

John opened his eyes. Socrates stood beside the sofa and shook the last remainders of sleep out of him.

"Where's our lunch?" Socrates repeated, still shaking John vigorously.

A moment later, Socrates was pulled back and Joanna's face looked down at John.

"Are you okay, John?" she asked with apparent concern.

John sat up on the sofa and nodded.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just fell asleep."

He got up and gave Joanna a hug. Then he nodded at Socrates.

"Where is our lunch?" Socrates hissed and gestured at the empty table.

John followed his gaze and stared at the table, wide-eyed. He had forgotten to make lunch. He hadn't even remembered picking up something along the way. Feeling dazed, he rubbed his forehead and mumbled an apology. Then he slipped out, announcing he would just go and get something. Joanna tried to stop him and called after him that it didn't matter, they could just sit there together without lunch. But John had already descended the stairs and run outside.

When he returned packed with takeout bags, a box of doughnuts under his arm, Joanna stepped forward and helped him unpack. She repeated that he didn't have to do that. But John just shook his head and set the table without speaking. Socrates was sitting at his usual place, waiting impatiently for the other two to take their seats as well. Then he reached for one of the plastic containers and started to eat. Joanna once again thanked John before taking another of the containers.

"What's wrong, John?" she asked when John didn't touch his lunch.

John jumped a little as if startled. He forced himself to smile at her.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"You're not eating anything."

"I'm not that hungry."

"Well," Socrates said, "it's not like home cooking. But still edible."

"Socrates!" Joanna almost shouted at him, jabbing him with her elbow.

"What? It's the truth."

John looked at Socrates. He took a deep breath. After a moment, he exhaled.

"This just isn't my day," he finally muttered.

He felt Joanna's gaze on him. It made him uneasy, so he pulled the last of the plastic containers towards him and tried to ignore her. Listlessly, he stabbed at his food.

"John, what's going on?"

John dropped his fork down in the container and fixed his eyes on Joanna. She met his gaze calmly. He raised his hands without knowing why, then let them drop on the tabletop with a bang.

"It just isn't fair. We're sitting in this half-collapsed building, eating bland, lukewarm takeout food. From plastic containers. With plastic forks. While all the others, who look at us funny when

they see us on the street but don't know the first thing about anything, are sitting in nice restaurants, eating well-prepared meals from real china plates using real silverware."

"We would have all that if you hadn't forgotten to cook," Socrates stated soberly through a mouthful of food.

John's jaw literally dropped and his eyes grew wide. The moment passed, though, and he collected himself enough to give Socrates no more than an angry glance. Socrates had turned his attention back to his lunch and didn't even notice.

Joanna reached out over the table and patted his hand.

"We like it here, John. It's the company that's important, not the food. We wouldn't enjoy the gourmet food all that much if we had to sit in a restaurant."

John pulled his hand from under hers and slumped back in his chair.

"It isn't really the food you're talking about, though. Am I right?" Joanna continued.

John looked out the window. Then back at Joanna.

"It just isn't right."

Joanna waited for him to go on.

"It can't be right that we have to leave or hide somewhere. Hide from the others in this half-collapsed factory."

Socrates drank from his water bottle and reached for his fork again. "Speak for yourself. I am not hiding. I'm just leaving the others in peace."

John turned to Socrates, who was lifting a forkful of food to his mouth.

"By staying out of there way?"

Socrates answered with his mouth full.

"Exactly. I leave them in peace and they do me."

"Call it what you will. The fact is, we are holed up in here while all the others are enjoying their freedom outside."

Socrates started laughing and almost choked on his food.

"Hilarious, isn't it?" he said. "Like an inverted zoo. The visitors lock themselves up in enclosures while the animals run free."

John clenched his fists on the table.

"I don't see anything funny in that! It doesn't make sense that we lock ourselves up. And I don't want to be left in peace. Not like that. And most certainly do I not want to leave others in peace."

His outburst took John by surprise and he blushed.

Socrates had finished his lunch and pushed the empty container away. "Look at him; he's starting to wake up. He's started to listen, see, and talk. But the world is what it is. Sometimes it's just not worth thinking about it too much."

John still felt beside himself and didn't know what to make of that. He glanced warily at Socrates, then Joanna, then back at Socrates. Both gave him encouraging nods.

"There must be a way to change that. Don't you think? We need to wake up everyone else, too."

"Why would we do that, John?" Socrates said. "They've done nothing to deserve it. To be more precise, they deserve exactly what they got, which is sleeping through everything."

John turned to Joanna, his arms raised in a gesture of helplessness.

"Joanna. You understand what I'm trying to say, don't you? You spend your life making others' easier and better. Why not go to the root of evil at last? Why not make a real change? You know we deserve it."

Joanna held John's glance for a few seconds. She rubbed her brow. Then she turned to Socrates.

"He has a point, Socrates. We shouldn't be thinking only of ourselves. Maybe what we're doing is not just for us but for a better future. A future this city is yearning for."

Socrates shook his head. "Let it keep yearning until it perishes."

John stood with a jerk. He furiously started gathering the empty containers and forks. He was about to stuff everything in one of the plastic bags when he stopped and turned to Socrates.

"You woke me up, Socrates."

"Yeah," scoffed Socrates. "And I am beginning to regret it."

John placed the trash bag on the floor. Then he started pouring coffee for everybody. Joanna stood too, opened the box of doughnuts, and proffered it to Socrates.

"Don't talk such nonsense, Socrates. You're keeping me awake, too, and you're loving it."

With a mischievous smile, Socrates took a doughnut. Joanna sat down again.

"And I think," said John as he passed around the coffee cups, "it shouldn't be a problem for you to wake up a few others, right?"

"Of course not. But why should I? I've told you, they're not worth it."

John sat back in his chair.

"Not even if we could make them see? You said it yourself: everyone would be able to see life as it should be, if they only used their intellects."

"I've also said that humans are too stupid and lazy to live that life. Even if they were able to see it."

"But imagine the impact, though, if many woke up – it would be the end of the city as we know it. Nothing would ever be the same."

Socrates reached into the pastry box without taking his eyes off John. His hand came out empty. With his head tilted to one side, he gazed past John into the distance and seemed to be talking to himself as he said:

"Yes, if they woke up nothing would ever be the same. Their awakening would be their doom. They would be forced to take in in one instant how unbearably pathetic and ridiculous life in the city has become ... They would be lost. And they would be scared and helpless as to what to do. It would be chaos. Anarchy."

Socrates' gaze focused on John again, who had pushed the doughnuts a bit closer to him.

Joanna was watching the two men, who looked at each other conspiratorially. "I think," she said casually, "it would be worth a try. You two make a great team. I would venture anything with you."

John looked at Joanna, then back at Socrates.

“The three of us are all we need, right?”

Socrates took doughnut from the box and got up. As he ate, he circled the table like a tiger in his cage. John and Joanna watched him walk around, shaking his head and gesticulating as if engaged in some kind of inner dispute. After a few rounds around the table, Socrates stopped. He looked at Joanna. Then John. He opened his arms wide in a dramatic gesture.

“Even if we wanted to – what are the three of us going to do?”

Joanna and John shared a glance. Socrates took another doughnut.

“So?”, he asked, “Do you want to stand on a soap box and preach? Hand out leaflets? Or do you intend to invite everybody over here for a discussion?”

He sat back down in his chair.

“Well, that would be a start,” Joanna commented.

“Maybe. But we probably need to do something that has a bit more of an impact, don't you think?” John asked.

“John is right,” Socrates said, gesturing for a refill with his empty cup. “There are enough people preaching or handing out leaflets as it is. Nobody takes any notice of them. And they don't make any kind of difference besides to themselves because it

helps them sleep a little easier at night thinking they've at least done something. And as for discussions and talking, let's leave that to the politicians. They are doing it all the time, to little avail."

Joanna filled his coffee cup.

"So you're saying we need some kind of spark to launch the movement. Something that sets off an avalanche."

The other two nodded.

What followed was a lively discussion on how to spark big change. They discussed the great revolutions in history. Ancient to modern. How they'd started, how they'd worked, how they'd finished, and, most importantly, what they had achieved. Unwilling or unable to believe in the ability of the masses to critique and rise up against the status quo, Socrates opined that all modern-era revolutions must be the results of conspiracies. Joanna thought that the latter movements hadn't done enough for the people that suffered most from circumstances. They all agreed that this must have been due to the driving motivators. It had always been about power, money, or natural resources. Whenever people had taken to the streets to fight for freedom and civil rights, on the other hand, they had achieved more. Those movements had succeeded in mobilizing the masses. They had been about rising up against oppression.

And that was exactly where their problem lay. The situation in the city was different. Everybody believed to be free. Or at least free enough. They all could sit, or rather, shit on their own little thrones, everybody a king or queen in their own homes. They could buy food in plastic containers. They slept in comfortable beds.

When John suggested using new media, social networks, forums, and messenger services to spread their message, Joanna immediately declared she could provide the necessary infrastructure. But Socrates would have none of it. Too frequently abused and easy to monitor, he said. Also, the strategy was 'too silent'. They needed a wake-up call, he said, an alarm signal. You had to be awake in order to read, after all.

When they ran out of ideas, coffee, and doughnuts and their revolutionary enthusiasm threatened to go sour and turn into frustration, they got up and left the building. It was late, daylight was dwindling.

When they walked onto the path on the canal, John said with a shrug, more to himself than the others: "Maybe we should just push everyone into the fountain at the mall. That would wake them up."

They started walking toward the city when Joanna picked up on his suggestion.

"You mean we should give all those toe dippers a nice cold bath to get them fully awake?"

Socrates raised a finger.

"Not a bad idea. I would not want them in my bathroom, but still - not a bad idea. Kick them out of their comfort zone. They'd have to wake up."

They walked a few yards in silence. Then Socrates stopped in his tracks. John and Joanna stood and waited for him. When Socrates showed no intention to catch up, they walked back to him.

"They don't even have to move out of their comfort zone," Socrates beamed at them. "We'll just take it away."

Joanna and John shared a glance. Then they looked uncomprehendingly at Socrates, who was still smiling broadly and gesturing at the street with outstretched arms. Joanna stepped behind him in an effort to see what he seemed to be seeing.

"What do you mean, Socrates? Do you want to take away the streets?"

Socrates turned to face Joanna.

"Not the streets, obviously."

"The flickering nights," John whispered in a toneless voice as he stared down the street. The windows of the houses on both sides flickered and flashed in all the colors of the rainbow.

"We'll shut down their nightly flickering," John repeated softly.

Socrates stepped close to him and leaned his head toward John's.

"Eureka!" he whispered in his ear.

The three of them stood in silence and gazed in amazement at the windows as if at a magnificent display of fireworks.

John and Socrates turned to each other simultaneously.

"Back to the factory?" John asked.

"Certainly." Socrates had already turned to head back.

"Aren't you even a little tired and hungry?" Joanna wondered.

"I'll get us something to eat," John offered.
"And more coffee." Without waiting for a reply, he started off.

Dragging two large bags up the walkway to the factory's entrance and struggling not to fall, John remembered that they didn't have any light inside. He felt his way up the stairs and along the corridor. It was really pitch black in here. And very quiet.

For a second he feared Joanna and Socrates might have decided not to return after all. As he approached their room on the second floor,

though, he saw a glimmer of light come through the empty doorframe. A few steps later and to his utmost relief, he also heard Joanna and Socrates' whispering voices.

When he stepped into the room, John stopped involuntarily and just stood there for several seconds. Joanna and Socrates were standing against the wall next to the sofa, which they had pushed to the side. Joanna was holding up a flickering lighter, visibly trying to light up a piece of wall Socrates was working on. John frowned. As he stepped closer he saw that Socrates had started to draw something on the wall with a bit of broken-off brick. It was a rough sketch of the city's outline. John looked at Joanna, who was smiling at him and nodding her thanks for the provisions he'd brought.

For a few seconds John kept his eyes on the flame in Joanna's hand. Something he'd seen the first time he entered this room hovered at the edge of his consciousness. He put down the bags, disappeared into the shadows in one corner of the room, and reemerged shortly afterwards holding two candles covered in a layer of dust that he wiped off with his sleeve. Smiling, he pulled the lighter he always kept on him for bar visits from his jacket pocket, lit the candles, and handed one of them to Joanna. Socrates, visibly surprised by the sudden improvement in lighting, gave John an appreciative nod and returned to his job. John took one of

the broken bits of brick lying on the ground near Socrates' feet and helped him draw the rough outline of the city map.

"Why exactly are we drawing a city map on the wall, Socrates?"

"It'll help us visualize."

"And what is it we want to visualize?"

"Our plan."

"But we don't have a plan yet. Or do we?" John asked and glanced over at Joanna. She shrugged.

"Of course we don't have a plan yet," Socrates said as he stepped back from the wall. "We have the basis for our plan, though: the city and all its many television sets. Which we will shut down."

John regarded the sketch on the wall. He nodded mutely.

"There are certain zones where the number of idiot boxes is negligible," Socrates explained, indicating a circle around part of the Island and an adjacent area on the other side of the river.

"That's right," John agreed. "Hardly anyone lives in the Financial District and where all the shops and businesses are."

Socrates nodded.

Unnoticed by the two men, Joanna had laid the table, taking out all the food John had brought.

"Come on, guys, let's eat," she interrupted their highly concentrated contemplation of their rough sketch.

John and Socrates exchange a glance and satisfied nods. Then they sat down at the table.

"So," Joanna started as everyone was tucking in, "have you figured out how to proceed?"

"Well," Socrates said through mouthfuls of food and without so much as looking up, "television doesn't work the way it used to. There are no TV antennas on the rooftops that we could just rip out. Once there were large station antennas on some hill somewhere; they sent out the signal to head stations, which passed them on to a distributor station and from there, to the homes of the docile TV audiences. But those days are gone."

"There are satellite dishes, though," said John. "You seem them now and then when you walk in the city."

"Yes, yes," Socrates bristled. "But those are few and far between. Everyone has cable nowadays. Plus, most of those dishes aren't even legal. Landlords usually ban them. They want their buildings to look pretty and decent - a look that is spoiled by satellite dishes."

"If everyone has cable, then there must be some kind of central distribution hub, though?" Joanna mused.

Socrates glanced at her and smiled.

"There is. Or rather, there are. Plural. It's no longer just one headend."

"So how many are there?" John asked.

"Similar to the phone lines and internet," Socrates said, "television signals are transmitted through fiber optics cables, which are usually installed along with the power lines. There are various different systems to set up and operate all that. They use a wide range of different technologies. The same goes for the distribution of services you can get through these physical networks. There are lots of different business models. It could be that one company provides the network, another one operates it, and one or several other ones act as service providers, which means that they feed the service, e.g. the television programs, into the network and offer them to their paying customers. This means it's hard to determine how and from whom each individual television set receives its program."

