

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 possible 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.