

JORDENS BARN





Handwritten text in a script, likely Devanagari, arranged in a grid-like pattern. The text is written in black ink on a white background. Some characters are highlighted in green. The text is organized into several columns and rows, with some characters appearing to be part of a larger word or phrase. The overall layout suggests a structured document or a list of items.



CHILD OF EARTH

Durandal Sippan Brytting

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(But if the choice were between bought-and-not-read, and read-but-not-bought, I'd pick the latter any day. Share it with every psychonaut you know.)

Front cover art: Vicente Balbastre

Culture is de user manual for de human experience. This book is a guide.

*This work is dedicated to you,
“Concerned Fucking Citizen”
who, on the night of November 2, 2007
were out walking your dog in Stockholm
in the first snow of that year.*

*In ten seconds and with a few choice words
you stood up for two complete strangers
who were helpless and vulnerable.*

*You left a mark on my soul
and I think of you whenever I need to be reminded
that even a very small action
can mean everything to another person
when she is weak.*

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

This is my first published novel – it is self-published – I am a part-time struggling writer / part-time eking out a living in the organic food business. My publishing budget was spent getting the physical hardcover book (in Swedish) out there, so this translation is purely a service to everyone who has asked me when they'll get to read it in English. That is why: #1, I can not afford an actual, professional translator. And that is why: #2, I hacked this translation together on my own. And that is why: #3, it's not a flawless translation. I may or may not have a way with words, but I militantly believe that one should never ever translate into a language that is not one's native tongue, period. I apologize for any errors in spelling, grammar, or style, and I urge anyone who knows better to contact me and point them out (except the myriad intentional ones, the intentionality of which should be clear from context) so I can fix them. [The good thing about a non-physical edition of the book is I can make changes even after I put this out there. This is the very first release, the "1.0".] This book is also packed with hidden messages, easter eggs, nods and winks to related works, and so on, some of which I found impossible to retain in the English. (Then again, I did put some others in there instead.) I think I did a half decent job, but the text is certainly inferior to the Swedish original. And that is why: #4, this edition is freeware. I'm simply glad that you're reading it.

(But if you speak Swedish, please support my budding writing career by purchasing the hardcover edition. Also, you can totally get it signed and then sell it on eBay when I'm dead and become a millionaire. Money-back guarantee if this turns out to not be the case!)

Oh, and before you turn the page and get into this book, I should tell you it is advisable to experience this adventure with your third eye wide open.

*“The war situation has developed
not necessarily to Japan’s advantage.”*

*—Hirohito, emperor of Japan,
hours after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*

I don’t care to dwell on the past. I would much prefer to talk neither of what has been, nor what is yet to come. Sometimes one can say so much and still never say enough. But what could be said about the present moment, without any account of at least some of what came before? How could you know who I am, without knowing who I was before?

That’s why I’m going to tell you about something that has already happened. And the first thing that happened was that it rained.

* * *

It rained when I got back to town. The smell of wet road dust spread in the air as the first sparse, light drops fell down and hit the ground all around me. I wandered into the town where I lived my childhood. It's a wonderful feeling, returning to familiar streets. The rain gently found its way in over the city, like the stroke of a loving hand. It was the last of several cool late-summer rains after a couple of long and unusually hot summer months. But the heat wave had passed. This was September, and the weather was teetering on the edge, about to fall headlong into autumn.

It was a Sunday afternoon and clouds covered the skies. As I entered the city, step by step down into old memories, the rain thickened. These streets are my home. I had been gone a few years, but it felt like a hundred. Or maybe just a few days. Sometimes it's hard to tell. There at the intersection stood the crooked stop sign, still not replaced. Here I walked past the dilapidated hot dog shack, abandoned and in disrepair since I was in grade school. There is conscious life underneath the surface here, and everywhere the glow of unknown graffiti artists' magical signs on the walls. I had walked a long way and ought to be exhausted, but their spells filled me with energy despite my barely remembering any of the signatures. Most seemed like strange symbols and random letters – and the ones I did recognize were just as mysterious, of course. But they felt like old friends when I passed them on the walls. Cryptic fading signatures of holy prophets such as Kari, B48, Home – the last one felt especially welcoming: I was home.

This city, population: some hundred thousand, was no Big City. It was also not the small town where everybody knows everybody. There were some who knew very many people. There were also those who did not know anyone. There were

movie theaters, restaurants and snooker halls. There were successful people, derelicts, old people's homes, and cigar clubs. There were places to be avoided after sundown, and there were people that might have been the good reason for it. In short, it was any given city.

If there was anything special to be said for it, it might have been a little more beautiful than most. It was a seaport, where the gulls wailed above the pier and summer winds scented the western part of town with salt water and seaweed. In the morning the sun would rise over the boundless woods, and at night she would set across the sea. She turned the heads of half the population then, enticing the old and the young to go out on their balconies, down to the ocean, out to beaches and parks to admire the skies, which seemed to shimmer in even more beautiful colors than usual this year.

But I guess that was true every year.

Not quite as colorful as those remarkable sunsets, but nearly, were the smoothly rounded letters still visible on the wall behind the hot dog shack, where the same huge slogan had enlightened passersby for years and years: "The Earth is our mother, the woods are alive!" In my childhood when the painting was fresh, it used to glitter like a rainbow and almost outdid the sun sinking down to sleep beneath the waters. I remember I always used to ask my mom to take me to school the long way, just so I'd get to look at the colorful building on the way there. It was faded and flaking now, but I remembered every single shade of color it used to be. The image was alive within me as though the colors had come into me as they went out of the dried-up boards of the shack. The artist, again, was Home, according to the signature in a corner. I sent a few

seconds' worth of deliberate love their way before the place disappeared behind me.

A few blocks ahead I spotted a homeless man I recognized from before. He was sleeping under a roof. So I finally got rid of the spare change someone gave me yesterday. The sound of rain was all around us. Rain always makes me happy. It's like the Earth and the sky embracing, I feel it sending ripples through me, like an act of cosmic lovemaking. Water is the source of all life and in the rain, nature impregnates herself. The Earth Mother gives unto herself the gift of water in order to grow. Our planet is the little embryo of the Milky Way, or at least the solar system. I love when it rains.

So I took off my sandals for a while and sat down next to the man. Sleep unites us all. I gathered my hair in my hands and wrung the water out. It sloshed against the pavement. The rain stood like a wall where the roof ended in front of us, and I sat still for a while just to enjoy the sound experience. I am constantly amazed by the most trivial things. How quietly a single water droplet falls to the ground. Then the roar of a rainstorm, infinitely grander than the mere sum of a billion silent drops.

As I sat there, a wordless revelation came to me, a premonition. There was something strange in the air. Something was getting closer. I could feel it in my whole body. *Something was about to happen.* Something huge. I closed my eyes and heard only the holy rainfall. Every day I come to a whole new place. It's cosmic. My name emphasizes it: it's Liv, and here I am, a part of the universe.

* * *

I stood behind a window on the other side of the street, glaring at those two out there. It was almost 3:50pm, and as if the hobo hadn't been annoying enough with his littering up the street right outside my living room window all day – now some kind of bleeding-heart liberal had teamed up with him. They're *breeding* out there, man. The rain beat hard against the window. I would have thought the first drizzle would scare the drunk off, but now that it's gotten to this they're gonna crowd the street until it stops raining altogether. Mother Fuck.

Don't get me too wrong, but I refuse to feel sorry for the homeless people in this town. Sure, it sucks in other countries that have real poverty. But this is a rich country and they can get every kind of help imaginable. I know this because I donate plenty to the organizations that provide that help. I'm not cold-hearted. I believe in helping people, as long as it's done the right way. But I also know all too well, that despite all the resources that are available to them, some people are just not interested. They don't want help. And there is no excuse for that. Like those two outside the window. People that make an informed decision to live like that. To be a wandering pack of bums that live off of other people's garbage, when they could go to a halfway house or whatever at any time, and start taking steps toward a normal life. Why? It's pure, meaningless stupidity. I'm getting annoyed just thinking about it.

So I stood there staring. I felt like the hobo ruined my whole day. I was in a great mood before I saw that guy out there. Last night I finally got lucky with Jennifer again. She's the girl I live with. Shit, I love her, but our sex life is fucked up, man. She's a walking inconsistency. She's crazy hot, but she's got a voice like she smoked three packs a day for decades, but really she's not even 30 and never smoked at all. She's smart, but sometimes

she gets into one of her turns and acts out like crazy. She's not stable. The bedroom summarizes it pretty good: we barely ever have sex, but when we do, holy shit. I've never seen kinky like this. I didn't really think it was real. It's one of those things that guys brag about and you know they're exaggerating. Here's how it works with Jennifer, every single time: first there's nothing, for like forever, sometimes several weeks. And then, just when I'm starting to get desperate enough to *nag* her about it – like clockwork – that's when she lets me in her pants. The same deal every time. And every time that happens, she insists on getting so hammered she can barely stand up – on her own initiative, I mean – and then I get to do pretty much whatever I want with her. Shit, I hear how this sounds, but seriously, that's how she wants it. I'm not some kind of sociopath or something. I even questioned it, actually. It's not like I enjoyed the fact that my own girlfriend had to be blackout drunk in order to get down to it. Obviously I wondered what the fuck was going on. So after we started having sex on a regular basis and I guess we were sort of in a relationship, I asked her flat out if she didn't want to do it with me or if she had something against me or what. But then she just mumbled, drunk and hoarse, "this is how I wanna get fucked". And hey, we're all different. Why shouldn't she be allowed to get her kicks the way she likes it? I ain't complaining. Sure, I guess she had some kind of issues. Who doesn't? That's no reason why she shouldn't be loved, jeez. And in between those rare sexy nights, our relationship was pretty much like any other, more or less.

* * *

I sat on ma knees in a bathroom the other side of town, house belongin to some family with kids. I was in a pool of brown water and half ma arm shoved in the pipes. Ma name's Cláudio and I'm a plumber. I *ain't* no "pipefitter" or whatever they make up to get over their complex. I'm a *plumber*. And I don't pay tax, I got zero education, and I'm the *best* at what I do. I'm an artist in the bathroom and I love my job. I'm proud to call maself a plumber.

I love the whole deal. I love bein invited into rich people's fancy homes, and gettin to lift their secret lids. I get to see the parts of their houses that they never see. And there, from inside their shameful hidin places, I get to *pull stuff out*. And the homeowners standin there in the bathroom door with an embarrassed smile, forced to look at stuff they don't want to know none about. If I say so maself I'd say my job is a lot like bein a shrink. Only less showy.

So there I was, draggin a huge, hairy lump of somethin outta the drains. The pipe gave a wet rattle as if it just barfed up a dead cat. And it looked like it, too. The family man was peekin into the bathroom, and I was about to ask as a joke how long they'd been missin their cat. Ha ha ha! But then I saw he was pale enough just lookin at the hairball. I gave him a stern look instead and did the usual spiel about what not to flush. You gonna play hairdresser with your kids, the hair goes in the waste bin. Toilet bowls and trashcans got nothin in common so it's amazin how people keep mistakin one for the other all the time. Body waste goes in the toilet. Other waste is garbage.

"Duly noted," the guy mumbled. Name of Elias. I gave him a smile so he wouldn't feel too bad. Then I went back to cleanin the pipes.

But there was somethin else wrong too. I couldn't quite put ma finger on it exactly, but somethin was just not right. Nothin I could do anythin about, but definitely somethin. Like I said I'm real good at what I do, and if there's a problem I'm familiar with and I can fix it then I sense it almost as soon as I step in the room. I got like a sixth sense almost. But this was just somethin vague in the back of my head that I couldn't quite make out. Nothin I had to worry about, really. But it bugged me. Like there was somethin under the floor. Not in the pipes, I mean, but like *under the floor*. I thought like a shrink would. If he discovers that the patient's crazy brain is because of some regular disease in the body that's behind it, then he'd send him on to a regular doctor, right? But I gotta finish up the toilet first in either case. So I kept at it.

If I weren't a plumber, what would I do? I couldn't even imagine anythin else. It's my dad's fault that I ended up here. Well, turned out not to be a fault, but still. He didn't approve that I couldn't get a job when I was young, because there were still jobs to get when he was. Young, I mean. So when I couldn't find one, he made it his life goal to find one for me. And the first job he could arrange was this, cleanin out blocked toilets and shit like that.

So one day there I was, in a bathroom belongin to some guy he knew, with a pair of gross, worn-out rubber gloves on that would break within five minutes. I had no clue what I was doin, just tried to hide how terrified I was, you know? I went through like an inner crisis there on the floor, but in the end I had to decide to just do it. Cause it had to be done, like. So I said, fuck the thoughts and fears, just get on with it! And when the gloves dissolved down there in the shit soup I simply gave up. I mean that in a good way. It was already too late, right? It

immediately clicked for me, that if I'm gonna get dirty then I might as well get really fucking dirty. There's no difference between havin someone else's shit and piss all over your hands, and havin it all the way up to your elbows. After that it was easy street the whole way. Nothin could ever gross me out after feelin those rubber gloves tear and the brown sludge come seepin in and smearin all over ma fingers. Plus I learned to wear real reliable gloves after that.

Through the years I've taught myself everythin. By now I know pretty much everythin I'd know if I'd gone to like plumber school or whatever. Probably even more actually. Dad had a degree and he always said the most important thing he learned at the university was that it's a waste of time to look to anybody else for education. So I've just experimented ma way through everythin. Whenever there was somethin I couldn't do, I've never been too proud to turn down the money and tell the customer to find a better guy. But then I always made sure to learn that particular thing until next time, of course.

Then one day it hit me: I don't see this as a temporary thing anymore. I'm 30 now and I never want to work with anythin else. I'm not gonna get rich off it, but who needs money? I ain't dumb just cause I have a literal shit job. I've seen through the money scam. People stressin around and don't even know why. Me I stand at the sidelines, just lookin at them. Plus, the plumbin thing gives me a sort of - I don't know what to call it - inner peace, almost. There's somethin satisfyin about removin blockages from the pipes and then listenin to the sound of freely flowin water rushin through the ducts unhindered. It's the most beautiful sound there is. I don't know if this makes

sense here, but if I weren't a shrink maybe I'd be a midwife instead. I deliver the sewage and I love it!

* * *

It goes without saying that it's not a fun experience to have a stranger examining the stuff you've flushed down the toilet, but on this particular occasion it didn't bother me so much. A bigger feeling was buzzing in my chest, bubbling in harmony with the rain that poured down the bathroom window: excited anticipation. Because this was not just any day – this was the day of my liberation. This was the same day I had decided, for real this time, to start a new chapter of my life. I was going to leave my wife Anita and our children behind me.