Joanna had cleared away the empty food containers. Now she opened the box of doughnuts and pushed it to the center of the table between Socrates and John.

"So all we have to do is find out who and where these service providers are. There can't be that many of them," John stated.

Socrates nodded absent-mindedly as he reached for a doughnut. He and John started listing the names of providers they knew and speculating about their respective places of business. This went on for a while, until Joanna, who had been listening in silence, cleared her throat.

"Let's assume that we know the location of one of these service providers ... what exactly do you propose to do then?"

Socrates and John exchanged a glance.

"I guess knocking on their door and asking nicely that they shut down their service won't work," John finally said.

Socrates fished another doughnut from the box and stood. He hesitated, looking at John and Joanna as if he was about to say something. Then he seemed to change his mind. He took a bite of his doughnut and started pacing the room. John and Joanna followed him with their eyes as he retreated into the shadows. At some point Socrates muttered something but it was barely audible. When he reentered the patch of light cast by the candle on the table, they saw that he wasn't talking to them, wasn't in fact even paying them any attention but seemed in a deep conversation with himself.

John went over to retrieve the remaining candles from the stash in the corner and lit them with the help of Joanna.

"What do you think, Joanna? What's the easiest way to make them shut down the TV program?" John asked. Without waiting for an answer, he went on, playing around with one of the candles.

"We could launch an initiative for TV-free time on the social networks. Or we just spam the TV providers with emails until they give up."

Joanna gave him a doubtful look.

"You're right, that won't work," John said downbeat. "We should just go ahead and send them a virus." No sooner had he said it that John jerked up, suddenly fully awake. "That's it!" he exclaimed, then cried out in pain and dropped the candle he'd been holding. He'd burnt his finger. The candle went out.

"That's it!" he said again. "We'll hack them. Everything's governed by algorithms nowadays. We'll hack their system and shut them down." John was beaming at Joanna, unaware that Socrates had stepped behind him.

"No way," Socrates grunted. John startled and turned around.

"What? Why not?"

John bent down to pick up the candle he'd dropped and placed it back on the table.

"First of all, because we are unable to do that. Unless you happen to have the relevant skills, experience, and networks of supporters?"

John shook his head in chagrin and started picking at the extinguished candle on the table again.

Socrates sat down beside him.

"And second, we anyway do not want some quiet action. Have you forgotten? We want to give people a wake-up call."

John and Joanna moved their chairs closer to the table and watched Socrates attentively.

Socrates paused for a moment. Then he bent forward.

"A bang."

"You mean something like a big protest march?" John sounded doubtful.

"No. Something that will wake up the masses. Planting some virus or hacking the provider's system isn't just difficult - the general public may never even learn about it. These companies are prepared for something like that. Hell, they are basically expecting it. You'll hardly cause a ripple, let alone wake up the masses."

Joanna pushed the doughnut box over to Socrates.

"I think what Socrates means is that we need to do something that will get people talking," she said. "We need to create a buzz that will start an avalanche. Am I right?"

Socrates met Joanna's eyes, his face lit up.

"Exactly," he whispered, smiling at her.

Joanna turned to John.

"You see, don't you, John? We need an element of surprise to shake people up. Just a little moment of awakening."

For a few seconds, John gazed into the flame of one of the candles, deep in thought.

When he spoke, his voice was firm. "That means that the timing is important. The exact time when the television sets stop flickering."

Joanna and Socrates exchanged a glance. Then Socrates looked at John sideways. A smile spread over his face as he nodded his head.

"Good thinking, John. We need to pick a moment when it will really hurt the TV sheep that their boxes go dark."

John rested his elbows on the table and considered.

"Well, most of them spend their evenings in front of the TV."

Now Socrates turned to face John.

"Precisely. But it can't be just any evening. It must be a special night, one where more people than usual are glued to their TV screens."

John eyed Socrates, his lips slightly pursed.

"What are you thinking of, Socrates? A movie premiere? Some game show?"

"I wouldn't know. I don't own a TV. What do you like to watch?"

John shrugged.

"Nothing in particular. Sports, mainly. The usual games."

Socrates bent a little closer to John.

"The 'usual' games?"

"Yeah, you know. League games. And the final match, of course."

They both started grinning.

"The final," John whispered.

"The final," Socrates repeated.

Both turned to Joanna expectantly.

She raised her hands and shrugged.

"If you say so. The final."

The two men nodded contentedly.

"When is it?" Joanna asked.

"A few weeks from now," John said, looking at Socrates. "Postseason has only just started."

"Perfect", Socrates said and rose, one hand on John's shoulder. "That gives us plenty of time to

get ready." Once again, he paced around, murmuring softly to himself.

John looked after him into the darkness. Inadvertently, he touched the spot on his shoulder where Socrates had leaned on to him, and smiled. He was drawn from his reverie by the smell of fresh coffee. Joanna had placed a full cup in front of him. John nodded his thanks. Joanna held out the box with the last remaining doughnut for him. He gestured for her to take it. She thanked him, took the doughnut in one hand and one of the still-lit candles in the other, and took both over to Socrates. Of course she would bring Socrates the doughnut. By the light of the candle John saw him accept and, to his very surprise, thank Joanna with a kiss on her cheek before he resumed his pacing. Joanna sat back down at the table opposite John. He smiled at her and she averted her eyes, looking abashed as she hastily refilled her coffee cup.

"We still don't know how to shut down the broadcast," Joanna finally said, her voice deliberately matter-of-fact.

"No, we don't," John agreed worriedly. He cast his eyes around for Socrates. "Maybe," he said, "we should just blow up the providers' building."

"Maybe we should." Socrates had returned to the table.

John laughed and rose from his seat. When he noticed Socrates' determinedly serious expression, his laughter died.

"You're kidding, right? Socrates?"

For a long moment, there was silence. John turned to face Joanna. Before she could say something, Socrates came around the table, picked up his cup and held it out to her for a refill.

"Of course we won't blow up any buildings," he reassured John. "We don't want anybody to get hurt. Plus, blowing up buildings isn't as easy as it may sound."

Joanna poured Socrates more coffee.

"What were you thinking of, then, Socrates?" she asked.

Socrates shrugged and glanced at John, who was rubbing his forehead.

"Maybe," John ventured, "we cold sabotage the provider's infrastructure. Or cut off their power so that they can't broadcast."

"I think we're on the right track," said Socrates as he sat down next to Joanna. He engaged her in a discussion about server rooms, security services, and electric transformers. John only half listened to them. After a while, he took a candle and walked over to the sketch on the wall.

His eyes followed the lines representing the city's main thoroughfares. He heard Joanna and Socrates' low voices in the background as he walked the streets of the city in his mind, looking around at the flickering lights. The illuminated windows moved past him with increasing speed. Soon they had blurred to streaks of colors as he flew past. John imagined following the broadcast signals on their way to the TV sets. He beamed around the city with them, turning left and right, zooming along a bridge and into a house until he finally came to a halt as a little dot of light on a flat television screen. He saw a living room setting on the other side of the pane. People were sitting on the sofa and staring at him like apathetic robots. They seemed peaceful. And yet, it was a sad image. John did not want to stay there. With all his might he pushed against the frame of the TV screen, trying to break free. At last, he shot up, out of the television, like a bullet - right through the living-room ceiling, the higher levels of the building, the roof and even further, up into the night sky, where he came to a floating standstill. John looked down and saw the city flicker, just like he'd seen it from the outlook tower on the hill. He was about to close his eyes when he saw something moving towards him from the far, far distance. He focused on that something, realizing instantly what it was. It was darkness approaching him. The flickering lights shut down one by one. Where only a moment ago he'd seen merrily twitching

colors, there was nothing but darkness now. Darkness that swiftly spread across the entire city. Until the last of the flickering had vanished. John stared down at the darkness and saw that only one single, tiny glinting light remained. Slowly it dawned on him that it was the flame of the candle he was holding. He was back in the old factory on the canal, the wall with the sketch before him. John heard voices whispering somewhere behind him. He turned around.

He felt confident as he opened his mouth and started to speak: "We also just could make sure the broadcast signals never reach their destination."

The others fell silent. John waited for Joanna and Socrates to join him at the wall. Then he traced the lines on the map before them with his hand.

John continued: "We might not even target the signal itself. We could just shut off the grid."

Socrates leaned in closer as if to scrutinize the grid in the sketch.

"Huh. The grid. Everything's dependent on the grid. Excellent idea." At that, he turned to face Joanna and gave her a nod. Joanna clapped John on the shoulder. He felt them relax instantly.

"The grid has to go," Socrates mused, staring at John over the glowing candle, the light reflecting in his large, radiant eyes. John was about to draw back but Socrates turned away and kneeled down before the sketch. He pointed at various lines in

quick succession. Joanna and John tried to follow his gestures.

"We won't be able to get at the headends or main cable lines," he said. "And they'll have redundant systems in place. Contingency plans. Backup cabling."

Seemingly unaware of John and Joanna's presence, he started pacing and muttering again.

John looked over at Joanna, shrugged, and yawned. The two of them sat back at the table. Joanna filled John's coffee cup. They turned to gaze at Socrates and smiled.

"I've never seen him like that. So excited and full of energy. Thank you, John." As she said this, she touched his hand lightly. John smiled back at her. In his opinion, both Socrates and Joanna were acting out of the ordinary. The sudden harmony between them, this sense of connectedness, felt a bit weird to John. He'd almost preferred their heated discussions.

Socrates came rushing from the shadows and took the seat next to Joanna's. He started talking very fast, gesticulating with both hands: "It's pretty simple, basically. All grids are similar. They are made up of the same components: plastic pipes to protect the fiber optic cables underground, masts if the cable are aboveground, distribution boxes on the streets, sockets, couplers, splicing sleeves, all underground or on masts, and the

AONs, active optical networks, also have their own components, including switches and routers, that need power. That's where we'll strike. All these are our targets."

"Targets for what?" John asked, feeling a pang of irritation.

Socrates froze and blinked at John.

"For blowing up the grid, of course."

"Blowing up?" John repeated, incredulous.

Socrates' eyes darted back and forth between Joanna and John.

Joanna gently touched Socrates' cheek.

"Calm down, Socrates," she said softly. "Explain your plan from the beginning."

Socrates glared at Joanna for a couple of seconds, then his eyes softened and he started to smile. He took a deep breath and began to explain at length about television broadcasting, fiber optics cables, and the setup of the fiber optics grid. He continued to tell them how relatively simple it was to make explosives and that he could get all the necessary equipment easily, provided Joanna helped him. When he was done he looked at John.

"And we did agree we needed a bang, didn't we?"

John had put his head in his hands. It felt very heavy. Now he lifted it and shifted around in his chair.

"Yes, that's what we said." He was looking at Joanna as he said it.

Joanna shrugged.

"Nobody's going to get hurt, right?" she asked.

Socrates shook his head. "Of course not. We want to wake them up, not kill them."

"Then I'm in favor of Socrates' plan. What do you think, John?"

John frowned. He got up and waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. Then he went over to the sofa and stretched out on it.

"It doesn't matter. If I understood only half of what Socrates has been saying, there are countless of those distribution boxes and couplers and whatever else we want to blow up. Not only do we not have enough manpower to set up enough explosive charges in time, we don't even know the locations of all those thingamajics."

John dozed off to the sounds of Joanna and Socrates' voices engaged in yet another discussion.

It felt like only a minute had passed when someone shook him from his sleep. John struggled to open his eyes. When he was finally able to focus,

he recognized Socrates' grinning face looming above him.

"We've found the manpower!" Socrates beamed.

John shook himself, rubbed his eyes, sat up on the sofa, and yawned. He had no clue what Socrates was on about.

"I do think," Joanna chipped in, "that we've found a very good solution."

John took a breath and was about to say something when Socrates lunged to sit beside him.

"We have a whole army!" he exclaimed.

Eyes wide now, John pulled back from Socrates, who took this as encouragement to lean in even further. In a stage whisper he continued:

"Who do you think knows the city best? Who knows every little alley, hidden path, all the subway tunnels and their service shafts – the very ones the fiber optics pipelines run through? Who would know all the city's secret and forgotten places? And who can move around them without attracting attention?"

Socrates moved another inch closer to John.

"People like me, John," he answered his own questions in a toneless voice. "And there's an army of us out there."

John stared into Socrates' lit-up face. The he glanced over at Joanna. She sat down on the other end of the sofa and put her arm around his shoulder.

"Socrates is right, John. These people live on the streets. They know the city like the back of their hand. Also, it would be nice for them to have a task, don't you think? And what's really genius is that so many of them are regulars at the soup kitchen, some also at the shelter. That means we could recruit them there – isn't that how you put it, Socrates?"

Socrates reached across John's lap and gently patted Joanna's knee.

"That's it exactly," he said and they smiled at each other.

John had to get up. He started pacing in front of the sofa, struggling to clear his mind and get his thoughts in order. He stopped and eyed Joanna and Socrates on the sofa before him. They were looking at him expectantly. John shook his head and began to pace again.

Socrates jumped up and blocked John's way. "It will only take some wine and a little convincing to turn them into loyal warriors. Joanna and I will start today. We'll keep our eyes open for suitable candidates at the soup kitchen and at the shelter."

Joanna stood between the two men and slung her arms around their shoulders so that the three of them stood there as a single, three-headed body.

John took a deep breath and exhaled again. "And what is my role?" he asked.

Socrates smiled at Joanna and turned to John. "Don't worry; there will be enough to do for you. You can start by doing some reconnaissance. We need the exact locations of all the distribution boxes, sockets, and any other access point to the fiber optics network you can find."

At that, he stepped away from the group, picked up one of the few candles on the table that were still burning, and approached the sketch on the wall- Joanna and John followed him.

"Here," Socrates indicated the areas that represented residential neighborhoods.

"All the way to the city limits?" John asked.

"Especially the city limits. We probably don't have soldiers that far out. We'd also need to know whether the objects you find are suitable targets for explosives, and if not, why."

John nodded silently. He stepped a bit closer to the wall and studied the areas Socrates had pointed out. Joanna touched his back lightly. He turned to look at her and saw a smile flicker across her face. Before returning his attention to the

sketch, John watched Joanna take Socrates' hand and walk over to the sofa with him.

John strained to memorize the neighborhoods he was supposed to scout. Not only that, he also tried to come up with a plan to do so systematically. It shouldn't be too hard. After all, this was his city and he'd gotten around quite a lot, especially these past days. In his mind's eye he walked the streets of the city, all the way to the outer boroughs, planning the best routes.

