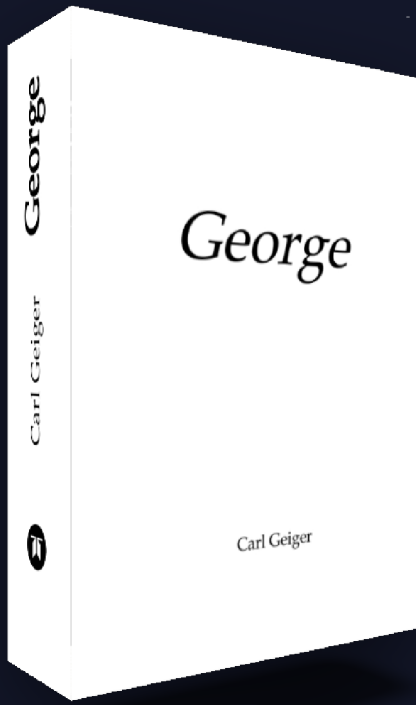




READING SAMPLE

George

Carl Geiger

A dinner among friends, an invitation to New York – and two people who can travel together, but cannot take a holiday from themselves.

After Dinner with Friends

00:51, TEXT MESSAGE, ME

Hello Lisa. I thought I'd write to you in good time, so that you can send me a few dates as soon as possible.

00:57, TEXT MESSAGE, LISA

George?

00:58, ME

Yes, it's me. We said goodbye on the platform just now and you gave me your number, remember? I hope you enjoyed the evening.

01:04, LISA

I remember. Hello George. It was a nice evening with interesting people. Thank you.

01:05, ME

As I said, it would be good if you could send me a few dates as soon as possible. Then I can book.

01:05, LISA

Dates? ... For what? Book what?

01:08, ME

Our trip to New York.

01:09, LISA

Have you lost your mind? That wasn't meant seriously ...

01:11, ME

Fear of flying already, hm? Never mind. It'll pass. I'm looking forward to it.

01:12, LISA

I'm not afraid of flying. We are certainly not flying to New York together. We met for the first time today. I'm not flying to New York with a complete stranger!

01:13, ME

Yesterday.

01:13, LISA

What do you mean, “yesterday”?

01:15, ME

We met yesterday. At dinner with the others. So strictly speaking we’re no longer “complete strangers” ... And besides, that’s the whole point ...

01:16, LISA

You’re mad. Get home safely. Sleep well.

01:17, ME

I don’t think so (mad, that is). Sleeping: I’m a little excited about our trip. But it’ll work out ... promise me you’ll think about it ... please?

01:22, LISA

Good night, George.

01:22, ME

It will only be one if you promise me ... please!

01:25, LISA

Fine. I promise. Now good night.

01:26, ME

Good night, Lisa. Sleep well and sweet dreams.

Dinner with Friends

‘George!’ Izzie, who has just sat down next to me at the table, half-tenderly rams her elbow sideways into my chest.

‘What?’ I look at her, shrugging innocently. ‘How can her day have been “bad” if, in her own words, “the usual” was bad? Either her day was perfectly normal, or all her days are “bad”.’

A few times a year I meet my closer circle of friends for dinner. It is nice to see these people now and then. By which I by no means wish to say that the emphasis lies on “now and then”. But these gatherings need not happen all that often, as far as I am concerned. It would be a shame, after all, if they were to degenerate into routine. This way, I believe, everyone is pleased to see the others again, and each of us has one thing or another to tell. Nothing is worse than idle chatter. Except perhaps what sometimes happens later on these evenings, when we already have a few beers and something stronger inside us, grow sentimental and begin telling one another the stories “from the old days”. If I were not a little tipsy myself by then, I would probably get up and go home. It is always the same stories anyway. Two or three events from our shared past which have evidently lodged themselves stubbornly in our memories and which we simply refuse to let go of. I must admit, though, that doused with a little alcohol these scraps of memory feel pleasant, and I can certainly see the magic of such customs. It is as though we were travelling back in time and feeling “like back then” again.

But we must be honest: telling each other stories, and the same ones over and over at that, is also a sign that we are already very old. And, far worse, that we no longer manage to live through any new shared past worth telling. No wonder — most of the people here have been in steady relationships for years at the very least, are married, or already have one or more children. New shared past is something

we all create mainly with people other than those we are sitting with here at the restaurant table.