Yes, it sounds bad. I understand that one might think that. But I've been thinking a lot. I've spent so many nights awake, turning it over and over in my head from every conceivable angle. Isn't it strange how everything looks so different when you change your perspective? For instance, and this may seem abstract but it's actually relevant: the passage of time. From an ordinary human perspective, it would seem that we are always moving forward through time. But if you think about it, isn't it equally valid that *time moves backwards through us*? Time comes at us from ahead, you might visualize it as a light shining from some point at the end of time, and we're constantly moving inwards toward that point at the center of the light. But behind us in the past, everything withers away in the long shadows of time. These shadows are cast farther than we can see, and they grind everything down to nothingness. Perhaps that light is something burning, time burning. With a fire that distorts, then purifies, and then finally obliterates. So everything we've done in the past, eventually it all becomes meaningless. It's all the same ashes in the end. Isn't it then my given right to be happy in the present moment? One might even say it's every man's *duty* to find his own happiness in the present moment.

On that rainy day during that summer's end when I made the decision to start a new chapter, I had already invested several years in being an excellent husband and father. I had gone into that venture with all my heart. I was never stingy or cruel, I gave all I had to the ones I loved. But that's not where I was meant to find my happiness.

I thought so at first. Or at least I wanted to think so. When I first met Anita, I felt like I was finally home. But the more time swept through me, the more the surface began to flake. The colors faded and I felt like I was missing out on something more important. Like I had been lured onto a path that I was never meant to walk. The days went by, turning into weeks, months and years, and that feeling of being *stuck* kept growing stronger. In the end there was nothing left of the happiness I once found in family life. Nothing at all.

And I believe – and most people would agree, I'm sure of it – I believe that each individual ultimately is responsible for their own happiness. That means, to begin with, that I had to go away for my own happiness. But actually, it even means that I'm going away for *their* happiness. I don't feel like anyone could accuse me of anything even if the others don't take it very well. I understand that from a certain point of view their sorrow would be my fault, but I think it's exactly the other way around. How real is a joy that is so helplessly bound to fickle circumstance? How can you label “true joy” that which can be disintegrated over a single night from another person merely departing from the group? But then, when they wake up tomorrow and find themselves in this new situation, “Life without Elias”. Then they'll get to find happiness again under new circumstances. Just like I am doing. And when they find

it, it shall be a stronger, more pure happiness, and so much more independent than before.

A loss here and there is a part of growing up and finding oneself. An *important* part, maybe the most important of all. And I'm not heartless - please don't think I didn't love them. They were my family after all. My beloved family. But the fact is that they were holding me back in my life. In some ways I think we held *each other* back. I just don't want my whole life to be all for somebody else's sake. Who wants that? I don't want to be a passive participant in my own life – just as little as I want the others to live just for my sake. But that is exactly what family life turns into. A dead end, for me and the others. But I would show them the way out. I'd lead them right by leaving to seek my own happiness. And I hoped with all my heart that they would find their happiness too, once I was gone.

* * *

I was lying on the couch upstairs. Mom sat at the table playing a card game with the twins. I pretended to read one of dad's old comic books. Fortunately they were so caught up in the cards that they didn't notice I never turned the page. I wasn't really reading at all. I'd been staring at the same page with the same sci-fi story for like ten minutes. I couldn't read, I could barely move, just lying there. I had a horrible feeling and I almost cried even. I don't know why I had to hide it, but somehow it felt very important that they didn't discover me. I was ashamed and I didn't know why.

This wasn't the first time it happened, but it was the worst. So far anyway. But every time was kind of the worst, so those words didn't mean anything. Not anymore. I didn't know what this was, but it had come and gone for as long as I could remember. In the nights I slept with a bucket next to my bed because I felt like I was gonna throw up, but I almost never did. I had to run to the bathroom in the middle of the night to puke, but as soon as I got there I didn't feel sick anymore. But then it came back as soon as I went back to bed. And I could never understand why.

I tried to see myself from outside sort of, to try to figure out what I did wrong that made me feel like this, but it was so hard. There were so many things that I stopped doing because I thought they had something to do with that terrible, terrible feeling. Sometimes when I tried something for the first time it seemed to work, at first. But then it happened again, even though I was so careful. It usually came at night. I always slept on my left side.

Mom and dad couldn't help at all. Asking them just made me feel stupid, like I only wanted attention. Because I was the youngest one and because John and Axel were twins. I couldn't

do anything real at all, because as soon as I got an opportunity to be seen everyone just said the little one was *acting out*. And if I told them about that, then *that* was just “typical youngest sibling behavior”. Of course I’m jealous of the twins, but only because nobody takes me seriously! (There’s a word for this and it’s called a viscous circle.) They should listen to me more. I wasn’t even that little anymore, I was going to turn 10 that year.

And right now I felt real sick. I couldn’t stand it anymore, I wanted to get out of myself, I wished that I didn’t exist, I wanted to disappear. But I felt like that all the other times too. But this wasn’t just any day. Because what made this one special, was that suddenly I felt: I *could* disappear. If I stopped just *thinking* about it and actually *did* something about it. Did something just like:

“Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer! After Mankind finally goes extinct and the surviving pets become self-aware, most of the planet’s animals suffer from confusion, shock, and depression. Kitten Lickle is a feral queen who runs the local pub, where alcoholic cats and dogs come to drown their sorrows in leftover bottles of the drinks of Man. But when Death one day threatens to reap her best friend, she can no longer afford to stagnate. She leaves the fragile safety of their pet society to go on a pilgrimage and find the rumored Twee Wisperer, a squirrel philosopher of legend who may not even exist. This marks the start of a polyglottal inner and outer adventure in search of answers to the grand questions. ‘An astonishing read’ –*Chronicle of Current Events*. ‘Unbelievable’ –*Evening Independent*. ‘Absurd and seriously funny’ –*Sunday Dispatch*.”

Thus read the blurb on the back of the cover of Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer, a genre-busting novel by Sandra Ehinger.

Everyone says I'm real good at reading. I've read like more books than everyone else in my class put together. But Kitten Lickle is the best book ever. I think it's actually a grownup book, although I found it in the youth section of the library and it doesn't look like a grownup book by the cover. But it's got a lot of tricky words, I mean – check out the back of the cover! But I mean I can read the whole thing, I just don't know what everything means exactly. But I borrowed the book anyway because the cover was great. And also it says on the back that it's an exciting adventure with talking animals and that all the humans have died. Plus it starts with cussing in English, and I think English has better cusswords than Swedish somehow:

“What de fuck happened? The question on the tip of everybody's tongue. Those two sentences also form the short prologue to this tale of Kitten Lickle, who was of a inquisitive mind & thus a fine protagonist.” Those three sentences set off the Kitten Lickle book, which was mostly in Swedish but with a decent helping of gratuitous English as spelled by cats, and sometimes other languages thrown in at random.

It was the hardest book I'd ever read. I could follow the story pretty good but some of the details were totally impossible. Like I said I read super much, and I usually asked mom when I found a word I didn't know in a book. But I don't know if mom wanted me to read this one, so I didn't dare. But I started using the dictionaries instead. Mom and dad have tons

of books. It took like a hundred years to read the whole book the first time, but as soon as I got through it I started over from the beginning. I've read it several times since then and I'm going to read it again. The strangest thing is that *every time* I find new words that I don't know, and every time it feels like I'm almost sure that I didn't even see them before even though it was the exact same book. Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer is the best book EVER.

* * *

I woke to the sound of rain. A young woman sat barefoot right next to me, looking at the downpour. *Nudi pedes*, like an ascetic monk. Her face was not entirely unfamiliar to me, I believe I might have seen her wander the streets in the past. But that must have been a long time ago now. I was always slightly glad to see her, although the reason why was always obscure to me. Likewise on this occasion. Something about her must have appealed to me on an unconscious level. Naturally, until now I had only seen her passing by, so this was our first actual contact. Well, “contact” may be poor wording. At this stage of my life I was not one inclined to conversation, and so I did not speak a word, despite her sitting beside me as comfortably as though we were acquainted. We nodded at one another in greeting, as though to at least confirm the existence of the other, and the recognition of same from the streets. We remained sitting in silence for a time.

Her naked feet reminded me of a verse from Exodus. *The place whereon thou standest is holy ground*. My gaze swept across the street, falling on a foul-smelling puddle of water, quivering and growing larger underneath the roof that jutted out above us. A chemical rainbow glittered on the surface of the water, an unnatural membrane formed by some liquid leaking out of a car up the street. In the middle of the puddle lay also an old condom or something, floating around like a dead, bloated jellyfish. I seemed to have dust or soil in my mouth, in my throat. I hawked, coughed and spat out some sort of phlegm into the water. God’s honest truth – if He against all reasonable assumption were real, this place still would not be holy ground. On the other hand, one might argue that the ontological relationship between the sacral and the profane certainly is a complex subject. The holiest may

perchance be more present in the most unclean, than anywhere else.

In light of these reflections, the bare feet of the nameless woman seemed all the more powerful as a symbol of purity. When Moses puts off his shoes from off his feet, he casts aside his old sins in preparation of facing God. The filth and the blood that clung to his soles through the walk of life must be left behind as he enters into the light of the Lord. Numerous biblical scholars put forth that Man is never actively punished for his past sins, like a shallow reading may suggest. Instead, sin is a temporary obstacle, meant to be overcome. It is a knot that we ourselves have tied around our own salvation, for ourselves to untangle. They maintain that sin is a chain forged by one's own hand, fettering us to the flesh. Weighing us down, dragging us to the material bottom of a larger, discarnate existence. This chain has to be abandoned before we can receive salvation. According to this interpretation, the sin and the punishment are one and the same.

No. That's enough of that. The thoughts are coming back again. This is not good. I shut my eyes, then blinked a few times to force them away, push everything down before it went too far. Gone. Gone? Gone.

I then examined my collection box. I estimated about twelve dollars. I was also carrying a little in my pockets from before. Put together it should be enough to silence my thoughts as well as my hunger. The rain was crashing down where the roof came to an end in front of us, but underneath it we sat on dry ground. I mustered the strength to get up with a groan, shaking gravel out of my beard.

The woman prepared to get up, and gave me an inquiring look as though she were asking for permission to accompany

me. I guess I made some gesture in response. When I started to walk, she walked by my side.

* * *

The next time I woke up underneath my thin blanket, half the day had gone by. The monster headache that woke me up a couple of times before lunch was gone, but I still felt like shit and was sore here and there. At least it was raining now. The calm pitter-patter against the other side of the wall eased the nausea a bit. Guess how thankful I was that it wasn't another day of nonstop glaring sun. These hungover mornings during the summer, when it got up to 33°C... Fuck that shit. I instinctively started shaking my head at the mere thought of it, but that made the headache come back so I immediately stopped. Carefully got up to sit on the bed with my feet firmly planted against the floor, waited for a while for the room to regain its balance around me. Trusty gravity. My jaw was sort of just hanging, mouth open like a broken cabinet, breathing deep and slow in an attempt to not vomit. This was not Jennifer's day. Far fucking from. Thank god I'm halfway through. Put on the first pair of sweatpants I could reach and a tank top, stumbled out to the kitchen to get a drink of water.

"Good morning sunshine!" Finn, my boyfriend, grinned. He sat in the living room in front of the TV with a pile of newspapers in his lap. "It's nice to finally see you awake, I've had it turned down for you."

He turned up the TV and the gentle throbbing of brain pain came fading back in. At least it was music on. I mean it could have been football or something. It was my folks' old song, too, I didn't notice until I heard the chorus. My brain wasn't all there yet. I'm never gonna drink again. That song with, those guys, she still listened to it all the time. Some 70s group. Right: *Dawn*. Funny coincidence. Then again it wasn't quite dawn anymore, but at least I just got up. So it was dawn in my head so to speak. I drew a huge glass of water and got it all down.

“The further from here girl, the better,” the TV sang, mirroring my feelings. I can’t believe it’s possible to feel this bad. I can’t believe I do this to myself. What is wrong with me?

“The store closes in a couple of hours, too. I figured if you wanted to sleep all day I could have gone, but – it’s supposed to be your day.”

Might as well. I felt trapped and sweaty, the air was thick and stale and hard to breathe. The TV immediately commented by singing about that place far away, “where the air is fresh and clean.” How the fuck could it know? I had another glass of water and then went outside in the stairwell, took the stairs instead of the elevator, still in sweatpants and that tank, like some drunk. Sticky hair clinging to me everywhere.

I was welcomed and cooled by the rain as I stepped out on the street. A friendly rain, like the sky reaching down to lick my face like a giant happy dog. Stood there for a while, eyes closed. Oh god this is good. I’m always uncomfortable indoors. All I could hear and feel now was the rain. I felt like I faded out and disappeared in the three-dimensional white noise of the raindrops. The nausea and anxiety temporarily went away, leaving such a liberating feeling that I let out an audible moan of relief, although it was drowned out by the rain of course. Water ran down my face and my shoulders and along my back under the fabric. It was amazing. Opened my eyes again. Hadn’t disappeared into the noise after all. On the other side of the street someone had spray-painted “I’M SORRY” in all the colors of the rainbow, a couple of years ago. Every time I come out the door and see the painting, I wonder if it was meant as some kind of general call in the night, or if there was a story of neighborhood drama behind it. Maybe some guy that got kicked out for cheating on his girlfriend. But I couldn’t be

standing here all day. I dragged my feet, making my way as slowly as possible toward the grocery store. Lifted my face toward the pouring clouds way above. I love the rain and I love the water. When I get back to the apartment I'm taking a long, long shower.

Took forever inside the store as usual, because I have to do everything the right way. At least I was too hungover to care what I looked like. That's something. I assume I looked obscene in the thin, wet tank. Felt the snide glares of some elderly people behind my back. Like I was walking around trying to be sexy right now. Went to the rice first, even though I already knew. On the way to the right section I made silent prayers not to have to get potatoes, not to have to get near the vegetable section – but predictably, the rice was even more expensive than last time. Insane. So another potato week, then. But it went pretty easy, getting to the corner and shoving some potatoes in a bag. I approached it sort of sideways, and stood facing away from the vegetables while I filled the bag. Tried not to think about what was behind me. And nothing happened. I kept my eyes fixed in the ceiling or some point far off in the distance the whole time I was in the store. Looked like a complete moron as usual, but there are things worse than embarrassing yourself in a grocery store.