Soon, however, he realized it was no use trying to recollect all the different streets and back alleys. He would have to make it up as he went along, hoping to cover the entire area.

Feeling stiff and a little wary, he turned to see what Joanna and Socrates were doing. He hadn't noticed before how quiet they'd been these past few minutes. As he approached the sofa he saw that they were sleeping. Joanna's head was in Socrates' lap. Socrates was sitting upright, his head on the sofa's backrest, his face tilted upwards. John didn't suppress a smile. He blew out the remaining candles and crept out of the room and down the stairs.

John crossed the canal and spent the entire day scouting the city's residential neighborhoods. Like a sleepwalker he strolled up and down every street he could find. Sometimes more than once. He had bought one of those city maps the tourists carried

around and marked the routes he took as well as the distribution boxes and sockets he found. When the map was covered in writing he started making notes on paper napkins he took whenever he got a coffee somewhere. He drank gallons of takeaway coffee.

It was night again when he arrived at the factory on the canal. John was fatigued. He dragged himself up the stairs. The room was dark but he could make out two silhouettes – Joanna and Socrates – who approached him with peculiar haste when he stepped into the room. Joanna nestled at her clothes. Socrates greeted him with a jovial “Hello!” that sounded a little breathless. John was holding a paper bag with a few doughnuts. He tossed it over on the table. Then he pulled the map and a handful of napkins with his notes from his pockets.

He sat at the table and reached for the pile of napkins when he realized that he could hardly see. John looked around. At last he seemed to remember what to do. He lit the candles, which were still standing on the table.

All of a sudden Joanna was standing beside him. Startled, John jumped up. His hands were shaking.

“Jesus, Joanna, don’t creep up on people like that!”

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Are you okay?"

"Of course. Here, I've been out all day reconnoitering."

"You look pretty exhausted."

"Never mind. Here, I've written everything down and marked it on the map."

John pointed at the white paper napkins on the table. His finger was shaking. Joanna nodded.

"Great job, John. Maybe you should take a break now. Go home!"

"No, look, it's all there. We need to go through it now. Then I can go back and scout the rest of the neighborhoods."

"Really, John, there is no rush. Go home. Get some rest."

John glanced at Socrates, who had joined them at the table. "We have to do this now, don't we?" John said.

"Joanna is right, John. Go home. Get some rest."

John shook his head in disbelief.

"By the way," Joanna asked, gesturing at the bag of doughnuts on the table. "Are you going to eat those?"

John shoved the bag over to Joanna.

"Okay," he said. "I will go and rest. Let me just sort through these notes first."

He sat down and started rummaging through the pile of napkins. Joanna and Socrates sat on the sofa.

John heard them whisper and giggle among themselves. He was irritated by their apparent intimacy. He tried to shut out their voices and focus solely on his napkins, which he sorted into piles on the table. He picked up one and spread it out in front of him like a newspaper. It was impossible to read what he'd written on it. His hands shook too much to hold it steady. Furthermore, his eyes seemed to be in some kind of competition with the candle flame as to who could flicker more. John's hands cramped up, which caused him to rip the napkin.

He stood and took a step towards the sofa but stopped dead when he saw Joanna and Socrates drawn close together, face to face, their legs intertwined.

They did not notice him. Joanna was holding out a doughnut to Socrates. He took a bite and chewed with relish. She put down the doughnut and wiped the sugar dust off Socrates' lips with her thumb, like a caress. He caught her thumb between his lips. Both of them giggled and moved their heads a little closer.

Feeling as if he was being pulled on strings, John turned around and tiptoed out. Outside, he hurried along the canal path and into the city. His face was burning. As for the rest of his body, he did not feel that at all. John registered that he was running but he didn't care.

Joanna and Socrates entwined on the sofa. That was weird. Though the two already had been unusually close to one another during the past days. It scared John. And in a strange way it also fascinated him. Overwhelmed him, almost. What an energy. And all of it was due to their plan. They would change the city. They would change everything.

John kept running for a few more blocks. He felt the urge to cheer loudly. Only now did he notice he was panting. His legs were hurting too. He slowed down and came to a stop. Hands on knees, he gasped for air. His stomach cramped up, once, twice, and he thought he would vomit. But he hadn't ingested more than coffee all day so he just retched a few times.

He looked around nervously without noticing where he was. The streets were well lit. He might easily continue his reconnaissance. But he'd left his city map on which he'd checked the streets he'd already covered on the table in the factory. Going back for it wasn't an option. He did not want to disturb the couple on the sofa. Much less see them.

John walked a few steps and stopped again. He looked around once more, identifying his location this time. He had an idea where to get paper for his notes and maybe even a new map. He hurried on resolutely and did not stop before he reached Izzie's building.

Placing his finger on her doorbell, he pushed for several seconds. When nothing happened, he pushed again. And again. Finally Izzie's voice crackled from the intercom. She sounded sleepy and very annoyed.

"Who is that? What do you want?"

"Hi, Izzie, it's me. Buzz me up."

"John?"

"Yes. Open the door."

"What the hell do you want? I was sleeping."

"Doesn't matter. You're awake now. Let me in. I need to tell you something."

"Are you insane? Did you hear what I said? I. Was. Sleeping. It's late. I have an early start tomorrow, as you well know. Whatever it is you want to tell me will have to wait. Good night, John."

"No! Wait! It's about Socrates and Joanna."

There were several seconds of silence. John wasn't sure whether Izzie was still listening.

"Come on, Izzie. You've always been curious about the two of them."

There was no sound from the intercom.

"And you said you would talk to me about them - anytime."

Nothing. John waited. He tried to think of something else to tell the intercom. Eventually the sound of the buzzer made him jump. Feeling relieved, he pushed open the door and ran up the stairs to Izzie's apartment. She stood waiting in the doorway, clad in a bathrobe.

"What on earth is going on with you?"

"Hello, Izzie," John gasped and hugged her.

Taken by surprise, Izzie stumbled back. Before she could fend off or return his hug, John released her and stormed past her into the apartment. Izzie spent a little more time than necessary fastening the knot of her bathrobe before she followed John inside.

She leaned against the doorframe and eyed John, who had dropped his jacket carelessly on the floor and was scanning her living room as if looking for something. He kept talking very fast and without a pause. Izzie could only make out fragments. Plan. Television. Fiber optic cable. The grid. Awake. Socrates. Joanna. Izzie shook her head and smiled inwardly. It was impossible to determine whom he was talking to - her or himself. John was

examining her bookshelves now, saying something about a map.

Izzie jolted into action and stepped towards John. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she barked.

John turned to face her and gaped at her, wide-eyed.

"I was asleep. John. You know perfectly well that I have to get up very early in the morning and usually go to bed before now."

John raised his hands. "I'm sorry, Izzie. You're right, of course, but this really is important and --"

"At lunch the other day you barely tolerated my presence and got rid of me as soon as you could. Now you just show up in the middle of the night and basically blackmail me into letting you come up here. What the hell?"

"I've just told you, we are --"

"Have you any idea how I felt after our lunch on Sunday? I really thought we were over. You didn't call or anything since then. Why?"

John just stood there, blinking.

"Anyway, shouldn't you be at work right now?" Izzie went on.

John seemed to process this information for a second. Then he shrugged and looked down between his feet.

Izzie took a quick step towards him, then stopped. She looked at him and took a deep breath.

"Why aren't you at the office, John?" she asked again, her voice gentler now. She slowly came over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Look at you. Your clothes are filthy. You're in bad need of a shave." She let the fingers of her other hand run down his cheeks and lifted his chin. Their eyes met.

"Also, my dear, you smell awful." She smiled. "You really do. Come, take a shower. Please."

John lips were moving silently. Finally he just nodded and padded into the bathroom.

While he was showering, Izzie made tea and arranged a few buns on a plate. She was still in the kitchen putting everything on a tray when she heard John calling her from the living room.

What she saw as she walked in literally made her gasp. She froze for a split second and covered her hand with her mouth. Then she erupted into laughter.

John was standing in the middle of the room, stark naked and dripping water all over the floor, his hand in his hips, fixating her with blazing eyes.

She had barely got her laughing fit under control when John started pacing her living room, gesticulating wildly with both hands as he explained

his plan. Izzie watched him, smiling and shaking her head. She still did not get what he was on about. His pacing back and forth and in circles around her didn't make matters any easier. She had to strain to understand even a few strings of words. At the moment she did not mind that since the view he offered was pretty enough. He seemed to have gained some weight over the past few weeks.

She went to the bathroom to get a towel. She was about to leave the bathroom, towel in hand, when she turned back and looked around. Something had struck her as different. It was the bathroom mirror. Unlike when she showered, the bathroom mirror wasn't fogged up. In fact, the air in there wasn't particularly warm or humid. Izzie raised an eyebrow, frowned, and went back to the living room. Maybe they turned off the warm water late at night.

John was still talking a mile a minute in the living room. He did not even pause when Izzie blocked his way and held out the towel to him. Eventually, she took hold of his arm and started rubbing him down with the towel. At first, John frowned and tried to ward off the towel with his free hand as if it were a pesky little mosquito. When Izzie persisted, he allowed her to dry his arms, face, and hair.

The stream of words had stopped. When she was done Izzie took a step back. John's hair was

ruffled and stood up in all directions. Izzie smiled involuntarily. John smiled too. Their eyes met. As if an invisible hand had pushed her forward, Izzie moved closer and continued to towel John dry. Without breaking eye contact she moved the towel gently across his chest and lower, caressing his stomach and hips with the fluffy fabric. Still holding the towel, she moved her hands over his loins and to his back, up and down and up again, moving in closely snuggling her body against his. Then she wandered her hands lower, circling his buttocks softly with the towel before cupping them and pushing her fingers hard against the fabric and his flesh beneath. She could feel his muscles tense in her grip and saw his pupils widen.

Unwittingly, Izzie bit her lower lip. She cautiously moved the towel around to the sides, letting his gaze tell her how far she was allowed to go. As her hand reached his penis she felt it strain against her touch. John groaned softly. He reached for the towel between his legs, yanked it out of Izzie's hands and threw it down. Then he grabbed her, picked her up, and carried her over to the sofa.

Breathing heavily, he kneeled above her and untied her bathrobe. She was wearing nothing but panties and a flimsy camisole underneath. John watched his hand feeling its way under the camisole and up to cup her breasts. When Izzie uttered a little moan, he stopped. Their eyes met. As if drawn by her gaze, he withdrew his hand, leaned

over her, placing both hands to the sides of her head, and moved his face so close to hers that his hot breath merged with hers. Mustering every bit of power he had left, he kept his trembling lips an unbearably tiny distance from Izzie's. Their breaths grew faster. He felt the blood throb in his penis. Resisting became an inhuman effort. John felt his senses blur.

At last he let himself get lost in a kiss that grew more and more intense. What started as a soft touching of lips soon became a dance of tongues. Izzie wrapped her arms around John's back and pulled him down onto her. She felt his erection rub against her and sensed his soundless cries that mingled with his kisses when she moved just the right way under him. John couldn't take it any longer. He moved his mouth from Izzie's lips down along her neck, over the cloth between her breasts and further down to her panties. Izzie did not try to stop him. On the contrary: when he kissed her breasts, she pushed his head down with both hands. Greedily, John sat up and ripped Izzie's panties off. Izzie spread her legs, raising one foot over the sofa's back rest and placing the other on the floor. John dove headlong between her open thighs. He kissed and caressed her wet labia and her clit with his tongue just as lovingly as he had her mouth. Izzie uttered a loud groan, arching her back and pushing herself against him. John didn't stop until she screamed.

As if this had been his cue he lifted his head, pushed himself upwards and entered her with his now achingly hard penis. The ecstasy did not last long and after a last, rapt staccato he climaxed, an undefinable sound breaking free from his throat, and collapsed. Lying on top of Izzie he slowly came back to his senses.

John's head was on Izzie's shoulder and she could feel his breath on her skin turn from a pant to slow exhalations. She hugged him tight, caressing his back and waiting for him to calm down completely.

"So how is this thing between us going to go on?" she asked after a while, her voice casual.

"This is comfortable; I could stay like this a bit longer."

"You really could have called."

John lifted his head.

"I told you, I just forgot. We were so busy with
--"

"Just forgot? You just forgot about me?"

"No. I didn't. I'm sorry, okay? It won't happen again."

"That's what you said last time."

"What do you want me to say, Izzie?"

She gazed at him for a few seconds. "I don't know," she answered and made a half-hearted effort to free herself and push him off the sofa. John pushed back and grabbed her arms. They wrestled playfully until she gave up and he lay on top of her again.

"Isn't this what it always was, Izzie? Lots of fun and few complications?"

"And is that what you like, John? Is this enough for you?"

It took him two long breaths to answer.

"Is this enough for you? What do *you* want?"

Izzie folded her hands behind her head.

"I want your heart, your soul, your spirit, and your body. All nicely wrapped in a lot of love, please. Too much?"

John sat upright. He reached for her hands, disentangled her fingers, and entwined his fingers with hers. Then he slowly moved his upper body down on hers, stretching out both their arms so that they lay close, face to face, Izzie's arms stretched over her head and onto the sofa's rest, her hands held down by his. All this time, they had held each other with their gaze.

"You might be surprised to learn how much I am willing to give for something that's worth it, Izzie."

He leaned in closer and kissed her lips softly.

She was about to kiss him back when there was a distinct grumble from John's stomach. They paused. As they started in on their kiss again, the grumble continued.

"Come, I have fresh buns in the kitchen," Izzie said softly. John climbed off her, nodding and shaking his head at the same time.

Izzie picked up her clothes and got dressed. Then she went to get John shorts and a t-shirt of his that he'd left previously. They sat at the dining table with two cups of tea, the buns, and some butter.

John took a sip of the now lukewarm tea and pulled a face. "I'd prefer coffee," he said.

Izzie shrugged and handed him a bun.

"And I'd prefer an uninterrupted night's sleep. Anyway, tea's a good tranquilizer."

John wolfed down the bun and reached for another one.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You seem a little agitated and out of sorts today."

John blinked at her uncomprehendingly.

"Well, that's normal, isn't it? Considering what we're planning."

Izzie frowned.

"What are we planning?"

"Not you and me. Socrates, Joanna, and I. Though you can join us if you want. There's lots to do."

"Would you mind telling me what you're talking about?"

John rolled his eyes. Then he repeated what he'd told her about the flickering of the TV screens and their plan. While he talked he ate another two or three buns.