All the same — and I believe I can speak for everyone here — we are close friends. Some of them are even my best friends. I am forever fascinated by how human beings work. Or how I believe they do. Really, we have had hardly anything to do with one another for years, and yet over the decades we have never entirely lost sight of each other, and still feel somehow connected. The past seems to have shaped us profoundly.

I am still looking at Izzie as the waiter brings our drinks.

She takes a deep breath and whirls her arms about. ‘It’s just something people say. Kindly behave yourself and be nice to Lisa,’ she sighs, nodding her head towards Lisa, who is sitting opposite me.

Lisa is new. It is her first time with us. Izzie brought her along.

I shrug again and look over at Max, who is sitting next to Lisa. He is Izzie’s husband and is grinning into his beer glass. Their two children are old enough to stay home alone tonight.

‘Darling,’ he says calmly, ‘YOU said you talked Lisa into coming along because she’d had a “bad day” and ought to treat herself to a little distraction. George only asked, and Lisa answered “the usual”. Seen that way, it was a usual, or in other words a normal, day for Lisa. Perfectly normally bad, as George said.’

Izzie’s eyes grow wide.

‘Max, for heaven’s sake, don’t encourage him. Help ME, will you!’

Max looks at me and tries to put on a serious face.

‘George. Be nice to Lisa. She’s had a bad day.’

I have to laugh. So does Max. I see Lisa grinning behind a raised hand. Izzie shakes her head, but she cannot help grinning too.

Jasmin and Alex turn towards us. They are the other couple at the table, sitting next to Izzie and Max, women beside women and men beside men. They have deposited their first child with Jasmin’s grandparents. The second is on the way, so there is no alcohol for Jasmin tonight. Alex is going without as well. So the evening probably will not run too late. That suits me fine.

‘What’s so funny?’ Jasmin asks curiously.

Izzie rolls her eyes theatrically.

‘We shouldn’t have sat Lisa next to George.’

‘Ah,’ Jasmin groans, ‘what did he say?’

‘Hey, hey. What’s this conspiracy all of a sudden?’ I protest. ‘I only asked about her day.’

‘And then he told her all her days were bad,’ Izzie adds, quite unasked.

‘Lisa said that “the usual” had been bad, and so ...’ I try to explain, but Jasmin interrupts me.

‘Oh, George. Let poor Lisa settle in first.’

‘But...’

‘No, George. No “but”,’ Jasmin interrupts me again.

Then she turns to Lisa.

‘You’ll have to forgive him, Lisa, our George isn’t very good at small talk. You’ll get used to it.’

‘Tsk. Not good at small talk,’ I mimic Jasmin. ‘I’m brilliant at small talk. I just don’t like small.’

‘Of course,’ Izzie scoffs, stroking my head with her hand as she does so.

We all have to laugh.

Simon and Robert have just arrived, sat down next to Lisa and me, and ordered a beer each. Simon, by his own account, is in an on-off relationship and is therefore here alone. Robert is firmly spoken for, but his better half, Annabelle, is abroad on business. She teaches yoga classes and is currently doing further training. ‘But otherwise she’s perfect,’ Robert is in the habit of saying on the subject.

‘What’s it all about?’ Simon wants to know after a brief greeting. ‘Elias sends his apologies, by the way. He’s on a reading tour.’

‘It’s about having a go at me, once again,’ I state for the record.

‘Oh, a round of sympathy for George,’ Jasmin laughs.

‘George doesn’t like small talk,’ Max states soberly.

‘Why not?’ Lisa asks me.

I look at her.

‘Do you like small talk, then?’

Lisa wags her index finger back and forth.

‘No, no. You can’t just answer a question with another question.’

‘Of course I can,’ I reply with a shrug.

‘Yes, all right, you CAN,’ Lisa concedes, rolling her eyes. ‘But you shouldn’t.’

I raise my eyebrows and am just about to answer when Izzie once again works on my chest, half-tenderly, with her elbow. We exchange a brief look. I turn back to Lisa and regard her for a moment.

She has lovely, well-kept dark hair, which she is wearing tied back this evening. I like her face. It is unobtrusively regular, without any distracting prominent features. She is lightly made up, but only so as to support the softness of her face, nothing emphasised or marked out. Either she is modest or she is trying to look inconspicuous. When she arrived, Izzie introduced Lisa as a lawyer she works with. So perhaps that is why. She has come straight from the office. That would also explain her clothes and the severe hairstyle. She is wearing a small necklace and matching earrings. But no rings, decorative or otherwise, on her fingers.

‘Because small talk is completely overrated,’ I finally answer Lisa.

‘How so?’ she insists, at once and firmly.