But then at last, naturally, after I got the milk that was last on the list and all I had to do was get back to the register, that's when it happened. Of course. On my way to the register I accidentally glanced right at the god damn shelf of god damn yellow cubes of god damn *baker's yeast*. And they are a fucking gross shade of yellow, too. They really are. I sped up toward the register and tried not to think about it. It's just ugly paper cubes, never mind them. But it was useless. Those little lumps

of yeast were merely the buds at the top of a poisonous plant. Watching them bloom meant taking in the whole plant, toxic roots and all. And in my head a slideshow began. Images of the actual yeast production. I stood in the register, watching my groceries sliding along the agonizingly slow conveyor belt. Somewhere out there, there are factories where that yeast comes from. Where it – *grows*. I threw money at the clerk and started shoving all the groceries into paper bags before he could even get my change. Brain bombarding me with mental pictures. Giant stainless steel cylinders, full of living, growing yeast. Fucking brain fucking thoughts, and that earthy *smell*. Screw the change, I ran the fuck out of the store. As soon as I was out on the street I put the grocery bags down, and my eyes watered as I puked all over the ground.

* * *

There I was, sloshing through the streets along with this new friend, through pouring rainwater, sandals in hand. I relished the feel of water against my skin and the deep, cool sensation under my tired feet. I had walked for a long time. Come so far. Now that harvest season was finally here, I loved every second that had led up to this moment. To this particular stroll in this magical rain, next to this vaguely familiar vagrant.

I wasn't raised in a spiritual home. My mother and father were atheists, and they did not appreciate my curious questions about God and the unknown as a child. Questions which only grew more and more insistent as I grew older. Their answers never satisfied me, which only increased my curiosity. When they finally started to realize that I was never going to outgrow what they first thought a "phase", they could not hide their disappointment. They tried, of course, but I knew. So it was clear to me that what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't stop. I became withdrawn and kept to myself. Wherever I went I would seek out those secluded spots where I could be alone, and I would sit there and brood.

I pondered the difference between that which is, and that which is not. Could anything at all be said to not exist? That would mean that *there is something which is not*. How could I resolve that paradox? And why did I seem to be the only one to find it exciting to think about? These questions haunted me, lying in wait in every remote corner I found myself in, and yet I was almost uncontrollably drawn to them. I would fall deep into thought and the next time I looked up, there I was. In my teenage years, the loneliness became agonizing. I didn't know anyone that shared my interest in spiritual matters nor the philosophy of life. I thought I was alone in this world. That's what all the other teens felt as well, of course, but when you're

alone in this world it doesn't matter if and what anyone or everyone else is up to. During the low points I took to self-injury. I still bear the scars from cutting myself as that troubled young girl, but they have faded some. They look a bit like flat worms, sort of lying dormant on my skin. Sometimes I stroke them, remembering where I've been.

After I got out of high school I finally found the others. The ones who seemed to be like me. Everything changed then. The world was suddenly full of spiritual people, and I'd had so much time to brood during the lonesome years that I learned some useful things about different kinds of suffering. It helped me stay centered and calm. I was finally happy. Now I wanted to proselytize, and I decided to become a nun or a priest or something along those lines, although I had no idea what religion I belonged to. By a certain twist of fate, the details are not relevant here, I spent a short time with no place to stay. But in that temporary homelessness, I discovered that I enjoyed it so much I decided to stay in it. I have never had a home again. Instead the whole city became my home. I walked the streets seeking God within myself, and seeking my future in various religions. Some of my peers thought I was going crazy, but I was handling everyday life better than ever. Once I even advanced considerably on a religious career path, so to speak, before something happened that closed that chapter for me and opened up the next. That was five or ten years ago, and shortly after that episode I left town.

Back then I used to hold one-on-one spiritual talks, not unlike the confession of Christianity, with people in need of spiritual guidance. All I wanted was to help people out of the same darkness I had escaped on my own. Sometimes I did help someone, and it was incredible. But other times they were just

as dejected when they left, which was harrowing. Then on one occasion, I seemed to actually make things even worse than before, when I was talking to a woman my age who suffered from a paralyzing fear of dying. Her life was infused with fear and anxiety resulting from a traumatic experience in childhood, it was so bad that she could barely live her life. I felt that I gave wise counsel and good advice, and still she seemed worse off when we parted. I tried to understand why some were helped and others not. But the more I examined the dilemma in my mind, the more it seemed to me that it was nothing but random chance that determined the outcome of my efforts. It had absolutely nothing to do with me, but simply a matter of the grace of God. Then what was the purpose of making the effort at all? I came to understand that I had been doing everything wrong. And I gave up what could have been a religious career – fortunately, I mean, what an absurd idea – and I walked out of town. My reasoning was that if random chance had this power over me, I had to familiarize myself with Chance. Get to know that which holds power over you, and it loses that power. What will hold power over you then? Then do it again, and again, and again. Maybe this was how I could find God.

God works through Chance, there is no doubt about that. So I vowed to wander the world at random until Chance brought me to somebody who could teach me what I needed to be taught. And eventually, that's just what happened. I stayed there for a long time and I learned a great deal, but the cosmic forces at play were not done with me yet. One day I was told to continue my journey, that it was time to return home. So I started walking again. And a few months and thousands of miles later – here I am. This is where all journeys will come to

an end. The wheels were already in motion. And as soon as I came back home, I had immediately come upon a man I recognized. Plus I was carrying some of his money. Everything was part of one and the same great path. I was meant to stay with him until the very end of the road. So I did.

He walked beside me with dispirited steps. I knew them well, the sort of footsteps that drag the paths out as you walk. Those steps will get you nowhere. So I touched his arm gently, and reminded him that it wasn't far ahead, and I know a place where we can go later if you want to get out of the rain.

He didn't speak, but he had heard. And he walked a little easier.

The rain fell. Each falling rain contains every other rain that ever fell and ever will fall, like each autumn embodies all other autumns, the sorrow of all the world echoes in each man's sorrow. I cried a few tears of joy, and they mixed with the rain on my face.

A rumbling came from the skies but there was no flash to be seen. Most people would be in their homes right now, dry and warm with a cup of tea or hot chocolate. Those who feared the thunder would drown the noise out with their TVs, those who enjoyed it would look out through their windows. Spiritual people thought of the great powers of the universe, and the meaning of storms. Pessimists thought of rising death tolls in hurricanes elsewhere on the planet. "The angels are crying," a woman in mourning sniffled at Elizabeth Hospital, and even if her sorrow was no lighter than before, somehow carrying it got slightly easier with that cosmic participation. Two lovers gasped in their embrace in front of a panoramic window by the ocean. A body bathed in the rain.

A city is a place where something is always happening, and where something entirely unrelated is always happening simultaneously. A city is no place for people. We are meant to live in villages, societies of a size that fits us comfortably. There is no room for more than one stranger in a given human society. Cities suffer by definition from unsustainable growth. A city is a village that has developed cancer. A shudder passed through me. Everything that rises must converge. We sloshed onward through the rain.

* * *

Well, the rain finally got rid of the hobos, but by now it was coming down so hard I could barely see the other side of the street anyway. Why don't you bums just go to the homeless shelter!? They're just trying to get our pity. It's not like they have to sit out there in the rain, so why else would they, if not to act like martyrs? All so they can rake in some extra cash from passersby. I'm so sick of it. And the news just came on the TV, too. I switched channels to avoid that bullshit. I don't watch TV news, it's all brainwashing anyway. Newspapers are highly suspicious too, but at least I get to choose what I'm reading. Plus I always read several competing magazines at once, to avoid buying into any one viewpoint too quickly. And so should everyone else, too. But nobody else does. It fucking sucks. We've got some dark times ahead.

I was growing more and more convinced that our whole society was on its last legs. In fact, for a while now I had been seriously considering how to prepare. Nuclear war could break out at any time. I mean it. There are more nuclear weapons than ever before floating around out there. And contemporary

warheads are thousands of times more powerful than the ones that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thousands of times! And yet nobody talked about the nuclear threat anymore. Somehow that topic became off limits, or turned into some kind of holy cow of the West. The fact that all these news media are working so hard on their terror campaign to frighten the people with viruses and natural disasters and what have you, but never mention nuclear war anymore. That fact proves that the latter is the true threat. Because you don't talk about your true fear. There was a flash of lightning within the clouds above. Rain is fucking disgusting. People think that rain is water, but rain is actually filth. The toxins and shit from our polluted atmosphere isn't just contained in the rain, it's literally a prerequisite for it. The water in the air needs particles to condense around. So each raindrop that ever falls was formed around a speck of filth up there in the clouds. Every single fucking drop of rain has an invisible poisonous kernel right in the middle of that innocent watery shell. Fuck that shit.

It's definitely just a matter of time until I leave this sinking ship behind. Everything is going to hell in a handbasket, and the people in charge of our safety couldn't care less about us. Another uncomfortable fact: during the cold war, the British government printed pamphlets on how to stay safe during a nuclear attack. For instance, you should crawl into a paper bag when the sirens came on. They never went into detail about the purpose of that action. That it makes it easier for them to gather up the bodies afterwards. That's how much ordinary people mean to them. They start the war. And when they push the button, we obediently tuck ourselves into our own body bags. It makes me fucking sick to my stomach. I'm gonna

gather as much of my stuff as I can bring, and move far away from here while I still can. Up north, probably. So far up north that nobody would ever have any reason to drop any bombs anywhere near me. And up there I'm gonna build one of them Earthships, that were invented by some American guy – I guess they're not all bad – in the 70s. What it is, is a house made from recycled garbage. Old spare tires and empty bottles and stuff. The house generates its own heat, water, and food, so you can live totally off the grid, as independent of the state as possible. That's where we'd live, me and Jennifer. We'd have a great life up there, living off of the gardens of our earthship. And above all it'd be *completely silent*. I've figured out why all these whackjobs go on about their lizard people and insect people and what have you, supposedly controlling the world in human disguises. For the longest time I couldn't understand how such an outlandish conspiracy theory could gather so many actual proponents. But I'll tell you why. It's because we've surrounded ourselves with all these machines that run 24/7 and give off a continuous, high-frequency buzzing. The high pitch and the fact that it's totally ubiquitous makes us filter it out so we usually don't even consciously hear it. But it's there. And it stimulates some kind of ancient reflex, triggers a lurking horror in our minds. At some point in the distant past of our pre-biped ancestors it might have been vital for the survival of the species. But today all it does is awaken this vague fear of something unknown that drones and hums in the dark. Those lunatic conspiracy theories are a manifestation of that fear. Malevolent insects from the black, boundless void above.

But I never mentioned any of this to other people. There are things that most people prefer to remain ignorant about, at any

cost. My boys didn't mind telling me that politicians are all corrupt liars and what's the world coming to and all that, and they shared my views on the conspiracy to keep people in the dark. *But*. As soon as you make an attempt to actually *explore* any of those topics, to consider all the implications and connections beyond the pointless, tired chestnuts that keep coming up in unchanging phrasings after a hard day's work. Then you've instantly killed the mood. It's like you're supposed to believe and assert that everything sucks and the end is nigh, but absolutely never ever *ponder* it. Or, god forbid, plan for it! That would make you a crazy survivalist all of a sudden! As if it wasn't the other way around. I mean if everyone agrees that the shit is about to hit the fan on a major scale, isn't it insane to *not* prepare for it? Perhaps that very fact is a part of the cultural brainwashing. Supposedly, they intentionally blast us with extreme, conflicting messages in order to paralyze us. The mass culture of our society is nothing but one long series of hypnotic throbs to our brains, to keep us down.

Far north. Earthship. Maybe we should have an underground panic room, too. There's bound to show up freeloaders who want to get in, once it all goes down. Like the fable about the ant and the grasshopper. Should have built their own earthships, huh? Now who's exaggerating?

I switched the channel back, the news had ended and the weather guy promised better weather this week.

* * *

I couldn't barely see the road through the windshield, it was comin down like crazy. I got done with the toilet, put everythin back in its place, and last of all – the best part of every job

really – scrubbed ma hands clean. I wonder if shrinks get to do that before they go home, right? Or if they leave the office with their hands crusted up with all that stuff they scraped out from the sewage of their patients. That's gotta be really dirty work, man. And I made sure to tell the guy to look into whatever's under the house. Like check so it wasn't an animal that crawled under there and died or somethin.

Now I was in ma trusty old Honda, headed home. She'd gone through several hands before, but the mileage was surprisingly low and she was a dream to drive. The rain poured down and I had to inch my way along the windin forest roads on the outskirts of town. In this kind of weather I usually had to do the last bit by foot. I lived, mostly anyway, in this old trailer that I totally loved. Parked in a glade at the end of a real tiny gravel road. Amazin place! The landowner let me stay there in exchange for sort of illegally installin a garbage disposal years ago. Plus free plumbin jobs when needed, but so far he'd only needed me one single time in all these years. Except for the garbage disposal, I mean. The only one I'll ever install, by the way. I say never. The whole concept is disgustin – sorry if I'm stuck in ma work metaphor, but it's like if psychiatry invented a pill that takes away guilt. What a nightmare. I'm really like a holistic plumber. One might say a philosopher.

So anyway. I'd gotten as close to the glade as I ever would in this weather. Now I stepped out in the rainstorm and slammed the car door behind me. This little gravel road of mine got flooded all the time when we got a storm like this. I had to leave the car then and walk for about a half a mile. Nothin but a good thing, really. From a holistic perspective I mean. Water

is ma business, see, so it's rewardin for me to have a close relationship with water in every way. And wadin through the deepest puddles in the forest like this, I felt like I was gettin under the skin of Mother Earth herself. It was almost sexual. And all around, the trees rose toward the clouds, so beautiful. The foilage was just turnin colors.

Sometimes I get this uncanny feelin from trees. Don't you? Obviously I enjoy them most of the time – otherwise why would I live in the woods, right. Sometimes when there's a windstorm, I go out and put an ear to a tree trunk, you can hear the sounds then of the gnomes underground and their machines at work. Those times I know the woods are alive. And I feel like maybe the forest likes me back. But every now and then, it's as if a crack opens up or like a veil shifts in the wind, and the trees seem sort of – diffrent. Somethin almost disgustin comes over them, I'm not sure how to explain... It's somethin to do with how they *grow*. I mean trees don't do nothin but growin and growin, they don't stop growin until they're dead. I'm like, what would it feel like to be a tree? To constantly expand in all directions and feel that steady tightenin of your thick bark, you know? Or the feel of the sun and the wind pulsatin through you in this infinite rhythmic pattern, day and night, summer and winter, year after year? They don't think, they don't do, they just stand around, growin. Slowly but surely. For hundreds of years sometimes, from out of a tiny nothin to these monstrous, rigid hands with a thousand fingers. Could a man even understand what that timespan is like? When it's so much longer than anything we'll ever experience? Hundreds, thousands of years? Imagine if you could see the entire life of a tree, sped up like. They'd explode outta the ground, sprawlin claw-like outgrowths all

over like tiny clones of themselves. And finally once they've grown huge, they die and stiffen and lose their color. Turnin into a gray statue like some kind of nightmarish version of what the livin tree was.