When he was done he took a swig of tea and watched Izzie over the rim of his cup. She didn't say anything. John put down his cup but kept looking at her expectantly. Finally she shook her head.

John frowned and leaned back in his chair.

"Don't you think it's a good plan, Izzie?"

"You're kidding, right? Tell me you're not seriously thinking about doing something insane like this!"

"Didn't you hear what I said? It isn't inane. Not in the least. We'll help people. We'll help the city."

"Haven't you done enough to annoy me today? You're crazy."

John lifted his chin and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You're the one who's always bitching about my job and how horrible money is and so on. You're the one claiming to be all for a better, healthier, more humane world. But when I present you a wonderful idea to achieve exactly that, I'm the one who's crazy. That's pure hypocrisy!"

"Oh, no. You do not get to call me a hypocrite just because I won't play along with your insane nonsense. I don't think you even know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yeah? Well at least I understand that talk alone won't change anything. Criticizing everything and bitching about things. Anybody can do that. Even you."

Izzie's jaw dropped. She took her cup and finished her tea in one gulp. John uncrossed his arms and started twiddling his fingers, looking down in his lap.

"I didn't mean it like that, Izzie. I know what you say isn't just empty talk."

Izzie put down her cup. She leaned over to John, reached for his forearm and began stroking it gently.

"It's okay. I know you didn't mean it. I shouldn't have provoked you like that."

"So you do like our plan?"

Izzie smiled at John.

"No, sweetie, I don't."

"But we have to do something, Izzie. We need to help this city."

"John, even if you went through with this – what good would it do? You certainly wouldn't achieve what you imagine. And I don't think that a few days without television will 'heal' people. Anyway, there are also movie theaters, video games, smartphones, and loads of other stuff. There are malls where people can go to distract themselves until their televisions start to flicker again. Or bars where they can get drunk. Three weeks at the most and everything would be forgotten. And as for you, you'd probably end up in jail. Or in the asylum."

John stared at her, motionless, his expression stony.

"All I'm saying, John, is that I think it's great you want to change things. But not like this. Certainly not through violence. Terrorizing the city isn't the solution. Come on, you know this."

Izzie took one of the few remaining buns, cut it up, and started buttering one half.

"I'm not sure you really understand what I said, Izzie. We need to do something. Before it's too late. Things can't just go on like this."

Izzie put the buttered half of the bun on the table before John. Then she took the other half and started spreading it with butter too.

"I don't own a television set, John."

John looked up from the buttered bun and scanned the living room. He knew full well, though, that he wouldn't find a TV anywhere.

"So presumably I am 'awake' already, right?" Izzie went on.

John hesitated for a second. Then he said:

"Right. Which is why you should understand what I'm talking about."

"Should I? Maybe I am too 'awake' for your plan because I never owned a TV?"

John blinked at her in surprise.

"That was a joke" Izzie smiled and took a bite from the bun in her hand.

When she noticed that John was pondering what she'd said, she hastened to swallow.

"What I mean, John, is that there are people in this city who aren't TV junkies. More importantly, that there are limits. You can't just force your world view on others with whatever means you think are justified."

John took a sip of his tea.

"But how else can you make a difference?"

"Start a movement. But do it differently. Convince people. Allow them to see the world with your eyes. Maybe it will be a kind of awakening for them."

"Easier said than done. How could I do such a thing? I can't just go around the town square preaching like some kind of crazy person."

Izzie burst out laughing. John gave her an indignant stare. She waved one hand in apology, covering her mouth with the other to stifle her laughter. John shook his head but started smiling too.

"That's too bad. I would have come and listened." At that, she turned away from him, struggling not to giggle again. When she turned back to face him, he stuck out his tongue. They both laughed.

"I am sure there are other ways," Izzie said when she'd calmed down.

"Like what?"

Izzie shrugged and gazed at her teacup.

"Write a book!"

John shook his head and drank the rest of his tea.

"Too much work."

Izzie smiled. "You're willing to blow up half the city but writing a book is too much work?"

John nodded and stared down at the table.

"Yes, I think so," he said. "Maybe the work isn't the problem. I just don't know how. Writing is an art. It requires skill. Anyone can blow up stuff. I admire artists but I don't think I envy them."

Izzie was nodding her head slowly, almost imperceptibly, seeming to look straight through John.

"So, any other ideas?" John asked. "Do you think I should live on the streets or start a soup kitchen?" He took a bite from the bun she'd buttered for him.

Izzie returned her focus on him and looked for a second as if she hadn't heard him. But she quickly recovered.

"I think you do not have to do anything nearly so dramatic. Why don't you blow up your own TV? I'm pretty sure spending less time watching television would do you a world of good."

John sat up straighter from his slump on the chair, so straight that his back was perfectly vertical. He gulped down the last bite of his bun.

"Hey, I'm not watching all that much anymore."

"But you still own one ..."

"Sure, but it's basically just sitting there."

"You're a TV addict, actually. You switch it on every day. Just to see what's on, right?"

"Young lady! One, I do not turn on the TV every day. Two, I am certainly not addicted to it."

"Oh, really? So why not give it away?"

"It's not an addiction, okay? It's a lifestyle. I could get rid of it anytime. But I choose not to. After all, it complements my décor."

"Yes, of course. And that's why you can hardly survive a whole weekend at my place, where there's no TV."

"Anyway, now that you've busted my plan there's nothing left for me to do but watch TV."

"Well, you could spend more time with me. To name one thing."

John nodded.

"I will."

He took hold of Izzie's legs and put her feet in his lap. Then he started to massage them gently.

"You philanderer," Izzie whispered and smiled.

She let John continue for a few minutes, then withdrew her feet and kneeled on the floor before him. Slowly, she wiggled his shorts down to his knees. She took hold of his penis. It responded instantly to her touch. Izzie massaged it until it was stiff and straining towards her. She leaned forward just a bit. John could feel her hot breath on his glans. First she kissed his throbbing penis. Then she darted her tongue around it. Finally she closed

her lips on it and let it slip into her mouth, slowly and only a little way. Keeping her eyes fixed on John's, she moved her mouth lower, slipping him deeper inside. John grabbed the edge of his seat with both hands, clinging on for dear life. Izzie moved slowly further down his shaft and then up again. And again and again. John's buttocks cramped tight. His pelvis rose to meet her. When she caressed his dripping glans with the tip of her tongue he couldn't suppress a moan of lustful agony. Before she finally delivered him from the pain and allowed him to come, Izzie stood, pulled down her panties from under the bathrobe and slowly sat down on his lap, letting him enter her and sink down deep inside her. John held her tight with both arms, rocking her up and down vigorously. It took only a short ride for him to come. His arms fell to his side, his upper body slumped, and his head came to rest on Izzie's shoulders. He was panting. Izzie hugged him and kissed his still-damp hair. For a while they just sat there, motionless.

"I love these moments and the feeling right after we had sex," Izzie finally said. "Freshly fucked."

John lifted his head and grinned.

"Freshly fucked?"

"Yes. Freshly fucked," Izzie repeated calmly and unblinkingly. "Nice feeling. It could go on for eternity."

John's grin faded.

"I too like freshly fucked. But I'm afraid it's not for eternity."

She kissed him on the lips and got up.

"You don't know that."

John watched her put her panties on and adjusting her bathrobe.

"Do you think there is an eternity for us, Izzie?"

She stopped fussing with her bathrobe and stared at John in puzzlement and irritation. She sat down on her chair as John pulled up his shorts and moved closer to the table.

"I do not know, John. But I like the idea."

"Because it's a comfort to you?"

Izzie looked him in the eye and frowned.

"Huh. No. Why would I need a comfort? Do I look sad?"

"That's not what I meant. But why do you like the idea?"

"Well, because I'd like it to be true. I would like it if death did not mean that everything is over."

John took the empty tea cup and moved it around.

"Do you mean with angels and stuff?"

"No, I don't think so. I mean, I don't know, obviously. But are we talking about religious concepts of eternity now, or our own? Or are they one and the same for you?"

"Well, all I know about eternity is what you read and what people tell me."

"But you also have your own concept."

He put down the cup and looked up at Izzie.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that nobody really knows anything about eternity. If it does exist, it can be pretty much anything."

"Exactly. You either believe in it or you don't. But you won't know if it really exists until you find out."

"You won't know that it does not exist until you finally find out, though. Right?"

"Sure, but what good does it do you to have ideas about something that does and doesn't exist, Izzie?"

"What good is it not to have any if you do know that eternity does or doesn't exist?"

"Maybe those ideas affect your life here."

"Everything we do or do not affects our lives, John. That's what makes life so wonderful. And cruel, too. But I don't think my various ideas about eternity have such a big impact on my life here and now, though."

She laughed.

"They're much too bizarre for that, at least some of them."

John's forehead wrinkled.

"You have more than one idea about eternity?"

"Of course I do. It's like painting trompe l'oeil paintings in a room without doors and windows."

"Huh?"

"I'm sitting in a windowless room, painting the landscape that's behind the walls, only I don't know what it looks like or even if it's really there. I can paint countless pictures of it. That doesn't mean I have to believe in each or any of them. Or not believe."

"But still, everything can be completely different than what you picture," John said. "Or maybe there is nothing. You do not know. You can only assume ... or believe."

Izzie shrugged.

"Sure. No one can blame me for that, though. There are no doors or windows, after all. All you

can really say is that you like some pictures better than others."

"But there might not be anything beyond those walls. And even if there was something - it could be nothing like your pictures ..."

"So what. That's not my fault. I'm only painting pictures, John. That's certainly better than drawing the white walls. What does yours look like?"

John took the empty cup between his hands and stared down at its bottom.

"I don't have one."

Izzie put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. She gave John a sideways glance.

"I don't think that's entirely true. But it doesn't matter. Let's just start one together right now."

John turned to face her.

"You're joking, right?"

"Am I laughing?"

"You want me to imagine all of eternity right now?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Not eternity, no. Just a place, with lots of details, where you can imagine being happy. That makes you happy."

"And that's supposed to be eternity then?"

"No, that's just the place where you would like to spend eternity."

"That's not the same thing."

"How would you know? Come on, don't chicken out."

John shrugged and gazed at his teacup again.

"I can't paint pictures. Especially not of something that may not even exist. And that I don't know the first thing about even if it does."

"Oh come on, I'll help you make a sketch. So, if you think about your special place, what do you see - a beach, mountains, a village of singing dwarfs ...?"

John looked up at Izzie, his head shaking.

"Izzie, I think you need to sleep. You're obviously way past your bedtime."

"Come on. Blue skies ... a little brook of beer ... televisions growing on trees ... hot girls in tiny bikinis playing volleyball ..."

She saw his glance move past her. His mind had drifted elsewhere. She leaned forward and punched him on the arm.

"John! You can't be serious! Don't tell all your imagination comes up with are hedonistic male fantasies. You must be deeper than this!"

"Ouch! You said it yourself: whatever would make me happy."

"Happy for eternity, not just a night."

"An eternal night ..."

"Ha, ha."

Now it was her turn to stick out her tongue.
John laughed.

"Okay, Izzie, you're right. It probably wouldn't last long. Not an eternity, that's for sure. But virtually any picture I paint would most likely include you in a bikini. Though I might still be under the influence of certain events that took place this evening."

Izzie acted outraged.

"What do you mean, 'virtually' any picture?"

They both laughed. Then Izzie caressed the spot on John's arm she had struck.

"Well, John, all artists have their favorite themes. And as long as the woman in the bikini is me, I think your choice could be worse."

John nodded in agreement.

"And what do your pictures look like, Izzie?"

"Let's see ... if I had to paint one now, it would be very much influenced by recent events, too. But how does one visualize 'freshly fucked'?"

They grinned at each other.

"Seriously, though, I do have a kind of common element in all my pictures. They're often about

people. People who were part of my life once or still are. Or people I'd like to have met."

"So you want to meet all your friends and relatives again?"

"Not just friends and relatives. Other people too. Mainly persons I've had important or memorable experiences with. Take yesterday: there was this guy in the bakery who chewed me out because he apparently had to wait in the line so long and blamed me because he thought I'd been too slow. I guess he won't ever return. I would like to meet him again and ask him why he'd been in such a crummy mood and why he had to take it out on me."

"You seriously want to talk with the people you meet over there about what happened between you? Say things you've always meant to say to each other but never did?"

"Yes. Among other things."

"Christ, that sounds like therapy. Or some kind of intervention. For eternity!"

"No, it wouldn't be like that. 'Over there' we will all be on the same level. We will look at things from a certain distance and be able to see and understand. Tell the important things from the mundane."

"So it will be like angels and stuff."

“Listen, they’re my pictures. I’m allowed to paint them any way I want.”

“Of course you are. Hm, will you also meet all your exes again?”

“Naturally,” she said. “We’ll have a lot to talk about.”

John narrowed his eyes.

“Even the ones who left and hurt you?”

Izzie nodded.

“Even those.”

“Well then. Once you’ve said everything you needed to say to each other I will punch every single one of them in the face. Whatever ‘level’ we’re on.”

Izzie looked John in the eye and grinned.

“Who says you’ll even be there?”

John blinked in confusion, then rallied.

“Ha! If you’re so set on meeting all those other imbeciles you will certainly want to see me again. However and whenever this thing here between us will end ...”

“Of course I’d want to see you. Only problem is, I will go to heaven, whereas ...”

She bit her lip to stifle a laugh.

John turned to her and rubbed his nose with his middle finger in a very obvious gesture. Then they both gave in to laughter.

"It might be better if I won't go to heaven, Izzie. I could just sneak in and mess up your exes real good. I won't be obliged to follow house rules."

"Why do I get the feeling you would enjoy that? Not playing by any rules. Acting like the ruffian."

"In any case, I will rough them up."

Izzie smiled, leaned forward, and stroked John's cheek.

"Will you really sneak into heaven for me?"

John took her hand in his and kissed her palm.

"Of course I will. I've found you here; I'll find you again over there."

Izzie leaned over with her entire upper body. John leaned in to meet her until their Lips touched.

"See, there you go, you've painted one of your pictures. And to set the record straight: I'm the one who found you, sweetie. Not the other way around."

John lifted his head and raised his eyebrows.

"I know exactly when and where we first met."

"So do I." Izzie rose from her seat.

"Izzie, I've picked you up at that café at the mall."

Izzie looked down on him.

"I have to powder my nose. And no, you didn't."

John followed her to the bathroom and stood outside the door.

"Of course I did," he said to the closed door. "We were sitting at the table and I hit on you."

There was silence on the other side. Then the sound of the toilet flushing. A little while later, Izzie opened the door. She kissed John on the lips.

"But I was the one who chose to sit at your table in the first place," she said and walked over to the living room table.