I find it hard to judge whether her question is honest curiosity, whether she wants to provoke me, or whether she needs to let off steam after a bad day.

With a half-hearted smile she holds my gaze, seemingly with ease. I think she does not know herself. But I like her voice, at any rate. Firm, a little husky, and pleasant in pitch.

‘Shouldn’t it be your turn to answer my question first, before you’re allowed to ask me a new one?’ I ask amiably.

Lisa lowers her gaze to the menu lying on the table in front of her.

‘Yes, I like small talk. It’s a nice way to break the ice and build a connection with each other, isn’t it?’

I smile.

‘Are you asking me because you’re not sure?’

She looks at me and smiles back.

‘I phrase it as a question because it sounds more polite, don’t you think? I believe that’s how it’s done in small talk.’

I think, visual impression or no visual impression, she is definitely not trying to be inconspicuous.

The rest of the table has grown unusually quiet, and I can feel the others' eyes fixed on Lisa and me.

I lean back in my chair, relaxed, and purse my lips.

'You see,' I say to Lisa, 'all completely superfluous. Firstly, if you want to talk about the weather — I've just been outside as well, I know what the weather's like. Secondly, granted, small talk might break the ice, but that, evidently, can be done in other ways too. And thirdly ... Thirdly, you're wrong.'

'About what?' Lisa asks, visibly intrigued.

'Yes, George, what is she wrong about?' Izzie presses, definitely with a little too much provocative relish.

'The bit about building connections,' I begin, 'that's where she's wrong.'

'Oh, what nonsense,' Izzie blurts out at once.

'Well, I like small talk too,' Simon lets us all know.

'And you need small talk all the time at work,' Robert adds.

'Everyone does small talk. Except you,' Jasmin says, shaking her head.

While the others busily discuss what small talk is good for and all the places it can be put to use, I wave the waiter over and place my order. He then waits patiently until the rest of the table have followed suit between their eager enumerations.

In the end everyone agrees that small talk is a good way of building connections, both in professional surroundings and in private life. They fall silent and look at me.

I shrug.

'Well, then you're all wrong.'

At once a collective groan can be heard around the table.

'Enlighten us, great master,' Jasmin demands, rolling her eyes.

Naturally I generously ignore her sarcastic undertone.

'What you've all described are situations which, at best, are still about sounding each other out BEFORE building a connection. You make small talk so as to put the other person to a first little test and get your bearings. Only

afterwards do you decide whether you want to build a connection — and, if so, what kind. Or perhaps you're only chatting with the other person because social convention requires it. Because it's polite.'

'That's what we've been saying all along. Small talk comes at the beginning of building a connection with each other,' Max sums up.

'No,' I object, 'that's not what you said. You said small talk IS the beginning of building a connection. But it's merely the preparation for the decision to build one.'

'Have you lost your mind? It's exactly the same thing,' Simon fumes.

'Building, decision ... hair-splitting. At any rate we meant the same thing and we're all agreed,' Alex adds.

I fix him with my eyes.

'When I say hello to the woman at the supermarket till and she asks me, "Hot today, hm?", I don't have the feeling that I'm already building a connection with her.'

Simon shakes his head.

'No, you're not building one, because you already have one. That's exactly what small talk does.'

Lisa looks at me.

'So, George,' she asks politely, with feigned interest, 'convinced?'

She has evidently decided to be provocative. Which I rather like.

I waggle my head from side to side, as if undecided.

'I suppose we'd first have to agree on what exactly we mean by "connection".'

'Oh God, here we go again,' Simon groans.

'George,' Max says calmly to me, 'not everyone here is a philosopher.'

I want to reply, but Lisa gets in first.

'Connection means trust.'

The others at the table seem to think for a moment and then nod at her.

I look at her and nod too.

'All the better. We're among friends here. If there's no trust here, where would there be? So anyone who makes nothing but small talk in a setting like this doesn't want to share anything at all. Or has something to hide. That's why small talk is

superfluous. And if you don't want to share anything anyway, or want to hide everything, then there's no need to waste time on small talk either.'

Lisa smiles triumphantly.

'Yes, fine. But I don't know yet whether I'm among friends here, do I? And with a little small talk I could get to know you all better and build a feeling of familiarity with you, so that we can work on connections.'

'Exactly,' Izzie confirms Lisa's objection.

I lean forward until my elbows come to rest on the table. I look straight at Lisa. She has very beautiful eyes.

'So you do have something to hide, Lisa? Is that why you had a bad day today?'