Ma socks were soaked through by now. But I trudged along under the gross trees. I imagine that if there's life in space, like if there are intelligent beins from some other kinda planet with totally different life forms... If they ever land here. They're gonna think that the vegetation on this planet is so friggin creepy. The trees are terrifyin and huge, and hard and thick, and they spurt uncontrollably out of the ground – kind of like the individual hairs bein squeezed out of our scalps, actually! They're really nothin but infinitely long, pretty revoltin strings of limp, dead tissue. The hairs, I mean. Imagine a scalp zoomed in – all these thick, disgustin hairs that come crawlin outta somethin that probably resembles a giant meat grinder. That's how I see trees sometimes. But then I looked up and they were just beautiful trees again. I don't know what's wrong with me.

Inside the trailer. Rain patterin against the roof and walls. I put ma soggy shoes on a old paper and plugged in the shoe dryers. One of few items in here that run on electricity. I had a few sun cells on the roof. Then I got undressed and wrapped myself in a thick blanket to get warm and dry. I lay down on the bed to just listen to the water for a while. It surrounded me on all sides, so close that the sound and my body almost ran together. A lit candle spread a flickerin, warm light in the trailer. This was wonderful. I love my life.

* * *

I remained standing in the bathroom door, barely noticing that I was alone in the room now. Could it even be possible to make someone else happy, unless you're happy within yourself already? The thunder rolled outside. I'd been debating with myself for the longest time how to break the news to Anita. I couldn't just give it to her straight, obviously – how do you say something like that to your wife? She didn't even know I was unhappy. I wanted to make it as painless as possible. I did love her, I didn't want to hurt her. At first I thought I could put all my thoughts in a letter. But in the end I decided the best thing would be to leave her without leaving her. It was doable. If I were to simply vanish without a trace. That way it would be left open to her what actually happened. She would have the opportunity to interpret the situation in whatever way was the least hurtful to her. Yes, a complete and sudden disappearance was the only way that wouldn't necessarily break her heart. I made my decision out of love.

Plus it struck me later that in case I actually did change my mind later – if this turned out to be some sort of temporary confusion on my part, and I discovered after trying my wings that I preferred the cage... If that did happen, unlikely though it seemed, then I could return to her with some kind of story, and not have to hurt anyone's feelings. We could go on as usual again. As long as I didn't burn any bridges today. It was definitely the right thing to do.

A few days ago I was already thinking about picking this weekend to leave. And now, like some kind of confirmation that I made the right choice, this thing with the dead animal or whatever it was, under the floor. I almost gagged just thinking about it. I might have been standing right here brushing my

teeth with a carcass right underneath my feet. Taken showers only a few feet from the remains of something that crawled under the house and died. Hell no. How long had it been under there? It was uncanny how it resembled my life situation. Something rotten underneath the surface. Something deceased that once was alive. Something that was wrong, in a way that was uncertain but it had to be escaped. I didn't quite understand what the pipefitter had been talking about, if he had noticed a smell or something, how he had known – but I got the point. There was something nasty under my bathroom floor. Yuck. I didn't know how much time had passed since he'd gone. I was just scratching myself and staring at the shiny floor tiles. What if it was water damage? That would be even worse than a dead badger or something, no matter how disgusting that thought was. In either case I couldn't just leave it like this, I didn't want the others to be in the dark about it. So I went to the kitchen and wrote a post-it. "Note to self: call someone re: bathroom floor. Water damage?" I put it up on the to-do board on the fridge. Then I went to the hall.

I felt weak in the knees, my heart pounding in my chest. I felt so free, so eager. Thinking of everything I would do now that I belonged to myself again. Never again would I allow myself to be just a passive supporting actor in my own life. I was already reborn. This was the first day of the rest of my life. The silly old adage suddenly contained a tangible truth. I already knew the first thing I would do: I was going to visit the first hot dog stand and get the biggest bacon sausage they had. How I missed bacon. My doctor warned me to cut down on salty foods and animal fats, but Jesus Christ, Anita! Sometimes you have to treat yourself! I hadn't been allowed to eat any of my favorite foods for years, just because I was the way I was

and passively accepted all of her rules. Not even the doctor was that strict.

The rain fell outside, somehow appealing. To enter into that muddle of drops and vanish. I put on my coat and shoes. I hadn't packed anything, obviously. I couldn't bring anything that I wouldn't bring on an average stroll around the neighborhood. That would clue them in to what really happened. I couldn't do that to them. My record collection, the furniture from long before we even met, the antique oriental rug that belonged to my grandmother Maria, the entertainment system – I would leave everything in the house behind when I walked out tonight. I'd have to learn to get by without things I'd been accustomed to for decades. But I knew my new life would be worth the sacrifice.

Just when I had tied the shoes and stood by the door, umbrella in hand, Anita came down the stairs. I knew it was her by the sound of her footsteps before I even saw her. I don't know why, but that's precisely the kind of thing that drives me insane. She was wearing her old polka dot dress, the one she usually had on Sundays in particular. Come to think of it, I never knew why. I guess we didn't know *everything* about one another, then.

"You're going out? In this weather?"

"What's wrong with a little rain? I thought I'd take a little walk. Listen to the noise and think deep thoughts."

She smiled at me.

"It's raining cats and dogs! But okay. You do what you will. How long will you be gone? We were just about to watch a movie."

I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. Now that freedom was just within my grasp, I almost panicked at the thought of staying for even one second more.

“You guys start without me. Bye!”

And I turned around, time seemed to slow down until I moved as if I was underwater as my hand inched toward the door handle and I slowly closed my fingers around it and turned. Everything felt so real now. And there was something *about* that door handle. Every day for fourteen years I had seen it without ever really seeing it, held it without ever really touching it. Now I saw it and touched it for the first time ever, and after walking through this door I would never return. From this moment on, everything was different. The metal was cold to the touch as I grasped it. And the door opened, letting in a deafening roar from the falling rain outside.

I stepped out into the storm, struggling for a moment with the umbrella because my hands and arms were physically shaking from the euphoric sense of freedom and I could barely get it up. Then I closed the door behind me and finally walked into the rain. My foot absently kicked Anita’s garden gnome on my way to the gate. Out of the darkness of the driveway I heard the rain banging against the roof of our car. Out on the street, a round streetlight tried to break through black leaves, giving the impression of a shattered full moon.

Nobody in the house knew they would never see me again. I was the sole owner of my life now. Incredible, that this feeling was still accessible to me: that the world was at my feet.

* * *

Since I was leaving home just like Kitten Lickle, I packed the same stuff as her too. In other words I brought almost nothing on my pilgrimage. Kitten Lickle's philosophy was that if you embark on a journey with a higher purpose, everything will come to you as you need it. "Nature loves courage," she said to Solomon, her cat friend with the disease. "De Universe provides." Solomon was old, almost ten years, and they were in love. The animals had inherited self-awareness from the hairless ones (people are called "hairless ones" in the book) but not their knowledge, so nobody knew what disease he had or how to cure him. Solomon dreamed at night that Death came to him in the shape of a ragged, ashen feral cat. The Grey Cat Death had no eyes, and no claws on its front paws, but on the rear paws it had huge, crooked, razor sharp claws that wouldn't retract, and they tore up dangling chunks of roots and soil from the ground wherever it walked. Behind its waving tail hung a constant cloud of dust and particles. Death caressed Solomon, booped him on the nose with its soft front paws and said don't be afeared, don't struggling, but along with the inheritance from the hairless ones came *dread*, which wasn't the same as fear. They had fear before but now they had dread. It's hard to explain but it sounds way better in the book. Anyway the animals were frightened of dying. Nobody was ready anymore when that grey cat came. And when you stared into the black eye sockets of Death you saw terrible things in there even though they were really just black and empty. I kind of felt a little sorry for Death. The cat nobody liked.

Kitten Lickle promised that she would leave and find someone who could help Solomon. And she didn't pack anything, because nature loves courage, and on a journey with a higher purpose everything will come to you as you need it.

Because De Universe provides. The fur on her back was all she brought on the day she left. She had her white fur plus she had a *companion* and his name was Hermes. I didn't have a companion, but I decided that Kitten Lickle herself could be my companion.

I sneaked out the back door late at night when the others were watching TV. They didn't notice a thing. Here's what I brought:

- the clothes on my back
- an umbrella
- the book "Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer".

I felt super awesome. I hadn't felt this good like ever. That's how I knew I was doing the right thing. I would have done anything to get away from that terrible, terrible feeling – but now I knew you never have to do "anything". You just have to do... I don't know how to explain. But it's like... As long as you're doing the right thing, you don't have to do any other thing. Whatever, Kitten Lickle would have said it way better. But it doesn't matter. The important thing is I was on the right track. It was so exciting. This was gonna be great. I had never had this feeling before. But it felt *right*.

* * *

"My name is Gustaf," I said. By now I felt we ought to introduce ourselves.

"Liv," said Liv. It seemed a tad amusing. No, not quite. Amusing it was not. But it was something, assuredly.

Gusts of wind whipped the rain against my face in hard slaps and my feet were cold and wet. We had a long way to go yet. The System¹ was closed of course (and in this case, “amusing” would be an apt phrasing) but that was a problem of minor significance. The young woman named Liv said very little, and I tried to focus solely on the cold and the rain. Not think too much. So I too was quiet.

And internally I repeated like a mantra, here I am, it’s cold and rainy, don’t think, it’s cold and rainy, here I am... Anything to fill my mind, because if left empty, it starts filling itself.

As a child I discovered somehow that I could think better if I pretended that I was two separate people. I would for instance think up a question, and then imagine somebody else answering it. For some reason this worked peculiarly well. Thus the game quickly became a habit. After some years I wanted to give the responding thinker a name. “What is your name?” I thought, but no name came. So I asked my mother one night at the kitchen table:

“Who was the smartest person ever?”

And my mother replied:

“I don’t think anyone could answer that.” And then she smiled her singular smile. “But there’s a story about it.”

My mother always had a response to every question; even when there was no answer she would invariably deliver a long and enlightening reply that somehow touched the subject. And being a child with a thirst for knowledge, I loved it. I took a sip of my tea, and from the living room came the scratchy melody

¹ “The System” is the colloquial name of the government-operated company that holds the monopoly on selling hard liquor in Sweden.

of a record on her old gramophone. One of her favorites, “Auf dem Wasser zu singen”.

Ach, es entschwindet mit tauigem Flügel, mir auf den wiegenden Wellen die Zeit...

Mother enjoyed Schubert in general and this piece in particular. She could listen to the record for ever and never tire of Count Stolberg’s untranslatable stanzas about time gliding into the distance on quivering waves, like a swan on dew-sprinkled wings. Its beauty so overwhelmed her that she was sometimes moved to tears listening to it. But her tears over Schubert were always happy tears. Not like the times she listened to the records of classical music that John left behind. She locked herself in his old room then, and turned up the volume to hide how she cried in mourning for hours. She didn’t want me to know, and I said nothing.

John, the prodigious father I never got to meet, but whose memory besieged me in childhood. I am convinced that my mother could not have gone on after his passing, had she not had me to take care of. She was not alone. Perhaps that’s what made her such a good mother, the fact that as a widow she had to be two parents at once. And I had a happy childhood despite my absent father. Most of the time we were an ordinary, happy family of two. We had tea together every night. This night the gramophone sang about the little boat rocking on the waters and my mother’s eyes were dry and bright. I took a bite of my good night sandwich and looked at her silently, waiting for the story. About the smartest person who ever lived.

“A very long time ago there was a man called Socrates. And there was an oracle who said he was the wisest of all people, but he himself didn’t think he was very wise at all. So he went around looking for somebody wiser than him, but he felt that

everyone he talked to was just as ignorant as himself. So in the end he realized that if everybody is equally ignorant, then you are less wise the more you *think* you know. And since he didn't think he knew anything at all, that made him the wisest of all people."

I sat there and tried to follow the reasoning for a while, but did not entirely comprehend.

"But... Everybody knows *something*."

My mother smiled shrewdly. "Are you sure about that, or is it just something you think you know?"

I felt my mind expanding slightly. And I named the responding thinker Socrates.

"What happened to him after that?"

She hesitated for a while before answering.

"I guess you could say he was a sort of hero. He stood up for his beliefs and was very brave through his entire life. And perhaps he really was one of the smartest people ever, since so much of what he said is still valid, even though it's been thousands of years."

I never heard Liv say "look out". We just passed under the roof outside a store, but I barely had time to register the brief respite from the rain, before I slipped on something and fell. I fell silently but hard to the ground, like a wounded bird. There was a burning sensation on my left palm and an intense pain burst into my knee. I sighed and lay where I had landed. Everything is misery. I'm getting up soon. Now that I'm on the ground anyway I might as well rest for a short while. I just turned my head slightly so I didn't have my cheek against the wet pavement. And at least it wasn't raining on me, at this moment.

Suddenly Liv was there, holding me and helping me get up.

“It’s okay. You’re not hurt,” she said. “Nothing serious, you just got some dirt on you.” And she brushed off the wet dirt that stuck to my face.

I took a few tentative steps and looked at my hands. She was right. It wasn’t so bad after all. Oh well. How about that. We walked on, rounded the corner and continued toward Russel’s apartment.

Russel and I knew each other from somewhere. I don’t quite recall how we first met, nor is it of the slightest relevance regardless. His customers called him Russel the Wine Guy. Wine was not all he sold, but it’s what people remembered him for. It was a hideous wine, fermented by himself in his bathtub and packaged in second-hand plastic bottles with the labels torn off. It cost next to nothing, tasted like one might expect, but got the job done in an emergency. When I needed to flush my mind before it started to fill itself with the wrong kind of thoughts.

* * *

Ask someone: “what is your greatest fear?” and they’re not going to give you the answer. They’ll give you *an* answer, but there will always be something even worse. Even more terrifying. The person you ask might not even be aware of it. But most people at least have an inkling, a vague awareness of *something more*, where they never quite go within their minds. Surely there are places in the realm of your own thoughts that you never visit? You don’t even know what’s there, precisely because you never go there. There’s nothing stopping you really – you just don’t. Maybe you think you don’t want to, or

don't need to. How can you know that, when you don't know what you would find?