John looked after her. Then he shook his head and went to the bathroom to pee.

Izzie eyed John when he sat back on his chair and started drumming his fingers on the table.

"You do remember, don't you, John?"

John leaned back in his chair. He shrugged dismissively.

"Vaguely," he lied, grinning.

"I remember it well," Izzie said. "It was so embarrassing! You were waving around that newspaper and I thought you were signaling me. Only when I was almost at your table did I realize you did not know me and hadn't even noticed me. But

there weren't any other available seats, so I sat down anyway. I was so nervous that I pushed my bag over and all my groceries rolled out and under the tables. God, I was mortified! And then there was this pushy waiter who wouldn't stop swarming around. You looked as if you didn't notice any of it."

John listened with apparent interest.

"In fact, you looked like you didn't see or hear what was going on around you at all," Izzie continued. You were just sitting there, all alone at your table, in a place swarming with people. You were reading your newspaper and drinking hot coffee on this already hot summer afternoon. Only a few times did you glance over at me as if I were bothering you."

"And that made such an impression on you that you waited for me to say something?"

"No, it made me think you were an arrogant asshole."

John's pupils widened in surprise.

"Don't worry, I don't think that about you anymore," Izzie reassured him. "You definitely aren't arrogant."

She shook her head, laughing.

"To be honest, Izzie, it took a lot of courage to approach you. I remember being pretty impressed

by you. So much so that I didn't take in much else around me."

Izzie tilted her head to one side and looked at him. Her gaze was soft and tender.

"I know."

"What you just said didn't sound like you knew."

"When you finally did say something to me that day I realized that I might have misjudged you. You were so nervous and insecure. Really cute."

"You made me look pretty stupid," John said. "That was a bit mean."

"Yes, I admit, I did savor the moment. And I didn't think the odds that the two of us would hit it off were great."

John nodded, deep in thought. When he spoke again, he seemed to be talking more to himself than her.

"I wasn't sure where that endeavor would lead me, either. And it did seem like we were running out of resources and motivation several times, didn't it?"

He raised his gaze to meet Izzie's eyes.

"But here we are, Izzie."

"Here we are. And I am glad we went through with it."

"Though it hung by a hair back then," John mused. "Thinking back on our first run - that was tough. It lodged itself in my mind like a marker."

"You were huffing and puffing like an old steam train but your persistence really impressed me."

"I collapsed on the sofa afterwards. I didn't think I'd ever be able to get up again. But then you came and brought me those buns ... I, too, am very glad than we went through with it, Izzie."

They exchanged a smile.

"Have you ever asked yourself whether we were destined for each other or just happened to be two people at the same café?" John asked.

"You mean two people who happened to be there at the same time, sitting at the same table against all the odds, and eventually started talking?"

John eyed Izzie.

"Are you implying that it might have been something other than pure coincidence?"

"Possibly."

"Is that because you like the idea? As you do your pictures about eternity?"

"Yes. Would that be such a horrible thing, John?"

"No, it's not horrible. But it is like the pictures and eternity. You can believe in it or not. You won't know until you know."

"So what? What do you think it is - coincidence or destiny?"

"How can I believe it is either one if I don't even know whether there is such a thing as destiny?" John asked.

"But don't you see? That isn't a problem at all," Izzie said. "Quite the contrary. It's wonderful."

"Wonderful?"

"Yes! It sets you free. Exactly because of not being able to know, you are free to assume what you like. Just like me."

John shifted around in his chair. Then he stood.

"Listen, Izzie. Eternity, destiny, and so on - those are big, important questions. I can't just pick and choose what I like best at any given moment."

"Why do you think they are such big and important questions?"

"Well, it does make a difference. It's not the same whether all this is destiny or just coincidence."

"Really? The two of us being here is either a result of coincidence or destiny. You just don't know which. There then can't be such a big difference after all."

John hesitated.

"Of course it would be different if we knew it to be one or the other," he finally said. "It makes a difference whether I'm just one of many guys who might have ended up sitting here with you or if some entity or whatever somewhere had destined us to be together."

"Would you not want to be here with me if it wasn't predestined?"

"You're putting words in my mouth, Izzie. Of course I would still want to be here with you. But it's a difference whether I'm here because of coincidence or destiny. Don't you see that?"

"The situation would be the same but it would mean something entirely different to you?" Izzie asked.

"Yes, exactly."

"Huh. But since you simply cannot know which one it is - why don't you just choose the one you like better?"

"Because it doesn't work like that. What you call freedom of choice is really just - forgive me for saying this - ignorance. In a way. You just ignore the question whether destiny or coincidence even exist."

"No, I don't ignore it," Izzie said. "I do bypass it, that is true. I go right on to the next question,

namely, whether we are sitting here together because of coincidence or destiny. And I answer that question the way I like."

"But how can you just do that? The only right way would be to say that it is impossible to know whether there is such a thing as destiny. Period."

Izzie picked up her empty teacup, held it for a second, and placed it down on the table again.

"Accept the gap, John," she said.

"Huh?"

"Accept the gap. They must have taught you that at university."

"No. I'm sure I'd remember that."

"I don't mean in some lecture," Izzie said. "It's something you pick up along the way, like when you study for exams. Accept the gap."

John stared at her, eyes wide.

"When you were cramming for exams you could hardly memorize every little detail, right?" Izzie went on. "You skip over or just scan some parts and focus on the important stuff. And despite, or perhaps because of it you pass the exam. Also, you more or less grasped what it was all about. You did graduate, didn't you?"

She laughed. John shook his head.

"Izzie, are you trying to tell me that knowing whether or not destiny or coincidence are real is just some kind of inconsequential 'gap'?"

"Sure. How can it be consequential if I cannot possibly know - and yet still we are here together?"

"But Izzie, assuming that there is - or isn't - such a thing as destiny does have enormous consequences. What if you're wrong? I can't just base my whole life on one assumption and then find out at the end that - oops! - I was wrong."

"Well, not assuming either one will certainly prove wrong in the end."

She fixed him with a firm gaze. He held it without blinking.

"At least that way I won't hand over my whole life to the consequences of a binary yes-or-no choice that may be based on pure speculation."

"Exactly. You are actually answering the question yourself, too. What you're not doing is decide between yes and no."

"We're turning in circles, Izzie."

"Not quite. You keep pretending your answer 'I don't know' won't have any consequences on how you live your life. When the truth is that you nothing but assume this answer will have the most bearable consequences for you. What's interesting is that you know for sure that 'I don't know' will turn out to be the wrong answer in either case."

"You can't answer questions like these with a simple yes or no, though. You cannot know what to believe."

They fell silent but did not break eye contact.

"What frightens you more, John?" asked Lizzie after a while. "That we may have met just by coincidence or that it was destiny after all?"

"Are you asking whether I believe we were meant for one another?"

He had turned away from her. Izzie looked at him calmly, waiting for him to face her again.

"Of course I would like it if we were destined to be together," he finally said.

"But?"

John took a deep breath.

"But do you really know what the consequences would be? If destiny exists, it's not just about the two of us, here and now. It involves a lot more. Everything, even."

"That doesn't make sense," Izzie said. "First you claim not to know if there even is such a thing as destiny. Then you seem to know exactly what it is and how it works - if it does exist, of course."

"If destiny exists you can't just choose what it should or shouldn't affect," John replied.

"Why not? You do the same when you say it involves everything."

"Yes, granted. But I'm making it a general rule, at least. You on the other hand just pick and choose what suits you best."

"So? I don't want love to be just a matter of coincidence. But neither do I want war and catastrophes to be the results of destiny."

"But you can't just --"

"Of course I can. With you, everything is always black or white. But admit it, you know as little as I do about the color palette here. Mine is also a general rule."

"How can it be when there's a little destiny at play here but none over there?"

"I never claimed my concept is easy to grasp. Or that it can be grasped at all."

"That's great then. A perfect explanation. No point arguing with that."

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm making the same argument you are, John."

"Hardly."

"Why not?"

"My concept is at least consistent. Anyone can understand it, Izzie."

“Tsk! I don’t. Anyway, yours is only one out of a vast variety of possible concepts. As is mine.”

“At least mine isn’t completely arbitrary and based on wishful thinking, Izzie.”

“Even if that were true it doesn’t mean yours has more right to exits than mine.”

“Yours has a strong individual bias. Mine is more universal and objective.”

“Yours isn’t universal at all,” protested Izzie. “It applies to you. Just like mine does me. We can’t decree how others should go about all this.”

“But that’s just it! It has to apply to everyone.”

“Huh? Why?!”

“Because otherwise it just … it wouldn’t make sense, Izzie.”

“So it doesn’t make sense. That’s okay. Until it all makes sense life has to go on. We all need to come to terms with these questions because they have an impact on our lives. And by necessity we can only paint our individually biased pictures of the actual reality of answers.”

“I’m a really bad painter, though, Izzie. And I don’t want to paint anything that isn’t actually real.”

Izzie leaned forward and gently ruffled John’s hair.

"That's why I had no choice but to find you in that café. So we can paint together."

"I don't know, Izzie. As wonderful as that sounds, it's also hard to hold on to. Nothing but pictures for all the big questions? Eternity, destiny, meaning – only pictures. I'm sorry but I can't get excited about that."

Izzie sat up straight again and smiled at John. Then she reached for the last bun, sliced it in two, buttered the halves, and placed them in front of John.

"John, you need to stop willing your mind and your spirit to agree on everything. I never claimed it was easy to paint those pictures and enjoy them, too. But isn't that what makes it so exciting? The challenge? Just imagine: it can be whatever you want it to be. Unleash your inner artist!"

John stared at the buttered bun.

"Huh. Maybe my inner artist passed away long ago."

"Oh, poor thing. But with your tormented artist's soul you seem to be in close contact, though. Want me to open the window so you can jump?"

John pupils widened. Izzie made a dismissive gesture.

"It was a joke, John. Yes, I admit – getting excited about these pictures is an art that takes effort. Some days, I too just bang my head against those

blank, white walls around us. What cheers me up, though, is your dilemma: in the end, anything may be possible beyond those walls."

"That's my dilemma?"

"Yes. It's the 'maybe' you're afraid to relinquish even though you yearn for a simple 'yes' or 'no'."

"I could just choose the 'no,'" John said. "Just walls. Nothing beyond."

"Really? Could you do that, John?"

Izzie stood and started stacking the plate and cups on the tray.

"No, I probably couldn't just like that," John admitted. "But that doesn't mean it's a 'yes'."

Izzie looked down at him, a tender smile on her lips. He pretended not to see it and reached for the two bun slices, biting into one and placing the other one on the tray. Then he picked up the tray and carried it to the kitchen. Izzie followed him.

"Hooray, the artist is alive! Death can wait."

John turned to face her, rolling his eyes. Izzie pursed her lips and blew him a kiss.

In the kitchen she started rinsing the dishes. John finished the bun and took a dish towel.

"Are you afraid of dying, Izzie?"

She lowered the cup she was holding under the tap and looked at him.

“What?”

“Well, we were just talking about death. Are you afraid of dying?”

“I don’t know. It’s not something you think about.”

She resumed washing the dishes, handing them to John, who dried them and put everything away in the cupboards and drawers.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said.

“What question?”

“Whether you’re afraid of dying.”

“What happened to you over these past few days?” Izzie asked. “You’ve changed. I don’t know what it is leading up to but I think I might like it.”

John was still gazing at her. He shrugged.

“Sometimes you go shopping at a different mall, sometimes you walk through unknown streets, and sometimes you just ask unusual questions.”

“And sometimes you go to a fountain,” Izzie added.

“Sometimes you go to a fountain,” John repeated, a smile on his face.

Izzie scrubbed the sink and washed her hands. She reached for the dish towel John was holding.

“Are you afraid of dying, John?” she asked.

"Honestly? I don't know. There seems to be a difference between dying and being dead."

Izzie had been hanging the towel on a hook but stopped and scrutinized John's face. His expression remained serious.

"I'm making more tea. Do you want some?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you."

Izzie put the kettle on and waited for it to boil, leaning against the stove.

"Izzie, you still haven't answered my question."

The water started boiling. Izzie put tea bags in two cups and poured hot water on them. She handed one cup to John and took the other.

Then she went to the living room, heading for the table first but deciding on the sofa instead. John sat down in the armchair opposite the little coffee table.

"Why would one have to be afraid of dying?" Izzie finally asked. "Because it might hurt or you might be very ill?"

"I was thinking more of the panic about the last moment," John said.

"Last-moment panic?"

"You know. Will I have many regrets? Will I want to stay? Will I feel that my life's work isn't

finished? Worst of all: will I be lonely? Will my last moment be horrible and cruel and overshadow all the rest of the life that lies behind me?"

"Oh. Yes, that does sound a bit panicky," Izzie agreed.

"So you know the feeling?"

"Actually, no."

"But it will literally be the last moment of your life," John said. "It might all come rushing back up, in a manner of speaking."

"So? That's a good thing, isn't it? I will just live my life - literally to the last moment - in a way that gives me no reason to panic. Were you planning to handle it differently?"

John gaped at her for a few heartbeats.

"Isn't that a bit simplistic, Izzie?"

"Look, John. There will always be things we regret. Some more, some less. It's unavoidable. There will be things we know we should have done but never got around to doing. But how many things you did do, things you won't regret, will be there in the end to outweigh the regrets and failures?"

"You think it's as simple as that?" John asked.

"Yes, it's as simple as that," Izzie said. "You live a good life; you can die a good death."

John leaned back in his armchair and groaned.

"I guess then none of us will die good deaths."

"Why do you think so?" Izzie asked.

John looked at her, his eyes wide, and raised both arms, palms turned toward the ceiling.

"I don't know where you live, Izzie, but have you looked around at what's recently going on out there in the city?"

"Come on, it's not as bad as you make it sound," Izzie said. "I think we live in a great city, actually. There are beautiful corners if you know where to look. And you can meet very nice and interesting people here."

"Sure Izzie. By and large it is a nice city. Until you look more closely. All those shops, bars, restaurants, cinemas, theaters, gyms, you name it. They're just a joke! People don't come here to live. They come here to make money so they can spend it on as much stuff as they can get. From apartments and cars down to all the little tidbits no one really needs. And everything has to be an event. An extraordinary experience. No incident is too small not to warrant some big production. Each meeting with friends has to be a party, every stretching exercise in the morning a spiritual quest. Even when you go to get your hair cut it's like a champagne reception worthy of the celebrity pages. People don't just go shopping, they have retail experiences. And all those events eat up their time and create stress and even more stress. Not to

mention the irrepressible urge to consume that seems to grip nearly everybody as soon as there is an abundance of whatever. Or maybe not even abundance. Just availability paired with someone who can afford whatever it is ...”