For a moment her face becomes a mask. Then it reddens a little; I can see it even through her make-up. The next thing I feel is Izzie's elbow in my ribs again.

'George!' she says, smirking at me.

'What?' I ask, quite surprised.

'She certainly has nothing to hide,' Jasmin backs her up, 'and, Lisa, you're definitely among friends here.'

I lean back in my chair with a smile and try to throw Lisa an apologetic look.

At that moment two waiters come to our table and serve the food we ordered. Lisa turns to one of them and orders a glass of red wine. She asks round the table who else would like one. Jasmin would love one but is not allowed. Izzie orders one as well. The gentlemen at the table, apart from me, stick to beer. I order my second Coke.

'Don't you drink alcohol?' Lisa asks me.

'I do.'

'But?'

'But what?'

'Coke?'

'Yes. I like Coke.'

'Couldn't you have had a glass of wine to clink glasses with?'

'I could.'

'But?'

'I like Coke.'

Lisa breathes in deeply and out again, rolling her eyes as she does so.

I wait patiently until she looks at me again.

‘Lisa, if you wanted to clink glasses with me, why didn’t you say so?’

‘I did ask who else would like wine.’

‘But I didn’t want wine, I wanted another Coke. But if you’d like to clink glasses with me, I’d have ordered myself a glass.’

Lisa looks over at Izzie.

‘Is he always like this?’ she asks, pointing her chin in my direction.

‘Do you mean about the Coke, or in general?’ Izzie answers laconically.

Jasmin pushes air through her pressed lips so forcefully that it hisses.

‘Comes to the same thing ...’

‘How much time have you got, Lisa?’ asks Max, who is evidently enjoying himself enormously.

I point at his plate and let him know that his food is getting cold. He grins at me and explains that that is perfectly all right with him.

‘Hard to say,’ Izzie goes on. ‘He is a bit special, our George. On the one hand, he gives the impression of being quite clever. And you definitely have to watch out that he doesn’t get into your head and muddle everything up in there. But deep down I don’t think he could hurt a fly, either. For all that, he seems to be a reasonably nice sort. On the other hand, you never really know where you stand with him.’

‘Something of a nerd,’ Simon contributes.

‘Emotionally hard to reach, I think. But definitely good for entertaining and, as you’ve just seen, mostly pointless discussions,’ Jasmin judges.

Alex nods.

I look at Max. ‘Anything valuable to add on the subject yourself?’

He shrugs. ‘I’ve already said you’re the philosopher here.’

Lisa grins at me, amused.

I narrow my eyes and raise my right index finger in admonition.

‘Well, firstly: I am blessed with a very potent and active prefrontal cortex. So I simply can’t help thinking a lot, and quickly ...’

‘Tsk,’ Izzie cuts in, ‘your prefrontal whatsit isn’t the problem. It’s your loose tongue, which you’re evidently far more blessed with.’

The rest of the table laughs and nods in agreement.

‘Every now and then we’re not sure whether he really is as intelligent as he sounds and makes out. Or whether he just has a loose, though admittedly quick, mouth,’ Jasmin adds, just to be on the safe side.

‘All right, all right. That was almost funny, and we all had a little laugh. But seriously now. Secondly, I need it for my job as well. So really it’s an occupational hazard.’

‘What is your job, then? Professional pain in the neck?’ Lisa asks at once.

I have to laugh along with the others. It came so directly and drily from Lisa that I could not suppress the reflex.

‘You’d have done better to ask how many jobs he’s had,’ Max answers her, grinning broadly at me.

‘George changes jobs more often than other people change their underwear,’ Izzie adds.

This time I intervene before everyone joins in the discussion again.

‘Yes, I’ve changed the company I work for now and then. But the job I do has basically stayed the same for years. I advise companies. Processes, workflows and so on.’

Lisa looks a little confused.

‘So you’re a consultant. You don’t change companies, you change contracts.’

I shake my head.

‘No. I change companies. I’m not an external consultant. I’m always employed.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Robert presses, ‘consultant or employee, either way you talk a lot and then only tell people what they already knew, or would know if they did their jobs properly. Typical consultancy business.’

‘It’s a job. And I’m good at it,’ I answer calmly.

Robert is a little irritated.

‘It’s a rip-off. You don’t do any proper work at all. You go in and talk to people, and then you make a few presentation slides showing what they told you,

only a bit prettier. And then you show them more slides where they can see how it could be done differently, whatever it is they do.'

I nod silently.