Right there, along with all of the other stuff, is where your greatest fear lies. The greatest fear is nothing we walk around and worry about all the time. It is something we never even think about, because the mere thought is unacceptable. You wouldn't talk about it or even put words to your fear, because even if you're not superstitious, it's not worth the risk. And we're all the same, I never thought about mine either. But enough about that.

I was soaking wet when I came back to the apartment building. The noise softened and the world closed up around me as the doors slammed shut, the noise of rattling metal echoing through the stairwell. Had to stay there for a while to prepare before I could walk further in. I can get a little claustrophobic when I'm indoors. Never really considered why. It's just how I am. But I've got it under control. I have everything under control.

When I came up to the apartment, Finn was still perched in front of the TV. Apparently he'd read about the crazy prices of rice and corn and whatever in the papers, so he already counted on another week of potatoes. As I unpacked the groceries, he went off on his usual tirade from the living room, about industrial society and its future and the inevitable cataclysm. Finn's theory was that prices were climbing because somebody was stockpiling produce, in order to survive when society collapses. He also believed that the explanations reported in the media – they seemed pretty reasonable to me – was a conspiracy not to create a panic. He wasn't perfect, but I loved him.

Went and brushed my teeth to get rid of the taste in my mouth. To forget what happened in the store. Feels like some of the hangover got barfed out too. No cloud without a silver lining. Took a shower to get rid of sweat and other fluids, washed my hair, then I sat for a while on the floor under the water just holding myself. There's so much time to think in the shower. Naked and alone and with the sound of the outside world drowned out by the water, you're forced to spend time with nothing but your thoughts. Thoughts are barbed, it's too easy to get tangled up in them.

I don't know what I'm doing. I love my boyfriend and I want to be able to make love to him, but I just can't. I used to think I just had to find the right person and it would work. But even though I fell so hard for Finn and he was perfect for me, it was just the same as it always had been. I'm practically a virgin, because I've never had sex with anyone without being so fucking wasted that I barely remember it afterwards. Hasn't really happened then, has it? At least it hasn't happened to *me*. Not for real. My partners have had sex, but I've just been hammered. I don't understand what's wrong with me. It's not that I don't want to, I mean I get horny like anybody else. And it's not that I don't enjoy it – I wish it were that simple! That would actually have solved the problem.

I don't have anyone to talk to about this. Every time I bring it up, people immediately assume I've been molested as a child or whatever, like that's the one and only source of intimacy issues. People simply can't look away from that one. But I know that's not it. It's like I have an invisible barrier that can't be crossed. I sat under the shower with my face hidden in my hands, silent tears mingling with the water. Why can't I just be normal? Why does something so fundamental as physical

intimacy with the man I love, be denied me? And the worst part is, I don't know how long *he* will accept this. It's got to be a drain on his self esteem, the way I act with him. He must walk around constantly worrying if my feelings for him are real, when we can't even make love without me getting blackout drunk. But what can I tell him, when I don't even know myself what's wrong with me? What if that's why he doesn't trust anyone, what if it's his insecurity towards me that he's projecting on the government and everything? He wasn't actually always like this, or, well, he was I guess – but it's been getting worse with time. And still I love him more and more. I love that he can stand me, that he really went for someone as crazy as me. I'm not the cute kind of crazy like in the movies, I am mentally disturbed. But maybe we're made for each other, I mean with him and his theories. Sometimes I find his paranoia kind of charming. When he talks about how we're gonna elope from society and grow old together, far away in his little house, just the two of us. I started to calm down now, and I had run out of tears. It's just hangover angst, it comes and then it goes and tomorrow I will have forgotten all about this and I don't have to think about it again. Not until the next time. And that doesn't matter right now. I turned off the water and dried myself off. Put on a nightgown even though I was still pretty damp, but I can't stand a proper bathrobe. There's something unpleasant about them. Went and sat down next to Finn, curled up into a ball and put my arms around him. At least I had my sweetheart. Every time it got bad and my anxieties came, I could deal with it because at least I got to be together with the love of my life. I didn't believe in the fairytale kind of love until we found one another. I felt like I had loved him ever since I was born, only I didn't know until I met him. That's the

best way I can put it. The relationship had its ups and downs like any other of course, but the foundation of love that it all rested on was greater than anything I could have ever imagined. And it warmed me now as I lay there beside him, and I half watched something on the TV while he went on about his theories. The nightgown was wet and sticky, but at least it was just thin fabric. Not too bad.

* * *

The walls had a cracked coat of flaking yellow paint. The stairwell hadn't been cleaned for a good while, and crusts of dried soil and mud clung to the floor. Did people really live in these apartments? The building seemed neglected and deserted. The last bumblebee of the season buzzed confusedly around a poor little flower pot housing a shriveled twig. Halfway up the stairs to the second floor I saw a plastic toy cow lying in the dirt and staring into the wall. Further up, an abandoned red ball with a dotted pattern. But we weren't going up there, Russel lived on the ground floor.

The sound of the doorbell faded out and dissolved into the muffled sound of rain which leaked in through the skewed door behind us. Nobody opened. Gustaf knocked on the door a couple of times. Droplets of water flew from his fist as it banged against the wood. Still nothing. He pried open the mail slot with a shrill squeak and looked inside.

"Russel?"

The light was on in there, but we couldn't hear a sound. Gustaf tried the door handle, but it was locked. He sighed and walked away. He looked so disappointed and tired, but continued on apathetically. I touched his arm again.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do."

He shrugged. Opened the door to the street again, but didn't go out. Together we watched the wall of rain in front of us. Waiting for a short while before walking into it. He turned to me.

"I haven't seen you around for a long time." His voice sounded friendly, but completely drained. "You've been out of town, right?"

"Yeah. I travel a lot."

What could it have been, five years since I was here? Or even longer? Time is a strange phenomenon. Without a watch or a calendar, you quickly lose track of it.

Gustaf tried in vain to brush some of the rainwater out of his mustache with one hand. "I could use a strong drink." I said nothing, but he continued: "I don't usually drink, you know. But right now I might."

"We could go to a bar?"

"Really. Your treat?"

We walked into the rainstorm again and I had to raise my voice to be heard over the noise.

"No money!" I shouted and gestured at my pockets. "Otherwise it'd be on me."

He didn't believe me, but I meant it, of course.

"I have some money." I could barely hear him. "But it won't get me far in most bars. They're expensive. I'm hoping to afford some food as well."

I must have looked a bit too sympathetic, because he immediately added: "I'll be fine. It's just a bit farther to walk. I know a guy the other side of town."

So we walked on.

I imagined he knew a lot of people in town. I remembered how many people I used to run into regularly back when I lived on the streets. I felt like I constantly had hundreds of people wandering around in my living room. And although most of

them avoided eye contact and pretended I wasn't there, there were plenty of friendly strangers that more or less hung out with me for a while.

A friend for a couple of minutes, and then sooner or later you might run into them somewhere else. Sometimes they'd recognize you and say hi, sometimes not. But that was me. Clearly, Gustaf and I were not playing the same board game. I genuinely loved having the entire city as my home. Plus I was an impossible optimist. I would have loved it anywhere. And I had a large social network. Friends and acquaintances that didn't hesitate to let me stay the night if I needed to. I never had to sleep on a park bench or under a bridge unless I wanted to, there was always somewhere to go. Gustaf on the other hand did not seem to be an optimist. He probably had a fair share of acquaintances, too, but I knew he would never let them invite him in. It wasn't pride. This man had abandoned pride long ago. No, something greater had a grip on him. But I didn't speculate. I can't read minds and I don't try to.

Now he stared straight ahead as he trudged along through the deluge, soaked to the bone and miserable. Somehow he seemed resolved and resigned all at once. I started to get to know him as we walked together in the rain. The pouring rain that I enjoyed and took for a gift from the skies, but which was nothing but a cold, wet hell to him.

* * *

I swear it's the farmers hoarding the crops. Everybody with farmland's got their own silo of soybeans or something stashed away somewhere. It's not like they're stupid. Me, I'm just a tiny cog in the machine of society, and if someone like me can see where this shit's headed, obviously plenty of others see it too. And if I had crops, I would *definitely* save some for myself.

Fucking *definitely*! Maybe I'd sell two or three quarters of the total produce. And then I'd have to sell at higher prices to make a profit. And the big corporations that I sell the stuff to, they've got people too that know what's coming. So they have their own doomsday stockpile – and raise the prices to the next middle-man to compensate. It gets worse by each step in the chain. It's no fucking wonder we're in the situation we're in. You don't exactly have to be Albert Einstein to put together what's going on here. All you gotta do is observe and draw conclusions. Except nobody else seems to see it as clearly as I do. No prizes for guessing why. I avoid the manipulative media. The cultural brainwashing that keeps the people in check. It's impossible to avoid it entirely of course, unless you leave town and completely drop out of society. But at least you can minimize the damage by staying away from the news in particular. Turn off your god damn TV, okay?

Or maybe I'm just more intelligent than everyone else, and that's why I understand the hidden workings of world politics. I don't mean to brag. But like, why deny it if it's true, right?

I don't look down on people if that's what you think. I don't look down on people stupider than me, and I don't look down on people smarter than me. And I'm not blaming the farmers and wholesalers, either. They're just doing what they can to survive what's about to happen – the fact that it is happening isn't on them. They're victims of power hungry leaders just like the rest of us. That very fact is the ultimate trump card of the grand conspiracy, that very fact is the central knot. The fact that most people are its victims and simultaneously its unknowing co-conspirators. Like the tens of thousands of people that built the Pyramids of Giza at the request of a few intellectual elite, totally clueless to the fact that they were actually helping to construct a weapon of mass destruction that would extinguish their entire civilization. It's called population

control. They wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice all of us. Fuck if I'm staying here, man. It's time to leave soon before it's too late. Jennifer sat next to me hugging my arm. Sometimes she mumbled something to show that she was listening, but I don't think she was. I just stopped talking and started daydreaming instead, about what our life was going to be like up in the north. Safe in our earthship while the rest of our civilization fell.

* * *

The silence was great. I mean it wasn't silent, like literally. The rain was still comin down on the leaves in the forest outside. But there was like a silence behind the rain. It was extra nice this summer, cause last year there was a heck of a racket all the time. The forest I lived in was at the foot of a mountain, and up in the mountain there was this mine. Or there used to be, anyway. It got started some time in the 1400s, I dunno exactly because history ain't my thing – then stopped in 1805. Everybody in town knew that date, you ain't gotta be no historian for that. That year they closed down the mine. Probably after some accident. The details, or pretty much everythin about it to be honest, was long forgotten. There were countless local legends about what might have happened. One crazier than the other. I'll bet it's exactly because it was a mine, you know? The thought of those black, empty tunnels under the mountain do somethin to the imagination. There's this gapin hole underneath the surface that wants to be fed. With stories, creatures, legends. Everythin empty wants to be filled, right.

But anyway. Even if it closed down hundreds of years ago, the last chapter wasn't written until this last year. Or, well, it started a bunch of years ago. Terrible tragedy. It all began

when two little boys disappeared. They were classmates and one day they went to school and never got back home. It took a while before anyone contacted the police, cause the parents assumed they were spendin the night at some friend's house and forgot to let them know. Happens all the time. But eventually the cops had to start lookin, it was in the papers and everythin. And that's when they started getting tips from here and there about this infamous pedophile who lived at the outskirts of town. Gottfrid was his name, Wasson I think. Even though he'd never been convicted, and they never mentioned him by name in the papers, there were plenty of people that figured out who the guy was. And the rumors were already there from before. What'cha gonna do?

But I gotta go on a sidetrack now about Gottfrid. This got nothin to do with the story really, but I just wanna say it. I lived in the forest back then too, when all that stuff went down. And I ain't read the news in twenty years, so I didn't know nothin about all that stuff with the kids and Gottfrid or anythin. It wasn't until this last year that I heard about it, when they reported on it absolutely everywhere and even I couldn't avoid it. But here's the thing is that I've been to his house, Gottfrid's I mean. A bunch of years before the kids went missin. I wouldn't say I knew the guy, I mean I was just there for a job, but we talked some. He had an unfortunate face, if you know what I mean. And he was a total recluse. But he was real friendly and we talked a bunch the whole time I was there. I got the impression he was super lonely. His rooms all smelled like dust and stale air. Gottfrid played this song for me from one of his records, he had like a million of them. He was real into music. Nice song, too. I don't really like classical music normally, but when I heard that song and saw the passion in his eyes, it's like I got it, you know? Like it was contagious. I

felt pretty sorry for the guy who lived there all isolated. Alone with all this music.

The walls were full of all kinds of instruments. Some were doodads I'd never even seen in pictures before. He told me he used to play all of them. But then he got some kinda sickness of the joints. His hands hurt so much that he couldn't barely do nothin at all no more. He lived off of ready-made soups and TV dinners from the store, and he spent his days just sittin around listenin to his old vinyl records. Other than deprivin him of his instruments, I think it's probably the disease that made him walk so weird too. But he didn't say anythin about that. But I'll bet it was his odd movements that scared some folks. His movements and his face. It's all so damn sad. What I'm sayin is that I'm pretty sure he wasn't no friggin pedophile. That guy could barely get to the store and back or cook food, how was he gonna molest kids. I don't get how anyone could have thought that about him actually. It's no surprise that he frightened children, but any adult shoulda seen what's what. But maybe he got to be the Bad Man with the kids until the rumor reached parents that ain't ever seen him. But anyhow. Like a week after the first headline about the missin kids, Gottfrid went missin too. When the police finally broke down the door they found him dead in his armchair. He done took poison.

* * *

We met for the first time in a park, me and Anita. One summer, so many years ago. We were both there in the company of our own separate groups, sitting in the sun, drinking beer, and laughing. A friend of mine saw her and decided to play matchmaker. I'm pretty sure he was mostly interested in her for himself, but that he sort of used me to play out his own emotions. He had a fiancée. Even back then I was a

passenger. My marriage, like the rest of my life, was built up around other people's motives and actions, coincidences that I just happened to be part of. It was never my own decisions or reasoning. I strung along passively, constantly, like a lifeless ragdoll being kicked around by children at play. Like I said, Anita wasn't there with our gang, and none of us knew her from before. She was just one young woman among others, who had unwittingly been chosen to be my future spouse. We had one guy who was acquainted with someone from her group, and my friends enthusiastically made sure that our two groups merged, and she and I ended up sitting together on a blanket. And I guess I fell for her a little bit, she was cute and we got along. We stayed in the park just talking until the sun went down. After that I saw her every day.