John couldn't tell whether Izzie was still following. Her eyes were laying on him but she seemed to look right through him. Then she nodded her head slowly.

“You're right, John,” she said. “Everything is only about buying and spending. Money and power. How much of it you have and how you make sure everybody else knows it. It's disgusting. Wherever there's a crisis or a conflict on this earth, look closer and you see some little person who wants more money, more power, more stuff. Deep inside, all of us have turned into mine workers. We crawl down into the earth to labor in the dust, hating our work but doing it anyway so that we can provide our families with 'events'. Mainly our kids, whom we want to become something and someone one day and have a better life than we could afford. And this self-imposed task even gives us comfort and a sense of purpose even though it eats us alive. Tired and with empty smiles on our faces we slowly but steadily fade away. And what do children learn from this behavior? When is a 'better life' ever good enough? And why can you only 'be someone' if you're able to afford all the things your parents couldn't?

We're eternal mine workers. We labor away, drenched in sweat, tears running down our faces, and whatever we scrape from the hard rock and haul up to the light of day will never bring anyone a better life."

John sat frozen like a statue on his chair. He almost forgot to breathe. He stared at Izzie. Her eyes were misty and it seemed to take her a few seconds to return her focus on John. He waited until he was sure she was with him. Then he took a deep breath and nodded at her.

"Exactly. We're beasts, Izzie. And we're the reason life in the city is what it is. Because we are what we are. There must be poverty and wealth, suffering and welfare, people must go hungry and get exploited, others need to be calculating and ruthless, we must perform and specialize, buy and waste, we must value the things we value, and so on. Because that's what we are and how we want to live. Even if only because we cannot help ourselves, because we're nothing but instinct-driven beasts with a hint of intellect, unable to outgrow our limitations and even less able to handle whatever else there might be other than instincts and intellect."

Izzie gave John a tender smile.

"Being human isn't always easy, John."

John made a scornful hissing sound.

"Being human isn't easy?" he said. "You said it yourself: we are - I am - torn between an almost unbearably cold and reductionist view of the world that offers me nothing but coincidence, and mysterious elevations of it, that drown everyone in hopeful promises of redemption. This inner turmoil drives most of us to long-suffering lethargy and some to bursts of various kinds of human craziness. Being human is a bane. Because we are simultaneously stupid, lazy, weak, proud, arrogant, and ignorant. As a species, we obviously are a complete failure."

John inhaled and exhaled heavily. He raised an eyebrow, looked at Izzie, and shrugged as if prompting her to reply. She looked back at him, her eyes wide.

"What has happened to you to cause this crisis? All those deep thoughts and questions - where do they suddenly come from? Don't get me wrong. I think it is wonderful that you're thinking about this stuff. I've always had a sense that your waters run deep. But who or what has turned these deep waters into a rushing river that could finally burst through all those hard layers you'd established around yourself?"

John sat in his armchair again and smiled silently. Izzie didn't seem to expect an answer from him.

"It was that night your colleague told you he'd leave, right?" she said. "That was the first time you went to the fountain and met those characters. What were their names again?"

She gave John an appraising look. He held her gaze.

"I've been to the fountain before that, Izzie. Or passed it. You, too, by the way. It's the one at the mall. Thousands of people go shopping right next to it. Actually, that's where the two of us met, remember?"

Izzie nodded, moving the tip of her tongue over her upper lip. She sank back into the sofa.

"What I'm trying to say is ... is there a pattern as to where and when the two of them appear? Are you sure you're not the only person who can see them?"

John's mouth stood wide open. He seemed rigid, frozen, blinking at Izzie uncomprehendingly.

"Forget it, it doesn't matter," she continued hastily. "They don't seem to do you any harm. You need to forget about your television-busting revolution, though. But we've been through that."

Her lips curled upwards in a forced smile and she eyed John. He was shaking his head vigorously and took a deep breath, about to reply, but she cut him off.

"John," she said, her voice louder now. "Do you envy Alexander for his decision to leave?"

John exhaled and stared at her for a few seconds, motionless. Then his gaze dropped. After another pause he pursed his lips and shrugged.

"To be honest - I don't know. Sure, there are moments when I think it would be nice to be somewhere far away. But generally, I like this city. I admire Alex' courage and determination. But envying him for actually going away? I think not, no."

Izzie nodded silently.

"I think your colleague was right to go," she said. "If that's what he believes he needs to do, the way he wants to live his life, then he had to leave."

"So you're saying we have to leave if we want to live good lives?"

"I'm saying that your colleague had to leave in order to live the life he wanted."

"What does that mean?" he said.

"Well, what's right for him doesn't have to be right for all of us. If he was fed up with city life and didn't want to be a part of it anymore, it was good for him to leave. But it shouldn't be about much else."

"Tell you the truth, Izzie - I did have a feeling that he wanted more than just a change of scenery."

"Sure. But unless he's become a cave-dweller or self-sufficient hermit, he won't get away from it all. Not really. His life may have changed a little, but it won't be all that different. Though I sincerely hope that he's found what he was looking for."

John stared down into his cup. Izzie paused until he looked up at her again.

"My personal belief, John, is that you do not have to leave this place in order to find your own way of life. I'm not saying it's easy. I do think it's possible, though. You know, we all find out quickly enough what we do or do not like here. And there's always something worth complaining about, wherever you are."

"You mean we can live a good life even here?"

"Of course. Come, let's paint some more pictures, John. Pictures of a good life?"

John grinned.

"Better not. I didn't exactly excel as a painter with those other ones."

Izzie raised an eyebrow.

"Practice makes perfect."

John leaned back in his armchair.

"It wouldn't be the same as before, though, right?"

She eyed him curiously.

“Why not?”

John sat up again and leaned forward, closer to Izzie.

“Because before we were in a room without windows and doors. Now we’re standing right in the middle of our motif.”

Izzie’s gaze drifted and she seemed to stare through John for a few seconds.

“That’s right.”

John slumped back in his armchair, a gratified smile on his lips.

“That makes painting all the easier, John,” Izzie said.

John’s smile disappeared.

“What?”

“Like you said: no room without door and windows. A clear view.”

“Oh, no – what I meant is that you can’t just imagine something and paint it however you like. Here you have reality to contend with. She’s the art critic.”

“Even better. Finally a true challenge.

She grinned mischievously.

John let his head fall on his chest.

"Come on, John, captivate me. Show me life in the city as it should be."

John groaned softly.

"I don't want to paint pictures, Izzie. Anyway, how can we know what a truly good life looks like? As humans we are living proof that we're clueless. We don't even know the true meaning of 'good'."

Izzie nodded her head almost imperceptibly and took a sip of tea.

"We call it 'worth living,'" she said.

John gaped at her, mouth open.

"What?"

"Let's not call it a 'good life' anymore. That rings false, somehow. Let's call it a 'life worth living'. That feels more fitting, somehow."

"Call it what you like but that doesn't change the fact that you cannot pin down what a 'better' life, or one that's 'worth living' should look like."

"Of course we can."

"No, we can't."

"Well, we know for one that our very living-worthy life should be here, in this city. We don't have to move to the seaside to live it."

"Wow, okay, so I guess we're just about done."

Izzie rolled her eyes and gave John a shrewd look, her head tilted.

"What do you want from me, Izzie? Yes, sure, I do like the city, by and large. It's worth living in it, as it were. But the devil is in the details."

"What details are we talking about?" Izzie asked.

John fidgeted then made a dismissive gesture. Izzie waited patiently. She took a sip of her tea and looked at John. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Fine," he said at last. "I'm sorry to admit that for me, watching television is part of a life worth living. Watching more wouldn't necessarily make my life more worth living but having no television at all would certainly make it less so."

Izzie winked at John.

"That's okay. You can keep the TV and I keep my running rounds."

John nodded.

"Works for me. I can watch TV while you're out running."

They exchanged a smile.

"See? We've made quite a head start with our life worth living. We'll stay here in the city, only leave if we feel like sea air, and won't let anybody take away our television or running rounds."

John took another sip of tea.

“Great, Izzie. Now all that’s left to deal with are tiny little details like those glass towers, our culture’s obsession with shopping, and the few wars that are always going on somewhere.”

“Exactly. The towers can be up for debate. As for shopping … well, we don’t have to eliminate that completely.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that a certain standard beyond the mere coverage of bare necessities and food should be allowed.”

“Okay, agreed,” John said. “There should be a certain standard of living. Complete self-denial doesn’t make life more worth living.”

“Exactly. But the way we consume needs to change. We should think before we buy. Less waste, more sustainability.”

“The same goes for production. A life worth living includes not only conscientious consumption, but also conscientious production.”

“Also, we need to be more peaceful in all our interactions,” Izzie added. “There needs to be less envy and greed. Less war. No more war, actually. People need to accept and help one another, not fight. More ‘us’, less ‘me’.”

“Growth in quality, not quantity. A redefinition of wealth.”

John finished the last of his tea and placed his cup on the coffee table.

Izzie nodded.

“You know, Izzie, our lives aren’t that bad, actually. And that has its prize. Isn’t it a bit ungrateful to have a good life and then complain about the prize?”

“No, it isn’t. That’s just the point.”

“Complaining about the prize?”

“Rethinking the prize. And deciding whether you’re still willing to pay it.”

“Make life more worth living by lowering the prize.”

“Though the ‘prize’ won’t drop, John. It changes. Or maybe somebody else has to pay it. If I commute by car I create noise, pollution, traffic jams, and other environmental issues. If I take the subway instead, I cause less stress for the environment but potentially more for myself because I am less flexible, it takes longer, and I have less privacy.”

Izzie paused, drank the last of her tea and placed her cup next to John's on the coffee table.

"Maybe that's the big roadblock on our journey from our current lives to a life more worth living," she said.

"How do you mean that?" John asked.

"I mean this discussion we're having. It reveals the underlying system all our lives are based on. We all talking about prizes; we try to balance cost and profit or having and not-having, doing and not-doing. Even our tongues can only speak in terms of economy. If we're really honest, we boil down far too many of our decisions to monetary units."

"It's obviously the perspective that suits us best, Izzie. And the bottom line is that it's brought us this far."

"Yes, precisely. This far. But how much further can we go? How much further do we want it to go? Money really seems to be the primer on the canvas of our lives, if you will."

"Well, it's not like the money economy was forced on us," John said. "It's developed along with us. First it was an exchange of goods. Then abstract monetary units entered the scene and replaced one side of the exchange. And that had a lot of advantages because money can be easily split, transported, and stored. Obviously, that means it is also easy to steal. Or to keep more of it than you truly need. For lean times. Or major investments. That dynamic has had a huge impact on how we

live today. Division of labor, specialization, more and more trade. And along with that came technological progress, spreading globalization, and evolving ideas about society, values, and life. The bottom line is that without money, we'd be nowhere."

"You can't know that, John," Izzie protested. "But it's true that money has become so powerful that it even pervades our language."

"That's not my point," said John. "I'm just saying that money has contributed a lot to our development."

"No doubt about it," Izzie said. "It also did a lot of damage. But that's not what I'm aiming at."

"So what are you aiming at?"

"Do you want it in your picture, John?"

"Well, I do need some kind of primer, don't I?"

"Sure. But we're not about to paint a portrait of the past. Not even the present. We're trying to visualize the future."

"What's well established can have a future, too."

"Of course," Izzie said. "And if you want money to be a part of yours, paint it in your picture. And don't forget to say on the plaque that you dedicate your work to mammon. You know what, though? If you really did care that much

about money, if you actually believed what you're saying, we wouldn't even have this conversation. Because in that case your life would be as worth living for you as you could wish and the city with all its aspects would be perfect for you."

"I told you I'm not a good painter," John said. "I can't just paint away money."

Izzie considered this for a moment.

"To be honest, I don't think I can either," she said. "It's complicated."

John picked up his empty teacup, turned it this way and that, paused a few seconds, and placed it back on the coffee table.

"So we're stuck, Izzie."

"Not necessarily. Maybe we should just break money's spell a little. Abolishing is just one, albeit be the most radical solution. You could also choose not to paint it in bright colors that cover everything but as something faded, less obtrusive, less significant."

"I'm listening."

"Well, we could stop making money such a priority. Try disentangling ourselves from it."

"That's all been tried or suggested before – in some way or another. Thomas More's 'Utopia'. Marxism. The list goes on."

"There you go with your black-and-white again, John. Maybe there's some solution in between?"

"If there was, wouldn't we have found it by now?"

"Did we always know that the Earth was spherical?" Izzie replied.

John grinned and nodded his head slowly.

"You're a typical male, John. Always out to find the ultimate solution, right now."

John gave her a look.

"Don't get me wrong," Izzie continued. "There are times when I just love that about you. Every woman needs a real male in her life. But large matters such as these should probably be approached more subtly. Step by step."

John nodded.

"I think we're already in the middle of that, don't you?" he said. "There are the debates about basic income ..."

"A citizen's income without requirement to work, right. Or at least a partial income."

"Yes. And I do like the approach – uncoupling the income from the value creation chain. By doing so, we really would make money less powerful and significant."

"There you go," Izzie said.

"It won't work, though," John went on.

"John! Don't go and spoil everything before we've even tried it!"

"Just a minute! The thing is that ours is a tough environment for in-between solutions. That's because we've succumbed to money in two ways. First, because we need it to live. That's an objective dependence that calls for system-based liberation. But second, there is our greed, our self-inflicted inner slavery. From that we can only liberate ourselves."

"So?"

"So? Solutions like the basic income approach face two challenges. One is that they only weaken the power of money. They do not eliminate its influence completely. So both dependencies persist - the real, objective one and the one caused by our greed. The second challenge is that even though their effect is so minimal they require an enormous change of attitudes of people in order to be implemented at all."

"But basic income would counteract bit by bit one of money's most adverse effects, namely, that we want more and more of it for increasingly insane consumption and will go after it with increasingly evil methods."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Plus, it would require us to live our lives without relying on our jobs as deter-

mining factors. Everybody complains about having to get up early and go to work. But take away their work and they wouldn't know what to do with themselves all day. Just ask Maslow, he of the hierarchy of needs. No one really wants to get to the top of that pyramid. It would mean self-fulfillment instead of a job you can complain about. Pure horror. No one but the Utopia people would like that."

Izzie stared at the teacup on the table.

"In that case, John, it is not the life worth living we need to visualize, but a human who would make their life more worth living."

"You want to visualize a new type of human?"