Essentially, he has summed it up well. And to some extent he is right. It is astonishing how far one can get in my business with nothing but common sense. The bigger the company I happen to be working for, the bigger, as a rule, the collective lack of clear sight, the depersonalisation of responsibility, and the inability to regulate itself over the long term into a state of healthy stability. There are always those who cannot, and many who do not want to. Or who at least want it primarily for themselves.

I do, however, bring along a little methodical knowledge and a fair amount of experience. So I would not sign up to the claim that my work generates no benefit and no added value. The most important thing, though, is that there is always something to do and the tasks are practically never the same. If one has to spend so many hours in the office, then at least let them be busy and entertaining ones.

'You're hardly in a position to shoot your mouth off.'

That was Simon. We all turn towards him reflexively.

'You're a banker. You just make money with money. That's far worse.'

Robert stares at the man opposite him in bafflement.

'I'm not a banker at all. I work in income collection. That's just the back office. You don't earn half as much there as on the front line.'

'Oh,' Jasmin asks, 'won't the big boys at the bank play with you?'

We all have to grin a little, and Robert quickly calms down again.

'That one there,' he says, pointing back at Simon, 'is the very worst of us anyway. He works on machines that are going to wipe out humanity.'

'What?' Lisa eyes Simon, half curious, half incredulous.

And Robert adds: 'He works in IT and programs those things that first beat us at chess, then learn to recognise cats in pictures, and then take over the world. Because that's exactly how the rise of the machines begins ...'

'What rubbish,' Simon is quick to play it down, 'I write algorithms for data analysis in advertising. It may be called artificial intelligence, but really it's just somewhat advanced logic. In any case, advertising has no interest whatsoever in

humanity being wiped out. Quite the opposite. It's like a virus, which has no interest in killing its host either.'

'Aha! So you do know about all that stuff, and you're secretly working on wiping out humanity,' Izzie jokes.

'Then again, it's not that hard to beat you at chess,' I smile at Robert, 'so these machines aren't all that frighteningly intelligent after all.'

In return he shows me his outstretched middle finger.

'Joking aside,' Jasmin demands anxiously, 'do you think this artificial intelligence is really coming?'

'What do you mean, "coming"? People have been working on it for decades,' Simon says drily, which does nothing whatsoever to reassure Jasmin.

'What? Does that mean there are already robots among us and we don't notice?' she asks, and we are not entirely sure whether she means it seriously or is trying to make a joke.

Simon makes no effort to find out. 'Of course. The machines have been ruling the world for ages, and soon they'll activate the Terminators, and they'll kill us all.'

Izzie gives him a very pointed and unmistakable look for that.

He flinches involuntarily.

'That was a joke, Jasmin. Artificial intelligence doesn't mean Terminators and machines that want to rule the world. Those don't exist, obviously.'

'Artificial intelligence or Terminators?' Max asks with a grin.

'Get stuffed,' Simon answers him, with rather less of a grin on his face.

'So what is artificial intelligence, then?' Izzie wants to know. Jasmin nods at her.

'In general, artificial intelligence refers to the attempt to replicate certain human decision-making structures, for instance by building and programming a computer in such a way that it can work on problems relatively independently. Often, however, the term is also used for an imitated intelligence, in which mostly simple algorithms are meant to simulate "intelligent behaviour", as in computer games, for example.

'The understanding of the term artificial intelligence often reflects the Enlightenment notion of "man as machine", the imitation of which is the

declared goal of so-called strong AI: to create an intelligence that is meant to mechanise human thought, or rather to design and build a machine that reacts intelligently or, indeed, behaves like a human being. After decades of research, the goals of strong AI remain visionary.'

We all look at Lisa, who is holding her smartphone and has just finished reading from the screen.

'Yes, sorry,' she adds, 'I'm an internet junkie. I google everything.'

'Well, that's a good example of how artificial intelligence replaces the human kind: by shifting "knowledge", unfiltered, from the head into the net, so that all the intelligence WE still need is the ability to surf the net,' I respond, far too spontaneously.

Lisa puts her smartphone down on the table, slowly raises her head and turns her undivided attention entirely on me.

'Present company excepted, of course,' shoots out of me at once. 'I was referring to the collective disinformation disaster of the broad masses on the internet. It's incredible how recklessly some people deal with the net and its possibilities and more or less hand themselves over to it completely.'

Lisa looks at me for another drawn-out moment. Then at last a faint smile appears on her lips.

'That was a close one, George.'

. . .

What happens next ...

... you can find out in *George* by Carl Geiger.

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