On Midsummer's Eve that year we had a picnic, just the two of us. We sat on a blanket in a cow pasture, eating her grandmother Sabina's pickled herring, which she made according to some secret family recipe and which was the best pickled herring I ever had. (We continued the tradition and had that herring every summer. But Sabina died the same year Anita got pregnant, and after that neither my wife nor her mother ever managed to get the recipe quite right. This year's herring was a complete fiasco.) Then we made love for the first time in that pasture. I don't actually remember very much about that. But afterwards, we lay in the grass embracing one another. Totally still, until I felt like we were one, like a porcelain figurine. Like we might break apart if we tried to separate. But eventually we were chased off by some wasps that came out of nowhere, or bees maybe. I can never tell the difference. I can't believe it's been twenty something years. Strange that I'd remember the food and the wasps better than the first time we slept together. Isn't it?

Back then, at the start of our relationship, I was so sure she was the missing piece of my puzzle. That this was what I'd been looking for, longing for. I hadn't contemplated my life yet then, hadn't noticed how I always just floated downstream. It didn't seem odd at all that I found the love of my life through a friend just because he saw a girl he thought was attractive in a park. And at first I truly believed we were happy together. But it was clearly a false happiness, since it didn't last. And now I barely remembered the first time we made love. That's simply not what stuck with me. I remember the herring.

I kept calling up these memories in order to test myself. If they'd made me feel regretful at all, if I missed her at all, I would have gone back home to her. But all it did was emphasize the contrast between the hopes I had for the future back then, and the bleak reality of what my life had become. The rain tapped against the umbrella and thunder roared somewhere within the grey skies above. It was clear to me now that I had ended up this miserable thanks to decades of passivity. I had to start acting for real. I was going to become a man of action, making my own decisions instead of just – floating along, like a dead fish. But how to begin? So far I had walked aimlessly through the rain, waiting for some kind of sign to show me what to do next. But that was passive too. Can't I make an independent decision even when I'm trying? I thought about it. I knew I had to leave town, but I'd left the car for Anita. There was only one place to go. I headed with purposeful steps toward the train station.

* * *

Everybody had heard of the Twee Wisperer and his powerful magic, but nobody seemed to have met him for real.

But if anyone could help Solomon, it was him. Hermes thought the whole thing was a bad idea and they ought to stay at home, but Kitten Lickle had made up her mind. She would not return without finding the squirrel, even if she died trying to find him. But my own adventure was even more difficult, because I didn't even have anyone to look for. I never heard anybody mention any Twee Wisperer in my world.

On the other hand I wasn't looking for anything but running from something. And so far running was going real good. I felt great out here in the rain. The terrible feeling was gone and I didn't have to throw up. Even when I'd walked so far that I couldn't walk anymore or hold up the umbrella, and I was soaked and sitting by the side of the road, shaking and freezing, even then I didn't want to go back home. Being cold and wet on an adventure is still better than being tucked in a warm bed and having to throw up. But then a figure came walking along the street and stopped in front of me.

"Why are you sitting out here in the rain, my child?"

He was an old man, so that's why he talked that way. He had a beard and one of those white collars that priests have in the movies.

"Where do you live?"

"Nowhere."

I didn't want to tell him the truth, because then he might call the police or something. And then I knew I'd have to come back home. Plus you have to be careful with people you don't know, although I was pretty sure this was a nice guy. You could tell he was. Mom and dad think that everyone in the whole world that you don't know is dangerous, but I think Kitten Lickle's method is much better. Cause when Kitten Lickle meets strange animals on her pilgrimage, she says she mixes 2 parts trust wid 1 parts situational awareness. That means you

trust people but you're also prepared just in case they're bad guys.

"I live on Earth," I said.

The old man laughed at my answer. "Well, this is no place to sit, you'll catch your death! Come visit my home for a while, and you can live on Earth again tomorrow, when it's stopped raining. You could help me out with something, and in exchange I offer you a proper meal for dinner."

2 parts trust, 1 parts situational awareness. If Kitten Lickle didn't assume that everyone she meets is a friend until they do something mean, she wouldn't have had any of her adventures. And then the book wouldn't have been so awesome. So I went with the old man. Plus he lived pretty close.

* * *

I had started to mumble and hum as I walked, in an attempt not to think. Merely repeating mental mantras about the weather was no longer sufficient. It had begun to leak out of my brain as an audial manifestation. This often happened after a while, when the thoughts went too far. The first few times I had to act this way in front of other people, I had felt embarrassed and humiliated, but now I didn't even notice. It came naturally when necessary. After an eternity of walking, we finally arrived at a small pub the other side of town, where Julius Gryc worked as a bartender. He was the first person I could talk to – many years ago – and he gave me both food and liquor sometimes. When it was absolutely necessary.

I don't know what it was about him that set him apart from everyone else. Most of the time I just wanted to be invisible. I was the sole inhabitant of my world. I wanted no friends, enemies, benefactors, nothing. But Julius was the one exception. It never felt like charity when he offered me food.

And we talked about things that would have felt strange and wrong to talk about with anybody else – *ordinary things*. Nonthreatening things. Once several years ago, we talked about a book he was reading at the time. Imagine that. I don't know if I'm making any sense at all. But if not, it's just as well.

He stood alone behind the bar, flipping through a magazine. The place was deserted. "Purple Rain" still echoed on a low volume and the lights were running on the empty dance floor, as though old ghosts were swaying to and fro across it in ethereal embraces. Liv and I were soaked, and left long streaks of water on the floor as we crossed the room. My beard dripped all over the bar when I stood across from Julius to greet him. I nodded toward the woman standing tall beside me, beaming through the wet streaks of hair that clung to her face. She was still barefoot, holding her sandals.

"Julius, meet Liv. Liv, Julius."

He greeted us, handed her a towel, and asked if we wanted something to drink.

"The usual," said I.

"I have no money," said Liv as she swiftly dried her hair.

Julius shrugged. "No worries, it's going on his tab."

I tried to put some of the money I had on the bar, but he ignored it and uncorked absinthe and rum. "Keep it for now. I know you'll pay me later."

We'd known each other for at least ten years, and so far he'd never let me pay a dime. But when I say it wasn't charity, I mean it. He was so genuine when he said that, as though I was wealthy enough to buy the entire establishment, and made it sound so natural that I was oftentimes convinced myself, temporarily.

"Do you serve hot chocolate?" asked Liv. "Otherwise tea would also be super."

"I'll hook you up. De Universe provides."

I'm fairly certain they normally did not serve hot chocolate. But he was a good friend. Liv handed me the towel and I wiped my face and my hair. The beard had already stopped dripping. The towel was grey with dirt when I handed it back to Julius.

I felt slightly better now. I was safe here. I worried no longer that Socrates might speak again.

* * *

I barely even knew myself that I had a phobia. I was painfully aware that I had some sort of problem, I mean – I could barely go buy groceries, I could barely have sex, I was constantly confused and I had these twisted thoughts... I wasn't born yesterday, obviously I knew there was some fucking reason why I was screwed up. But I never allowed myself to think closer about it to understand why I was like this. Why not? Because it was an impossible knot, a problem locked up within itself. I couldn't be aware of my phobia, without thinking about it. Without at least to some extent giving it access to my brain. And my entire life revolved around not letting it in, not thinking about it. My life was framed by my fear, it was infused with my fear. I would have done anything not to let *it* into any little corner of my mind. Anything. And that's exactly what I did, too. Every day. I did whatever I had to.

It all began nearly 20 years earlier. Not that I knew anything about that, either. This memory was fully repressed. Perhaps I should explain something about that, because some people think that "repressed memories" are inaccessible, that they are akin to forgotten memories. But that's not it at all. Forgotten memories are gone. They are not within the reach of consciousness, even if they do still exist in the basement of the unconscious mind and could potentially be lured back up at

some point. Repressed memories are different, they are always *sort of* within the reach of the mind, except *you don't go there*. It's not impossible to revisit them, it's just something you don't do. You make the decision not to think about them, and you make that decision over and over again, constantly. But you're not aware that you're avoiding them. Obviously, you can't be consciously aware of something that you choose not to think about. That's what consciousness is. Does it make sense? If not, it will once you return to the darkest recesses of your own mind. We've all got them, you too. You probably nibble at the edges of them sometimes. But the memories of those times we've dared to approach our repressed memories... We build mental labyrinths to trap ourselves in all the time. But let me tell you what happened.

On one autumn day in my childhood, I was out in the woods with my best friends. We were adventurers exploring a part of the forest we didn't usually go to. Walking around among these beautiful colors and leaves, we were spellbound every time we discovered a discarded glass bottle or a rotted fencepost. Then suddenly the forest opened up, we emerged into a glade and everyone fell silent. Glade is a strong word for it, but that's how we saw it anyway. At least the trees were slightly farther apart, and in the middle of this opening rose a large, dark, knotty trunk. Deep within the warm autumn fire of the birches stood this dead oak tree. Most of the branches had snapped and the crown was broken, the trunk ending in a cluster of pointed shards, reaching toward the light grey autumn sky above. The moist trunk and its contrast against the color explosion of gold and red around it made the lifeless oak tree appear pitch black where it stood, alone and silent and quite ominous.

"Shit."

We just stood there, not really wanting to go near the monstrosity. But then Ansa said,

“I bet you’re all too scared to walk up and touch it.”

And even though I’d just been thinking something along those lines myself, I thought she sounded pretty dorky now that I heard it said aloud, and with her Finnish accent. I mean, it was just a tree trunk. So I said “jeez, get real,” and I walked up and kicked the oak tree to demonstrate how harmless it was. The trunk gave off a muffled, hollow sound. The rest of the forest was dead quiet.

“It’s just a tree!”

The others walked up too. Including Ansa, although she was offended.

“You thought it was creepy too when we first saw it.”

“No. I was just surprised,” I said, a cocky semi-lie. I don’t even know why I said that. If only I hadn’t pushed this thing, probably nothing would have happened. It’s funny how everything grows. How the biggest things were once so small.

Ansa threw her arm out. “You’re saying you don’t think this tree is *a little* creepy, at all?”

I rolled my eyes. “Who’s afraid of a stupid tree?”

I saw the glint of triumph in her eyes, and realized I should have kept my mouth shut.

“Trial!”

My entire body lit up with anxiety as quickly as if someone had flipped a switch. I knew exactly what she was going to say. The hollow husk of the old oak tree towered beside us, silent and black.

“You have to climb in. Into the trunk.”

She made eye contact with each of the others in turn. Not that it mattered at this point if they accepted her challenge, I would have had to do it no matter what they said. Somehow, Ansa always managed to trap you, and you never saw it coming

until at the exact moment when it was too late. It was her that made us climb onto the school roof, to attempt to pick the lock to the teachers' lounge until we broke it, and all that stuff. Then she'd stand off to the side afterwards with her innocent Finnish accent, somehow getting away scot-free while the rest of us were getting yelled at. Plus she had top grades in my worst subjects, history and art. And I never learned, every single time I ended up doing some daredevil stunt to prove myself to her, and only in retrospect did I see that I was always just doing what she wanted. And so it would be this time as well. We all made our secret sign which meant the challenge was valid. We'd been doing that stuff since before the summer holidays. In school we'd felt incredibly superior with our private signals. Now that nobody else was around I guess it wasn't really necessary. But hey, we were adventurers. Heroes.

"I don't know if I can even get up there, there's no good branches."

Scornful noises.

"Look! I'm gonna *try*, okay!? And if I can just climb the trunk, I'm climbing inside *just like that!*"

* * *

So far there were few patrons in the bar. Gustaf and Julius chatted, it seemed like they hadn't seen each other in a while. Gustaf's voice almost trembled when he talked about Russel. Suddenly he blurted out that he thought his friend was dead. Lately his friends had been hospitalized one by one, and so far none had returned. Perhaps they were all dead, he didn't know. Some, like Russel, had simply vanished. I felt he was a bit quick to draw such a pessimistic conclusion. I told him perhaps Russel had simply gone out when we came to visit. But he didn't think so. I suggested we go back tomorrow, to ease his

concerns. But he said no. He had no business there anymore now.

I didn't quite understand Gustaf's sudden need for alcohol. It was true that he rarely drank, I sensed that even before and now my guess was confirmed by how quickly it got to his head. His eyes started to glaze over even halfway through his first Absinthe Minded Professor. He might not have had a drink since the last time he was in here. Now he asked me if he could sleep on my couch, and I had to remind him that I was homeless too. It's just, he explained, that the police usually rounded him up when he was drunk. Not because he made any trouble, he swore by that and I believed him. The only reason was that he could not go home and sleep it off in his own bedroom. They didn't want drunken homeless people to be too visible out on the streets. Julius angrily rubbed a spot on the bar, cursing society for locking people up and keeping them off of their own streets, just so old ladies wouldn't have to look at them.

"It's the same shit by you if you pass out in an apartment or outdoors. It's not like they're taking you in for your own sake. Don't the cops have crimes to solve?"

"It's okay," I said. "I'll be there and I'll be sober. They'll probably leave us alone."

I didn't have anything else to do anyway and nowhere else to be. Plus, I happened to know a place where we could go. I could take care of Gustaf.

* * *

I wish my mom could have been here, if she really was who she said she was. She'd know what to do to make it through this.

Let me tell you about my mom.

When I was nine, she had to go away for a while. She never returned. With time, comprehension dawned on me. She was dead. And that's what I believed until my sixteenth birthday.

That's when my dad decided it was time to "tell me the truth" for the first time. There would be several more of those occasions later on through the years, and several other "truths". Every time I've asked dad about mom, he's given a different answer and I've grown less and less certain about what actually happened.

I know one thing for a fact, because I was there. Mom told me once that she didn't just work in the office where she went every day. She said she had one of the most important jobs in the world. But it was a secret, and she couldn't tell anyone. Not even dad and me. I remember it so clearly because she made me swear not to tell anyone. I don't just mean like a promise, it was a solemn vow. She made me stand with my back straight and my eyes closed, hand over my heart and repeat after her. But now I wish she'd never told me, or at least that I didn't remember. I have wished I didn't remember since that day when I turned sixteen and dad told me that first version of the story. Because if it hadn't been for what she told me, I wouldn't have had to pay any attention to anything that dad said. It could have been a lie or a tall tale to mess with me or what the fuck ever. At least it didn't have to be this huge thing.

But it's this huge thing.

She told him things too. The office job was a front and she was actually some sort of agent. At first he thought she was joking. Then she managed to convince him it was true. But eventually, after hearing enough, he couldn't believe that either. All he could see was that mom was mentally ill. I think that part is true, that dad genuinely believed she was crazy. But to be honest, when he talked about it, he sounded completely deranged himself. Like I said, there was so much he told me that didn't add up.