"Not a new one, no. A different one. One with different values and drives. Isn't that what would bring us closer to a life more worth living – a new way of thinking and new guiding principles? Not forced upon us from the outside as laws but arising from our inside, our convictions."

"Wow, Izzie, that gives me bad flashbacks to those crummy sci-fi movies with future societies in which everybody is fully reasonable and completely boring. Is that really what you want?"

"Of course not. I don't care at all about these stereotypical final states of human development – a development into the one-way street of de-humanizing. I do want people to remain human.

With all the spirituality and intellect that involves."

"So basically just like today. Only very different."

Izzie scratched her head.

"Yes. No. I want an evolved human who can make life more worth living for everyone without surrendering individuality and human-ness. Someone who can believe in eternity yet not feel the need to proselytize or align the whole life with that belief. Someone who can have conflicts with others without having to start a war or hating adversaries forever. Someone who can compete with others but does not insist on being made king or queen if emerging winner. Someone who can be president without demanding or getting more respect than anyone else. In essence, someone who can be human in a way that lets all others be human too and live their lives worth living."

"I'm not sure that's even evolution you're talking about," John said. "Sounds more like a quantum leap to me. It most certainly would require humanity to take a huge step out of the comfort zone of our nature we've built up over the past few thousand years."

"So what?" Izzie said. "This comfort zone of our nature, as you call it, is no more than the legacy of our past. Sure, it shows us where we came from and can serve as a kind of pointer in life. But that

doesn't mean that it will continue to be appropriate. It doesn't mean we shouldn't leave it behind. After all, it is this comfort zone that keeps us from living a life more worth living."

"I think you're being the radical one now," John said.

Izzie went over to the cupboard to get a packet of cookies. She opened it, placed it on the coffee table, and took a handful.

"It's a bit frustrating, isn't it?" John continued. "Like you said - it's highly unlikely that anybody might know the right way to run the world. If finding it - and our lives worth living along with it - were easy we'd all long be there. We would have found and internalized it."

"That's what being human comes down to," Izzie said. "It's a never-ending learning curve. These pictures aren't meant for the museum. We just paint over them and redo them, again and again. You need to be able to let go of one work of art and do it all over again."

"Well, Izzie, it's a hard life as an artist."

Izzie looked at him, smiled, and bit into a cookie.

"I guess you're right, John. What's important is that you have a vision, though. You can't just force that vision on everyone else but you can use it to light a possible way."

"You mean a vision of a life worth living?" John asked.

"Yes. A vision can serve as a beacon. Humanity obviously isn't a speedboat that swerves this way and that. More like a huge tanker that moves very sluggishly and needs a lot of careful navigation to alter its course."

"Yeah. Sluggish, because stupid, lazy, weak, proud, arrogant, and ignorant. So what's your vision, Izzie?"

John reached for a cookie.

"My vision? My vision is that we will understand all this and be able to change it wherever change is necessary and useful. That we'll learn new patterns of behavior. Discard old ones. Question our moral values and shed those we do not really want anymore. Adopt new ones. Set a new course."

"First you'd need to get rid of the old captain, though," John said. "Or at least relieve the helmsman."

"I don't think there is only one captain or helmsman."

"How else will you then get your chaos cruise under control?"

"It's not as if the course sets itself. The crew on board can have influence. There are even signs that

the wheel is turned a few notches on course to a life more worth living now and then.”

“Sure, Izzie. Whenever someone stumbles and grabs at the wheel for support.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Izzie said. “Humanity is evolving, we always have been. And we wouldn’t be where we are now if there hadn’t been some course corrections along the way. Very deliberate ones.”

“Okay, granted. But the masses won’t march until their situation forces them to. That’s a known fact. Even then they often need a good kick in the ass.”

“Actually I hope that we’re beyond all that. I don’t want them to revolt violently. We must learn other ways to free ourselves from such situations.”

“Well, first you need to make people see that what we have is such a situation.”

“John, we are always in such a situation. Today’s revolution only sets the scene for tomorrow’s.”

“Only that no one is starting the necessary revolution anymore.”

“Just wait and see. Our lives may be quite good, but people are getting increasingly dissatisfied. That will mobilize them.”

“Into marching for the revolution after all?”

“No, John. Not that kind of mobilization. I mean mobilizing our power and will to change our way of thinking. I think this is our leverage point: we need to make sure that the dissatisfaction I mentioned continues to be a positive force and that its potential is deployed in the right direction.”

“I don’t follow,” John said.

“You said it yourself – dissatisfaction is often the trigger for revolt, revolution, mutiny, and such. People react differently to a feeling of dissatisfaction, though. There will always be some who’d rather numb it with television than face it. Others drop out or leave. If it gets really bad and the dissatisfaction lasts without its cause being identified, and if there are aggravating circumstances such as growing insecurity or propaganda from whichever side, anything can happen. People could become radicalized or return to traditional, established concepts and behaviors. But many are already on a good journey and have read the signs of the times. We need to steer the energy released through dissatisfaction in the right direction and get closer to a life more worth living.”

“Izzie!” John cried out, exasperated. “We’ve come full circle again! What is the right direction? Where is that life worth living that you want to set your course on?”

"It doesn't matter in the end which direction is the right one. It's not about *the* life more worth living. But we do need to steer toward a society, a form of living together that is reasonable for everyone and everyone can answer for. What it comes down to is a process of learning and approximation. Every day is like a new situation, almost. A situation we as humanity need to understand and handle. Just like you had to learn the new situation when you started school as a kid. Like you had to learn how to handle work. Like you had to learn how to handle being with me. It still isn't always easy for the two of us. So how can it be easy for a group, a society, or all of humankind? It's a process. You try to steer in the direction you assume in all conscience is 'right'."

John threw up his hands in frustration.

"See? We're just where we started. Not one step further. We've been turning in circles."

"We are not where we started. Quite the contrary. We finally have reached the place where we have to start working towards a life more worth living. And, most importantly, we haven't stumbled upon it nor picked it arbitrarily. We have searched for and found it."

"Don't beat about the bush, Izzie."

"We can't just obliterate what has evolved over the millennia – the legacy of our past. Nor can we just cover it up with some utopia. We're not even

able to visualize a working utopia. Because humanity's path to a life more worth living is a process of learning and approximation. And the only place for us, for you and me to start is right here, with us."

John narrowed his eyes.

"Um, and what exactly is that supposed to mean, Izzie?"

"Be the kind of human, of person you'd want everyone else to be too. Head into the direction you think is right. And I don't mean leave the city or go live on the streets or start a soup kitchen. Be the kind of person who makes life worth living, right here and now. For everybody. And especially yourself. Maybe it would be a start if you just switched on the TV a little less often."

John gazed pensively at his hands.

"Every movement starts with one single individual. But maybe I'd be only a drop in the ocean?"

Izzie nodded.

"You're right. Your circle of impact may be very small. Still I believe this is the only acceptable way and far better than nothing. I'm also positive that once you set off on your journey to a life more worth living, others will follow."

"We've sure lowered our expectations."

"Really? After all we've talked about tonight, John? I don't think what I described are low expectations or small steps. Quite the contrary. Nobody could expect more from you. Nor less, in fact. But you won't change humankind by turning against them. You won't make much of a difference if you let yourself get crushed by world weariness. If you insist on feeling responsible for all the evils in this world you will just suffer, and your suffering won't benefit anyone. You are not all of humanity. But you are a part of it. So start with yourself and let others do the same. Until all of humanity follows your example."

John took a deep breath and exhaled again. His eyes were on Izzie, his expression tender and calm.

"Do you really think that would be a big step? That it would mean I put high expectations on myself, at least?"

"John, only an exceptional person would have the courage to stand against everything others hold on to, everything they look to for guidance. To reject it even though it may still feel right and, more importantly, convenient and comfortable to you. To rise up against it and dare to follow your own vision, your own heart and mind in order to live a life more worth living.

Nobody spoke for several minutes. They both seemed lost in thought, nibbling their cookies. Then their gazes met again.

"Just out of curiosity, John: what does it mean to you? What would you consider a life worth living right now in this moment? Or let me put it differently: why is your life right now not as worth living as you'd want it to be?"

John reached into the cookie pack on the table.

"If I knew how to answer that we wouldn't have had this whole conversation."

Izzie nodded silently.

"How exactly were you planning to engage all of humanity if you can't even define what makes your own life worth living?"

John reached for his teacup. When he saw it was empty he shoved it back so hard that it slid over to the other side of the coffee table and almost toppled.

"Our plan to blow up half of the city would at least have woken people up."

"You would have created a bit of chaos. That's it."

"It would have been a start, Izzie."

"Is that so? What would it have started?"

"Possibly a swifter turn of the tanker we're all on."

"A turn where? In what direction?"

"We'd have seen that."

John stared at Izzie for a few heartbeats. Then he lowered his gaze and nodded. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, you're right, Izzie. Maybe the plan was a bit hazy."

Izzie smiled.

"Well, at least it shook you awake."

John met her eyes again and nodded. A soft smile crept onto his face. His features relaxed again.

"Right now ... in this moment ... I quite like my life. This here with you is as worth living as it could get for me."

Izzie beamed at him. For several seconds they just looked each other in the eye and remained silent.

Then Izzie said: "John, the life most worth living is nothing more than a series of moments like this, moments worth living."

John smiled and leaned toward her.

"Do you have the courage it takes, Izzie?"

Izzie blushed a little and seemed about to reply. In the last moment, though, she tore her eyes away from his expectant gaze. She stood and picked up their teacups.

“Courage, no courage … I don't know. Certainly not alone. I mean, I do not save animals or join protests against war or evil corporations. I'm not even sure I have a life that is right. Most of the time I just sit here and work on my book. To be honest, I hide behind my writing. So in answer to your question: no, I don't seem to have much courage.”

Without waiting for a reply she turned around and walked off to the kitchen, teacups in hand.

John jumped up from his armchair and hurried after her.

“That wasn't what I meant and you well know it. But never mind – what did you just say? You're writing a book?”

Izzie poured water in the kettle, not for the first time that night.

“Yes. Haven't I mentioned it before? I thought I'd told you.”

“I would definitely remember that.”

“Why did you think I get up at midnight some nights? I like to get some writing done before I head off to work.”

“Tsk! I thought that was just for my sake. Because you wanted to meet up.”

Izzie smiled at John. “Sorry to burst your bubble, sweetie.”

John affected a sneer. Inwardly, he thought back on that Saturday night when he'd stood outside her building and looked up at her window, drawing conclusion that had just proved false.

Izzie ran her palm over his cheek.

"Sometimes I did get up to meet you, too."

He leaned forward and kissed her.

"So are you writing about me and the tender effusions of my profound realism?"

"You wish. I've been writing long before I met you."

"Can I read it?"

"You'll have to wait until it's finished."

"When will that be?"

She took the kettle with the boiling water and filled their cups, which John had equipped with teabags.

"When I'm done."

Together they walked back to the living room and sat on the sofa, Izzie cross-legged on a cushion, John propped up with one arm against the sofa's back rest, his other hand holding his cup. He watched her sip her tea.

"What? Quit staring at me, John."

"I'm just admiring you. A writer. Unbelievable."

"Not really. I haven't published anything yet."

"Is there anything else that I should know but you forgot to mention?"

Izzie lowered her gaze and blew softly on her tea.

John jolted upright on the sofa. He sat his cup on the table and leaned closer to Izzie.

"Good Lord! There is more!"

Izzie sipped her tea.

"Not really, no."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Well, maybe my name ..."

She looked searchingly over the rim of her cup into John's eyes.

"Isabella."

John's expression was blank. He couldn't quite follow.

"My name is Isabella."

"Really?"

"Really. Izzie is short for Isabella."

"Oh, right. We talked about it back then, in the café, right?"

"Yes, maybe."

She put her cup down next to his.

“So why now, Isabella?”

“Why now what?”

“Why did you tell me your name now?”

Izzie picked her cup up again and drank.

“It seemed to be the right moment.”

John nodded and reached for his cup too. They looked at each other as they sipped their tea. At last John put his cup down again.

“I’m sure your book will be a great success.”

“You think so?”

“If there’s even half the wonderful ideas in it you’ve shared with me tonight and if your writing is as enchanting and full of surprises as you are, I am absolutely positive it will make you rich and famous.”

“Would you only see me as successful if I became rich and famous?”

“I think you know how I meant it. After all that we’ve talked about tonight, I think we both know.”

Izzie smiled.

“Well, some fame and riches would be okay for me, I guess. After all, it would mean that people like what I’ve written. Or at least buy it. And maybe even read it. And that’s what counts in the end.”

John pursed his lips.

“You could also publish your writing anonymously and free for anyone online.”

“I could. I could also keep on writing and never publish a word of it.”

“Could you?”

Izzie hesitated. She placed her cup on the table next to John’.

“As a writer I would like it if people read and understood my work. But I also love writing for its own sake. At the moment my life allows me to write just like that. Isn’t that success enough? I haven’t given it that much thought yet. Sure, it would be nice to do nothing but write for a living. Then again, would I write for the love of it or for money? Wouldn’t that make it all about money and fame after all? Commercial success as the be-all and end-all. Do I want that? Partly, yes. Of course. I’m only a present-day human. I’m not free from finding commercial success desirable or at least enjoyable. But is it right to think so? Is it what I want to live for, the example I want to set? No. I want to write whatever and however I want. If there are people who like to read that – all the better.”

John smiled tenderly at her.

“So you want people to read your work but you don’t want to write for readers. You want recognition but you don’t want to desire success.”

"Yes, exactly. And at the same time I blame successful writers for writing at least in part not for the art itself but money."

Izzie laughed but quickly turned serious again.

"Jesus, am I a bad person, John? Being read cannot be my goal and purpose. Readers will be forgotten, books will be forgotten. In the end, all will be forgotten as if we never existed. Writing can only be about writing. Anything else is just vanity, conceit, greed, and narcissism. Nothing written will remain in the end. All that matters is our own soul's grace. Yet despite all this I will try to publish and sell my book. God, I really am a bad person!"

John grinned at Izzie and shrugged.

"Being human isn't always easy, huh?"

"Being human is too easy, John. It's being a good human that is hard."

He caressed her arm tenderly.

"Don't worry, Izzie, I will make to keep you and your sweet little butt grounded. After all I knew you before you became rich and famous."

Izzie stretched her neck and gave him a dramatic eye-roll.

"Forget it. When I'm rich and famous I may not even know you anymore."

John nodded.

"Even better. That'll allow me to make a fortune selling my side of our story to the media, exposing you for the hypocrite and bad person you are."

"Pah. See if I care. Only no press is bad press."

They both laughed.

"Either way, you're the best and most successful person I know. And I'm sure you'll also be a successful author."

Izzie nodded gratefully. She seemed to lean forward to reach for her teacup but paused and just starred at the ground.

"What is it?" John asked.

Izzie looked up into John's face. Her eyes had misted over. She shrugged.

"Maybe I won't be able to finish my book. If the bakery closes down I will lose my job. Who knows what I'll do next."

"There are other jobs."

Izzie nodded unconvinced.

"Maybe. I do love the bakery, though. The weird rhythm it forces on me. The quiet in the mornings. The crowds at peak hours. The people. The smell of fresh buns."

"Ah, yes. The fresh buns. I would really miss those."

Izzie had folded her hands in her lap. John reached out and covered them with his.

"Have they sold the bakery yet, Izzie?"

"No, not that I know. They've had offers but they don't want to sell to a supermarket chain or some investor who doesn't care about the bread business. They're still hoping to find someone who'll take over and run the bakery."

"Is that so hard?"

"It looks like it. No one's shown much interest so far."

"I don't mean finding someone to run it. I mean running it."

Izzie looked intently at John. Her lips twitched up in a smile that soon lit up her whole face.

"It's nothing you couldn't learn."

John nodded, deep in thought.

"You like fresh buns, don't you, John? Ever thought of making them?"

John smiled

"Are we painting pictures again?"

Izzie shook her head, her eyes never leaving John's face.

"No, John. We are starting to make a plan."

John sat up straight.

“Believe me when I say I know very little about making buns. And nothings whatsoever about running a bakery.”

“As I said, I’m sure you could learn.”

“The nice thing about my job right now is that I’m good at it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t say it’s the money.”

“Well, the money doesn’t make me particularly unhappy.”

“So you’re good at your job and you earn good money. But do you also like that job?”

John shrugged involuntarily.

“What’s not to like about something you’re good at and get paid to do?”

“John, you didn’t answer my question.”

“Let’s put it this way: my job makes my life easier. Nothing is perfect.”

Izzie tilted her head to the side and gave John a serious look.

“Fine, Izzie. I heard what I said right now. I do things because they make my life easier. And then I ask myself why I’m thinking about blowing up half the city.”

Izzie smiled.

“You’re good at your job. That’s okay. But why continue to do something all your life if you’re already good at it? Maybe you’ll be an even better baker?”

John eyed Izzie intently.

“And you saying this has nothing to do with the fact that you anyway don’t like my current job and have been trying to make me quit for ages?”

Izzie smiled a bit sheepishly and looked down at her hands.

“Sometimes, John, things just fit together perfectly, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.”

“Do you really think I could make a success of it as a baker?”

“You wouldn’t have to do it on your own. And yes, I know you can do it. Whatever you do, John, in my view you are already a success. And I’m sure that you could run a successful bakery.”

John leaned forward, reached for his cup, and gazed into it.

“Cash in my savings, sell my apartment, write a business plan, negotiate with the bakery owners and banks, learn the business, train as a baker, quit my job. Lots of work, high risk.”

“An investment in life, John. A life worth living. That is worth all the effort. And it’s way better than blowing up the city.”

John looked up to meet Izzie's gaze. He nodded silently and let himself drown in her eyes. She smiled at him. Then she got up and reached out her hand.

"Come on, let's rest a bit. I need to leave for work soon."

John put down his teacup, took her hand, and allowed her to lead him to the bedroom.

Even before they reached the bed he gently yanked her into his embrace. Izzie pushed her body against his expectantly. John's lips opened and started quivering almost imperceptibly as if he was about to say something. Instead of words, though, there were just soft little pants of breath. Izzie moved closer into his embrace. He leaned forward and kissed her gingerly. She enjoyed his tender foray for a few heartbeats before starting to kiss him back. Their lips and tongues danced a slow waltz that intensified, became a passionate tango, and crescendoed into an intimate firework of acrobatics that defied all standards. Through all of this, they somehow managed to pull off each other's clothes and fall onto the bed. They rolled on the sheets like a single body, twisting and stretching this way and that in unison. Finally and abruptly, as if on cue, they stopped moving and lay completely still. John was on top. He carefully propped himself up on his hands, his fingers intertwined with hers. Their eyes were locked. For a

timeless moment they just stayed there, motionless, each one getting lost in the other's eyes until there was nothing left of their separate being and the world around them. As if together they had pushed open the door to another, unfathomably wonderful state of being and crossed its threshold. Slowly, carefully, without any rush John entered Izzie. Their bodies moved in a tender, unhurried rhythm, heading straight up the short and steep path towards climax.

As unspectacular as their lovemaking must have looked to the breaking dawn outside the bedroom window, as endlessly intense and euphoric it felt to the two of them. It was something beyond surrender and abandon. Far beyond domination and submission. Only becoming one. Fusing together. And then it was a tender ecstasy that broke from their loins as a superhuman primal force, spreading as a gigantic wave slowly but unstoppably over their whole bodies. For a moment, it blocked or even overexerted all their senses. It was a moment in which everything stopped existing. Followed by the moment in which everything was born anew. Slowly, the two of them reemerged; the world around them began to take on form and color, until they finally found themselves lying there, completely calm, one on top of the other, sharing a tender, secret smile.

Without letting go of Izzie or even breaking eye contact, John rolled to the side. They were exhausted and euphoric in equal measures. None of them even considered closing their eyes to sleep. Izzie's radio alarm had gone off a while ago. It was playing soft music. The world outside grew lighter.

Before long, the first rays of the sun began to fill the room with bright colors. At some point, Izzie and John wished each other good morning with a long kiss. They got up, dressed, and took turns in the bathroom and preparing breakfast.

As they buttered their first buns of the morning they saw that the city outside the living room window had woken up too.

"It is a beautiful city, don't you agree, Izzie?"

"Yes. I kind of fall in love with it all over again each morning."

They dug into their breakfast, taking big bites of the buns. John uttered a deep groan of satisfaction.

"This is so indescribably tasty."

"Buns are the best."

John nodded and took another bite.

When they'd finished their breakfast and cleared the table Izzie got ready to go to the bakery. She offered John to stay and sleep a little

longer. He declined and said he'd rather walk with her a bit.

Hand in hand, they walked down the corridor and the stairs. With Izzie's hand firmly in his, John felt as safe and anchored as never before.

As they stepped onto the street, John paused. He blinked up at the morning sun and breathed deeply. Izzie turned to face him. John smiled at her. Still holding hands, they walked to the subway station where Izzie would take the train to work.

At the entrance to the station they embraced and kissed, both unwilling to let the other go. They were oblivious of the crowds who milled past them as they stood right at the top of the stairs, in everyone's way. But no one bumped into them or even made a comment. They all stepped cautiously to the side and walked around them.

At last, John and Izzie agreed to meet up again that night. Izzie headed down the stairs and after turning back three times to wave at John she disappeared from his view.

John stayed where he was, rooted to the spot, his insides dancing to the rhythm of his pounding heart. He wanted to jump in the air, so high that his feet would never touch the ground again. Instead, his whole face twisted up in a gigantic yawn. He really needed to get some sleep.

He started on his way home, but his whole body seemed to get heavier and more sluggish with each step. He kept yawning in ever-decreasing intervals. Soon he had to struggle to keep his eyes open. Through all this, the smile never left his face.

Suddenly he stopped dead. Socrates and Joanna. He had to convince them to drop their plan. Then again, they'd probably done that last night anyway. John grinned and started walking again. The way the two of them had been at each other on the sofa, they probably hadn't been thinking about much else. Still, he would drop by the factory on the canal and talk to them.

He turned on his heel to get his bearing and realized he was standing outside the mall. Feeling just a little surprised, John shrugged and started up the stairs to the forecourt. He would cross the parking lot on the other side; that would take him straight to the canal.

After the first treads the stairs seemed longer and steeper than he remembered. His breath had become shallow. Each step felt like his thighs would give in any moment. John paused, yawned again, and sat on the steps.

People rushed past him, moving up and down. The street traffic hummed monotonously. John closed his eyes, trying to focus on the fountain's gentle gurgle. He could not hear it.

Wearily he opened his eyes and turned, still sitting, to see how far he was from the top of the stairs. Not that far. He rubbed his eyes and rose with a groan. Then he turned and determinedly walked up the last few steps.

As he reached the forecourt he saw immediately why there had been no gurgling. The fountain was sealed off with barrier tape. Technicians were standing in the drained pool, dismantling the sculpture. They had already taken down the waterwheel and thrown it carelessly on the ground.

John stepped closer until he stood behind the tape. Two workers were pushing the statue of Munchhausen on its side and started to carry it off. A third was sweeping the pool. John watched him for a while. The slow, rhythmic sweeping motion and the resounding swish of the broom had a mesmerizing effect. He had to be careful or he would fall asleep where he stood. Several times he almost lost his balance.

The two men dragged Munchhausen over to the side of the pool, heaved him out, and leaned him against the ledge, head down. John followed their actions and all of a sudden out of the corner of his eyes he recognized a familiar figure on the other side of the forecourt, right next to the stairs there. It was Joanna. John was glad to see her.

As he walked around the fountain towards her he saw another worker kneeling on the ground,

trowel in hand. He seemed to be repairing the fountain wall. Smiling, John walked on to meet Joanna. He thought about last night and what he would say to her.

When he was close enough to read Joanna's expression, his smile faded and his gladness gave way to a queasy feeling. Her eyes were red and swollen. Her mouth was quivering. Even as John came to stand right before her Joanna's glassy stare seemed to go through him. She did not even seem to recognize him. For a few seconds, John didn't know what to do, so he just stood there in silence and looked at her. Slowly, tears filled her eyes and started running down her cheeks. John leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her.

"He is dead, John," Joanna whispered against his skin and he felt her body shaking with sobs. Crushed, John held on to her, as much to keep himself upright as to comfort her.

After her sobs had subsided and she had taken a few ragged, but calmer breaths, Joanna stepped back. She blew her nose. John stood motionless.

"You know, when I woke up this morning on the sofa in the factory and found him gone, I had a very bad feeling," Joanna said. "I think Socrates just waited for me to fall asleep before he left. They found him in the fountain."

Joanna's gaze slipped past John to the fountain, where it rested for a few heartbeats.

"We spent a wonderful night together. I should have known better, though."

John struggled to maintain his composure.

"What do you mean, Joanna? You shouldn't blame yourself."

"I don't blame myself. It was wonderful. But I should have known that for Socrates it would be ..." Joanna fought back more tears. She blew her nose again.

"One way or another, it helped him overcome his worst fear. Or to face it. I hope he had the kind of dying he'd always imagined. The experience he feared yet looked forward to so much. I really hope he got to enjoy it."

Joanna buried her face in her hands. Her body was trembling silently. John wanted to hug her again but he was unable to move. His feet felt rooted to the ground, his arms like lead, and he had trouble breathing.

"Can I help you? Is there anything I can do?" he whispered hoarsely.

Joanna wiped off her tears with her palm and shook her head.

"Thank you. But no, it's all arranged."

John kept silent for several seconds.

Then he said: "Is there anything I can do for you, Joanna?"

Joanna looked at him. A soft smile stole over her face. But her eyes filled with more tears.

"That's very sweet, John. Thank you. Please don't worry about me, though. I will be okay."

She looked away for a moment, wiping her eyes unobtrusively.

"I will leave for a while, John."

John swallowed drily.

"Will we meet again?"

"I am absolutely certain that we will all meet again someday, somewhere. But not here and now."

John instinctively turned to look at the fountain. When he faced Joanna again a few seconds later, his eyes were moist.

"Don't worry. I won't leave the way Socrates did. There is a wonderful place for me on the other side of earth, high in the mountains. With people who will welcome me with open arms. I will feel right at home there. I can't stay here."

John nodded silently. He stared at the ground, trying to hold back the tears.

Joanna stepped forward and embraced him. She held him tightly.

"Although I would never have dared to admit this in front of this narrow-minded bully, who still

meant the world to me: you need to follow your heart, John, but follow it using your head.”

John tried to answer but all that came out were sobs. He was crying openly now. Joanna held him until he calmed down.

When they finally released their embrace, John was still choked up and struggling for composure. Joanna looked him deep in the eye and smiled. She wiped the last tear off his cheek with her thumb.

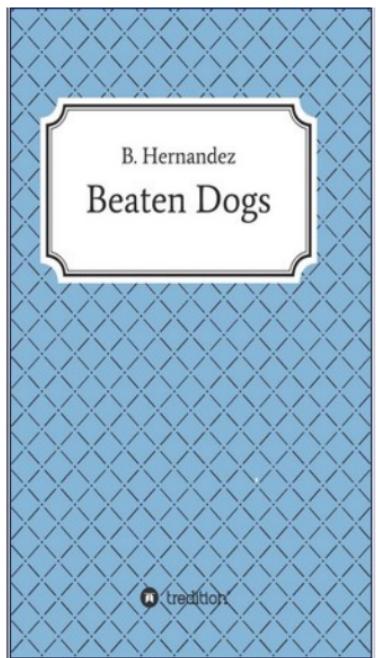
“Don’t waste any time.”

Both of them took a last deep breath together, then she turned and walked down the stairs. John lost her in the crowd but saw her reappear a little later. When she reached the parking lot, he lost her for good. He stood there for a few minutes and gazed across the canal into the distance.

When he passed the fountain on his way back, the workers had finished disassembling the sculpture and were repainting the pool interior. A weird blend of profound dismay and infinite relief settled on him as he walked down the stairs and to the crossroads. He waited patiently for the light to turn. John walked down the street thinking about what to cook for dinner with Izzie. The sun was high in the sky. The city around him was pulsating.

B. Hernandez

"Beaten Dogs"



"One way or the other, sooner or later, it would turn out exactly like this: you got older, the storms quieter, the inner voices would fall silent, your urge would die down, you would sit at the bar and remember the old battles, wounds and pain, and you would laugh at how powerful and intense it had all been. And how useless and destructive too. That especially. In time, even these memories would fade until you knew them to be there somewhere, but

couldn't feel them anymore. Just like he couldn't feel them right now. It would all be reduced to images and thoughts. Or not even that - you would only have a faint notion that there once was something different. That you once had felt and lived like that. But nothing would touch you anymore. You would have made your peace with everything. Eternal peace would rule where mighty battles were once raging. It would be like becoming a new person. Or perhaps rather a different person. A person you had longed to be in those dark, cold moments of your youth. Then you would finally arrive at the point that Alex had reached long before. You would know that the only possible happiness in life consisted in downing a few beers and having some lonely little thing suck your dick only to give her what she was craving for the most: a tender kiss and arms to hold her in the night. No more, no less."

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