The first time he confessed, the story ended with mom being so ridden with guilt over telling us "more than she was authorized to reveal", that she left us never to return. "For our

safety". The reasoning was, of course, that if she became targeted by the so-called enemy, or even by her own, we wouldn't get caught in the crossfire, proverbial or actual. Even at that point it should have been hard to believe, but I was sixteen and why would dad lie about something this serious? I was devastated to find out. Graduation was less than two weeks later, but I stayed home. I can't recall anymore, but I don't even think I was aware that graduation day came and went. I was in shock all summer. I couldn't believe it was true.

And as it turned out, it wasn't. Dad later confessed that she didn't actually leave to protect us from imaginary assassins at all – now suddenly she escaped when he tried to get her committed to Elizabeth Hospital. She was convinced she'd been betrayed and was terrified of being murdered by secret agents disguised as doctors. And then later on he'd tell several other conflicting stories. The only thing they had in common was that mom was missing. But the worst part of it came toward the end. Dad got cancer and wasted away, and when he was himself in a hospital bed at Elizabeth, in the delirium of the last days of his struggle, he spoke some scattered words and fragmented sentences that... To this day I don't know what to believe. I don't remember the exact words anymore, but it doesn't matter. He wasn't coherent, there was simply no way of making sense of it in either case. But I got the strong sense that his nonsense somehow *implied* that mom really did get committed to the psych ward at the hospital. If that was the case, that would mean that she could still be there. Just a few flights of stairs above the very room where I held watch at his deathbed – like five miles from my apartment – yet infinitely far away. Could she have been there all these years?

Obviously I contacted the psych ward, that same day he said those things and on several occasions later on. Tried to get something, anything out of them. But the hospital had a generally strict confidentiality policy, and at the psych ward flat out ridiculously strict. They couldn't give out *any* information about patients, even to next of kin. All they could

do was hypothetically inform the patient, if there was such a patient which they of course could not confirm, that I wanted to see her. If she accepted a visit from me, I could see her. If she didn't, they still couldn't confirm or deny that she was even there, so I was back at square one. The psych ward was like a black hole where things and people disappeared beyond the event horizon and then could not be reached by the rest of the universe ever again. At long last I managed to get one friendly nurse to take pity on me and at least let me know that they had no patient or journal with my mom's name. But considering the details of the rest of the story, that didn't really mean very much either.

* * *

So then they found the first kid. A few hundred yards away from the school, tops. The recycling truck showed up to empty the paper container, and it wasn't just newspapers that came tumblin out. The body was all grey like, havin been in there for a while. People came by all the time to throw away newspapers, with daily headlines screamin out the drama serial about the missin kids and the guilt-ridden pedophile. They never knew. I hope they got the guilt ridin them too when it turned out Gottfrid didn't do nothin. But they probably shrugged it off. Forgot all about him in five seconds. People can be so cruel.

The other kid was still gone without a trace though. But in the end the cops stopped investigatin the case. The final explanation was that the boys must have been playin around near the containers. One of them happened to be inside when the school janitor came by with the forklift with all the school's recyclable paper. A regular type thing. The kid must have heard him comin but not wanted to reveal he was in there, and then the other kid got scared and ran away. I'll bet their parents forbid them to play there. So that's why. I guess it wasn't such a good idea then to forbid it if all it did was stop them from gettin help. But whatcha gonna do.

The one that ran away, by the way I forgot to mention his name was Olof, he was too scared to come home and tell what happened. And the one that got trapped under the pile of paper couldn't get out, so he suffocated and died. I don't remember his name. Sven or Sten or somethin. He ended up turnin into a footnote mostly, with everythin that happened with Olof later on.

I think the cops got it down pretty much correct. But it took years before anyone figured out where the other little boy went. But it did come to light, finally. And that's what happened last spring. Suddenly Olof's missin persons case was makin headlines again. It all started with this one: "Mysterious disappearance solved by infamous graffiti painter". That season, street art became high fashion and the average Joes learned all about *urban exploration*.

There was this artist who called himself Home. I seen his pictures here and there actually. Damn good. He refused to be identified in the press, but he told his story. He'd broken into the sealed-up old entrance to the mine up in the mountain, to explore and paint and take pictures inside the mine. And somewhere deep down in the labyrinth of tunnels, his flashlight fell on somethin that ought not to be there at all. It was a shoe. Nobody else shoulda been in there since the mine was closed, 1805 that is, but here was this modern sneaker inside a deep tunnel.

At first people thought the whole thing was a scam by Home. The latest wave of street art was pretty performancey, so it wouldn't have surprised no one if it was all some stupid art project. But then the cops confirmed that the shoe really did seem to have belonged to Olof, the boy who vanished.

Pictures of the shoe and Home's photos from inside the mine were everywhere. They were really cool, too. I really get it, you know? Why he wanted to get in there? There was this huge debate about source protection because somebody was upset that Home refused to identify himself or talk to the cops.

And the ancient street art debate was there too of course, sort of goin through the motions in the background even though everybody knew that graffiti had won the war ages ago.

Home and a bunch of other artists and urban explorers were interviewed everywhere. There was quite a bunch of people what got their fifteen minutes of fame that summer. Experts and the man in the street alike suggested equally lame theories about how the shoe ended up in the mine. They never looked in there when he disappeared cause the entrance was sealed. Been closed ever since the mine was abandoned way back hundreds of years ago. When the kids went missin, the cops were up there three times to double check (or triple check I guess) that they were still firmly closed, and they were. There was no way of gettin in there. But now that the shoe turned up, they had to assume there was another way in. But they never found it. And they couldn't find Olof either, even though they searched the place as well as they could. But it was a huge mine and there were so many tunnels, some of them had collapsed and some were too dangerous to enter. They did find the other shoe and the kid's glasses in a tunnel that led to a deep chasm. They had to send a robot camera down on a rope but they didn't find him there either. Eventually they had to give up. There was a special funeral ceremony held for the boy outside the mine entrance. Then they went in with dynamite and plugged the tunnels so nobody else could get into trouble up there. That was the worst part of the hullabaloo last fall. That and all the goddamn reporters. They tried to interview me several times but I refused. Ended up in the papers anyway of course, they made me out to be some kind of eccentric freakin environmentalist prepper. One paper even claimed that I had to live in a forest trailer because I had electro-hypersensitivity or whatever. I didn't learn nothin about the media that I ain't already know.

So now the mine was closed once and for all. All there was left to visit now was the outer entrance, which they kept as a

memorial. The big iron door was open, but the tunnel only went a few yards into the mountain. You couldn't get no further. The whole thing was blocked up floor to ceiling with huge boulders. Outside the door there was a plaque screwed into the cliff to the left of the entrance. There were two texts, first one about Olof's puzzling fate and then one with a brief history of the mine itself. And to the right of the door there was an amazing spray-painting of the boy. At least fifteen different artists had been there and added "rest in peace"-comments and signatures all around it. But Home had painted the central picture. It was Olof, standing in a heroic pose and holding one shoe in his hand.

* * *

I struggled through the rain. My shoes were full of water and now it crawled up along my lower calves through the fabric of my socks. It was getting increasingly squishy and uncomfortable to walk. But it was just a few more blocks, then I'd be at the station. I kept rehearsing the scene in my mind: I'd walk in, pick a train that left within a few hours, maybe one bound for another country, then purchase a one-way ticket. Pay in cash.

I wonder if I unconsciously knew all along that this moment would come. We'd met over twenty years ago, lived together almost as long, and thirteen years with kids. Why didn't we ever merge our accounts? I couldn't recall if we'd ever talked about it. I didn't know how much Amanda had in her account, but it should be enough for them to get by. I had more than enough to start my new life, if I could just figure out how to withdraw the money without arousing suspicion. In fact I had so much that I ought to transfer some of it to her. But I couldn't, of course. That if anything would raise flags. It would jeopardize my plan of simply vanishing. Instead, it would be better for everyone if I left as few clues as possible. Plus, it

wouldn't have felt right to give them money, as if I was buying my freedom from them. They deserved better than that.

Suddenly I sensed something was wrong. The noise from the rain was so loud that I couldn't be sure, but somehow I knew somebody walked behind me. I'm about to get mugged, I thought. I don't know why. Even if somebody really was behind me, it could have been anybody. But somehow I felt absolutely certain that it was a mugger. I had an impulse to run, but it seemed sort of silly. I simply couldn't bring myself to break out of my usual pattern, to just move along without really acting. So I kept on walking at the same pace, even though I might have been able to outrun my stalker if I'd just tried. And I was indeed being followed. The station was so close now. But then he was right behind me, and when I heard his voice, the fear gripped me for real.

"You're about to get your ass kicked, gramps."

His voice was low, but threatening. I'd never tasted this flavor of fear before. It was such a ridiculous thing for the mugger to say, and still completely terrifying – because I knew he was stating a fact. I was reminded of my schooldays, I was a bit wild back then. Sometimes I guess we were kind of mean to some of our classmates. I remember that the leader of our gang said things like that. Laughable one-liners. Utterly silly, but nobody dared to laugh, because he could hurt them, *would* have hurt them – perhaps he even acted ridiculous on purpose, for that very reason. Even I could hear how stupid he sounded, and I was on his side. But I enjoyed the fact that nobody questioned us. Strange, I haven't thought about any of that in ages. I had completely forgotten the dumb things we used to do. This present ill surprise, could it somehow be punishment for those old offenses? That wasn't fair at all, we were just children back then.

A great deal of thoughts raced through my mind during the brief second that followed the mugger's words. Then suddenly

I was shoved in the back and fell flat on the street. My umbrella disappeared somewhere.

“Heeelp!”

I felt ashamed at how pitiful my call for help sounded, and I knew that the only two people to have heard it was myself and the mugger. Then the sound waves were struck down by heavy raindrops and everything vanished into the roar of the rain. And it truly was a little *call*, too, not a loud scream. Had I screamed for real, somebody might have heard me, if anyone was within shouting distance. Maybe I could even have scared the mugger off. But I did not scream. Somehow I was too shy. I wanted to scream louder and I *could* have screamed louder, but I hesitated. Why did I hesitate? As if there’s anything embarrassing about screaming for help, like I didn’t want to be a nuisance. It is hard to change. The stranger kicked or beat me where I lay in the pouring rain, and while the strikes to my back and arms hurt – of course they hurt – I actually remember thinking that it wasn’t that bad. I’d never been in a real fight before, but I always imagined it would be much worse than this. Then I passed out, I think.

* * *

He wasn’t just an old man though, he was a priest for real. And he said that lots of priests have those collars in the real world too, not just the movies. His name was Helge and he lived in apartment in a church. Not really inside the church but kind of above it, but it was the same door from the street. It looked like an ordinary house on the outside.

He made a bed for me in his guest room and then he made dinner. I sat at his kitchen table which was made of wood and had a real tablecloth, not a plastic one. I hugged Kitten Lickle, and I held it with the front facing out so he could see it. Partly because I was proud that I could read such a difficult book, but also it was such a good book that I wanted to tell him about it. He should read it too. But he had to get his own one, this was

mine. (Really it belonged to the library but since I wasn't coming back it felt like it was mine now. But it wasn't stealing because I would send it back to the library in the mail, when I was bigger and could afford my own book.) One time Helge turned around from the stove and then he finally said:

"What's that book you've got?"

"This is my *bible*!" I said so he'd understand how important it was and how good it was too. But then I remembered he was a real priest so I felt a little bad and said sorry. But he just laughed.

"A bible is simply an important book. Not necessarily the actual Gospels."

So I did say the right thing.

"It's called Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer."

He turned around again and looked me in the eye for a second.

"That is a really good book," he said, emphasizing every word.

"It's the only thing I brought with me in the whole world."

Then I realized what he just said.

"You've *read* it?"

"Many times. You made a good choice."

Even though I knew priests couldn't lie, I didn't really believe that he read Kitten Lickle. Where would he have found it? Priests don't read books like that, do they? But I think he knew what I was thinking because he said:

"Have you seen the text in the colophon?"

"No," I said and pretended to know what a callophone was. "But I didn't look so close."

"Look at the very first page, with the publishing details at the bottom."

I opened the book and looked. Bla bla numbers and stuff.

Culture is de user manual for de human experience.

"This book is a guide," I read slowly aloud. "What does that mean?"

“Oh, lots of things,” Helge said and put the food on the table. Macaroni stew with meatballs. “Put away that book so you don’t spill anything on it while we’re eating. They’ll be upset at the library.”

No way! I stared at him. How could he know everything? But he just smiled.

“I can’t read your mind. You can tell by the spine that it’s a library book.”

I turned the book this way and that. Maybe it was true. But if he couldn’t read minds... Then he wouldn’t know that I thought he could! I hoped he could teach me how to read minds too. But I was scared to ask. And he didn’t say anything about it, he just said a prayer over the meatballs. We ate dinner in silence.

* * *

It was all for naught. I left the bar with a whole bottle of rum in my hand, but the alcohol did nothing to silence Socrates. As a matter of fact the problem was, if anything, exacerbated. At length I was forced to accept the realization that this would never work, and by then it was too late. I had crossed the Rubicon, and the only way out now was to keep drinking until I was unconscious, and free from him thereby instead. So I drank still more.

Socrates echoed the Messiah, saying:

“How is it that you still do not understand?”

And instantly, in a moment of excruciating lucidity, I realized what he was referring to. This must have happened *every time I’ve been drinking*. And then the ghastly, inescapable conclusion that hit me like a gob of spit against the wind: it will *keep happening every time*. Panic struck. If I only had a pen and paper, I could write a note to myself...

“And then? When you find that note?”

My heart sank further. How many crumpled pieces of paper had I already woken up to find? Fuzzy notes with barely-

legible, angst-ridden adjurations never to drink again, notes I had laughed at and thrown away, abashed, the morning after. I was trapped in some eternal, wicked spiral, a self-fulfilling hex. I wanted to scream.

Then I remembered I had company this evening. That girl Liv was out there somewhere. Usually by the time I was at this stage, I was alone and locked in a cell, but she took good care of me. I tried to focus on my surroundings, escape the cage of my brain and become aware once more of the careening, rain-drenched street before us. The sound of water and the cold wetness of the drops that ran down my face. Her arms. The lights spinning in my peripheral vision. The burrowing nausea in my gut. The unstable ground beneath my feet. Liv walked beside me, held me upright and helped me walk. The world turned maddeningly about us like an infernal carousel.

“Liv,” said I, “you have to help me.”

“Huh?”

“It’s no use,” said Socrates.

“Tomorrow when I wake up and can’t remember, you have to tell me that I had an insight. Not just some alcoholic banality, but a genuine moment of clarity.”

“Haha, what?” laughed Liv. “What are you saying?”

“You are solving the wrong problem.”

“I must stop drinking. Not for the usual reasons. But because *it doesn’t even help briefly*. This is of utmost importance! You must tell me tomorrow that I asked you to say this. The booze doesn’t get to Socrates, tell me that I said that. Tell me that I said: the booze doesn’t get to Socrates. That is all you have to remember.”

“Gustaf, I can’t understand a word. What are you trying to say?”

“Stop blaming yourself.”

“For the love of God!” I started weeping with despondency and helplessness, but the intoxication concealed my sobbing, and the rain, my tears. “I am not being that inarticulate!”

“Yeah, soon. Just hang in there.” Her voice was soothing, but that didn’t help me one iota.

“We’re going to have a long talk tonight again,” said Socrates. “We can’t keep going in circles forever.”

What I hated about him was that he wanted the best for me. He wanted me to be like the old Gustaf once more. What I feared was that he might succeed.

* * *

I mean, I don’t even know how to explain it so you’ll understand. It’s frustrating not to be able to put it into words. But that’s how it is. I think that every truly intense emotional experience has that trait in common. The way they elude all attempts at description. Not that ordinary everyday emotions can really be accurately put into words either, when you think about it, but I mean... when it gets so intense that the world around you just ceases to be and all that remains is that emotion... But I dunno. Maybe if you’ve experienced the raw purity of *one* emotion at its peak intensity, that’s all the experience you need to at least imagine the other ones too. Like they sort of all come together at the end of the scale. Maybe there is only one single emotion at the bottom of it all, I dunno – or well, I think so, but – whatever. Sorry for the rant, I totally lost my train of thought. It doesn’t really matter what I say anyway. When it comes down to it, it’s not about how I describe it to you, it’s about where you’re coming from when you hear it. It’s all about you, see? Or maybe your soul, whatever that is. If you’ve ever been awed by any kind of overwhelming emotion, the way I was when – on that day in the woods with Ansa and the others. Pay attention.

So I climbed up that dead tree. There were hardly any branches left on it, and I had to climb the knots and lumpy growths on the trunk. But it worked, there were plenty of them. When I started to get higher up, I was pretty scared of losing

my grip and falling, but obviously I had no choice. All the others were down there watching. So I just kept going, not looking down. Finally I arrived at the broken top of the trunk, and I leaned over the edge and looked down inside it.

I guess I had expected it to be pitch black inside, but I was surprised. It was really dark of course, and I couldn't immediately see anything clearly down there, but *pitch black* it was not. I found myself almost, but not quite, able to discern contours – kind of like the brightest colors in the room seem just barely visible when you wake up confused in the dark somewhere. Like different shades of darkness. If only I had understood why. If I had just held up for an instant to question why the darkness inside the shell of the dead oak tree wasn't just uniformly black as night. But why should I have cared about something like that?

The trunk was gnarled on the inside as well, and I found good foothold down there when I started to climb inside. My heart pounded and by now I was terrified, but I still acted like it was nothing. This wouldn't be so terrible anyway. I'd just go down until the others couldn't see my head, then up again and I'd pass the test. Nothing to get worked up about. That'd show Ansa. They stood now in a semicircle, looking up at me as I disappeared further down into the hollow stem. Someone shouted "go Jennifer!" The shapeless tube was so cramped that I couldn't turn my neck to look down, but I felt ahead with my feet and always found a hold. When I was down to my armpits, I began to notice a strange smell, but didn't think much of it. When my nose was level with the edges of the trunk, the smell became stronger. It's gotta be coming from inside the tree. Now just one step left, then I'd've done it. It smelled like... I recognized it somehow but couldn't place it – pungent and earthy – and suddenly it dawned on me:

That day last summer when I ate that leftover piece of mommy's birthday cake that tasted so strange, and while I chewed I looked at the piece left on the plate and *oh God* my

eyes grew with horror, pupils widening like collapsing sinkholes as everything clicked in my brain, they greyish outlines, the smell – *mold!* The inside of the rotten tunnel was covered in it down there. It had to be the largest mass of mold I could imagine sitting there down in the darkness, and knowing that it waited there for me, silent and threatening right underneath me in this dead, narrow passage, struck me with literal panic.

People throw the word “panic” around so much that it’s losing its power. This was actual panic in its purest form. This was mindless terror and a completely uncontrollable need to escape – no, not even that is enough to describe the experience. When I say “need to escape”, that makes it sound as though some kind of action in time would be involved. It sounds like some sort of desire that could potentially be fulfilled, or else not. That was not it. This was not about “climbing back out” or anything, I just had to *be out of there* and it had to be *now now NOW*. My legs and arms shot down uncontrollably, like I thought I could fly out of there. Instead, moldered fragments of wood broke off underneath my feet and I slid deeper into the darkness. I screamed and stared up at the mouth of the oak tree disappearing away from me, and I felt like I was being sucked into the rotting tree, as if the mold was *eating me*. I will never forget the feeling of how that moist, furry mass seemed to close like a maw about me as I slid inexorably downwards to the base of the shaft, and my sweater hiked up exposing my stomach and back to the cold caress of the diseased tree walls. No memory from that day would return to spend one second in my conscious thoughts for twenty years afterwards. But I – *never* – *forgot*. Now you know why I suffer from mycophobia. Now you know why I didn’t even know it.

And I screamed the whole time. I screamed like I have never screamed before or since. Perhaps no one has ever screamed like I did that day. I’ve never heard anything resembling the

sound that came out of me – it was not human. Barely even animal. This cry was misplaced in history. It was unnatural in this era, a noise that could only have sprung from my oldest prehistoric roots, slumbering in some forgotten part of the human genetic code, once active millions of years ago when at some point, disappearing into the digestive juices of a strange predator might have been an ongoing issue for the species. I was disgusted to hear such a deformed howl coming out of my own throat, but I couldn't stop. I reached the bottom of the gullet and my feet sank into a wet slurry of water and rotting leaves, coated with a layer of the grayish-green fur that was everywhere. Mold surrounded me on all sides, like I was tightly wrapped inside a moist blanket. I felt it pressing coldly against the bare skin all around my abdomen. And I screamed. Every muscle in my body was tensed, but I couldn't move a limb, I was trapped down there in the dark, wet depths of the black canal. Still staring upwards towards the opening and the light, toward the autumn sky that seemed so far away in the distance. Just above me I could see through my burning tears the vile, growing fuzz, extending upwards along the inside of the stem. The mold was closer to freedom than I was. And I screamed. Despite the horrible pain of it, I screamed. I felt like it lacerated the inside of my windpipe, as though this inhuman howling tore off strips of the throat that were ejected along with the shriek. And still I screamed, until I could scream no more. Until something really broke inside of me and all that came out then was a hoarse, rasping wheeze. And I wheezed, and wheezed, and wheezed.

I wanted to faint, I wanted to die, I wanted to wake up from this nightmare. I wanted away from here, I wanted to not be, I wanted to cease to exist. I wanted whatever as long as it meant that this was not happening. This could not be happening. If I had been able to form a proper thought, I would have tried to jam a hand straight down my throat and choke myself just to get away. But there comes a point where the fear is so

paralyzing that all you can do is stare, straight ahead. To just stare, pleading, into the eyes of the universe, like a frightened little animal – and whisper, whimpering, a short, pitiful thought. *"No"*. Please, no.

And then universe stares back at you with cosmic indifference:

"Oh yes."

* * *

I stayed awake all night. It never even occurred to me to go to sleep. I didn't need a lot of sleep anymore. Instead, I just sat next to Gustaf, listening to the sound of silence. I had taken him to a certain hideout I knew of. It was where I used to come to be alone with my thoughts when I was younger. Like I said, I used to like to be alone. The place was really a graffiti spot, a forgotten byplace with plenty of large, empty concrete walls. But it was also a great haven for a recluse. The room was always comfortably warm, and more importantly, it was beautiful. The walls being covered in amazing graffiti. Strange how I had never encountered any of the artists here, as often as I used to come. It appeared that Home had been the first to find it. The oldest painting was a beautiful forest motif that covered most of the walls of the room, with Home's tag in each corner. Then there had been others – Home seemed to enjoy a certain amount of well-deserved respect among his peers, because the forest painting had been mostly left alone for years. But others had sort of made contributions, worked into his forest theme, and there were plenty of tags on the tree trunks. It was all so beautiful, you almost forgot that it was all just cold concrete underneath a thin layer of paint.

Gustaf moaned quietly now and again. I wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep or neither. In high school, when I tried for a while to socialize on the other kids' terms, I drank quite a lot. Then I used to get into a state of consciousness where people

around me thought I had fallen asleep, but in fact I was merely too drunk to move or open my eyes. In that moment, I was more than awake. I felt that my mind became crystal clear. From having been in a drunken haze minutes before, my mind was suddenly thoroughly sober, although my body was still out cold. I could hear every sound with perfect clarity through the thumping music, I could follow every conversation going on in the room simultaneously. Nobody I knew had ever experienced this when I asked them, or at least they didn't remember. But I wondered if Gustaf was in that zone right now. Maybe he was just dreaming.

Regardless, I sat next to him, sometimes stroking his arm, just in case it would help. The anxious moans made it sound like he was having an unsettling dream, or if he was awake, unsettling thoughts. The rain had stopped outside and the night air was heavy, full of that utter silence that only appears after a solid rainstorm. Some kind of machine hummed intermittently somewhere behind the concrete, then falling silent again. Perhaps it was some kind of ventilation. The sleeping building breathed deep. I couldn't understand what purpose this strange place was once meant for. It was connected to a large building with offices and stores to the other side, but this room was sort of behind that building and there were no doors here connecting it to the rest of the edifice. I almost got the sense that this room was not made by anyone. It felt like it had just appeared from nothing, solely to fill the universe's quota of power places. When you build in a city, you end up with cracks in the seam of reality, and those cracks get filled in by nature, organic, unplanned. Once upon a time, people might have said that in this spot, the veil was thin between this world and the spirit world.

The entrance was a practically invisible door around the back, far away from any natural routes unless you were specifically headed here. That's exactly why I came here. The isolation. I just wanted to sit down somewhere away from the

noise and bustle of the street, some quiet place where there was no one to disturb. Finding a truly secluded spot out on the town is even harder than you'd think, but eventually I'd made my way here and seen that door, and it was ajar. The door itself and the walls around it seemed to be used as a practice area by the artists, they were coated in signatures and weird signs and symbols. I opened the door and saw the forest on the other side. The wall outside and the concrete forest inside. In that exact moment, I began to understand graffiti. And in that exact moment, I began to understand magic.

In that instant, when I first discovered how to osmose some of the power weaved into the spray-painted spells of the prophets of the street – that same experience came to me again years later. Like an echo, in a much different manifestation, but the same instant nonetheless. It is said that history does not repeat itself, but that it does rhyme. It was that kind of resonance, only on a smaller, personal scale.

It was during the time that I was a drifter at the whims of Chance. Once I came through a forest. A beautiful light shone through the tall trees. The air was full of little noises from the birds and monkeys that lived here. But suddenly I seemed to walk into a bubble of silence right in the middle of the woods. All sound ceased and a sense of reverence filled my chest. I was certain that Chance had taken me to a holy place. A compulsion seized me, an urge to worship. I decided to pray as soon as I found a good spot to sit down. And just a few meters ahead, I discovered a strange construction right there in the middle of the woods. It was man-made and clearly had religious significance, but other than that it was so strange to me that I just stood there and stared. It looked like nothing I had seen before. To an outsider like myself, it was impossible to understand its purpose or use, no matter how long I stood there and admired it. It was covered in engravings using signs of the local language, which I did not speak or read or even know the name of. They were far removed from any alphabet

or other writing system that I had heard of. And for a brief moment I began to lament the fact that I could not fully appreciate this holy temple or altar or whatever it was, since I did not understand it. But then I saw the monkeys.

All over the forest there had been monkeys running around, socializing with one another and being noisy. But in this silent bubble they weren't the same. I saw several of them walk up to the shrine, apparently observing it and its inscriptions, then they turned around and walked away in silence. The temple must have been even more incomprehensible to the monkeys than to me, and they couldn't possibly understand what human writing even was – but *even the monkeys understood this was a sacred place*. I realized then that the sanctity wasn't on the surface, that I didn't have to comprehend what I saw or what it said in order to appreciate the shrine. This place wasn't sacred because someone built a temple here, *someone built the temple because the place was sacred*. I was a monkey.

So I prayed. I had my moment of veneration to the mystery. And I remembered the graffiti-covered concrete walls here in the forest room, how they too had filled me with awe the first time I saw the glow of living magic underneath the thin coating of ordinary consciousness. There may well be cold concrete underneath the paint, but underneath the concrete... beyond the concrete...

There are holy places wherever there is life. In the cracks.

I had now been enjoying the universe for some time next to Gustaf. His anxiety was pacified. He was quiet now, breathing deeply. Perhaps he had fallen asleep for real. I decided to stretch my legs for a while, go out and enjoy the night air and the silence. But as it turned out, I couldn't move my legs. I massaged them a little, in case they had fallen asleep from sitting weird or something. No difference. I couldn't move them at all, and this did not seem to be a temporary condition. I squeezed my fingers along from the feet and upwards. From the knees down, I couldn't feel anything. I waited for a long

while, but nothing happened. Something incredibly interesting was clearly going on in my body. I could no longer use my legs. This incident would probably have quite some impact on my day-to-day life. How exciting it would be to discover where this was headed. I dragged myself over to the nearest wall and sat up with my back against the trees. There I meditated on my new situation.

Then there was the other possibility. I couldn't just ignore it. And even though I didn't take it seriously to begin with, to be honest I've been leaning towards it more and more as the years have gone by. You can't just dismiss it out of hand. The possibility that my mom more or less told the truth. That she actually was involved in some sort of grand secret – for real. If that's the case, then based on what she told me directly and what dad told me later, plus my own research, I have arrived at the following hypothetical premises.

It was nothing governmental, thank God. Rather, she would have received initiation into a secret society before she met dad. If this is accurate, I have reason to believe she would have been around 27 at the time.

There are persistent rumors and myths indicating the existence of a certain occult order that operates under no name. If this secret society truly exists, I'll personally vouch for that particular trick as an effective way of keeping outsiders – like me – from digging up *any* worthwhile information at all about them. And as far as I'm concerned, it's pretty much beyond all reasonable doubt that this nameless circle is really real. What truly requires a leap of faith about them, though, is not their existence but the assumption that my mother was actually one of them. But let's say that she was. Then here's what I know: they gathered rarely or never, although they had some way to communicate among themselves. Mom never went into detail, and I haven't gotten anywhere with that. But sometimes when I read something, I'll get this strange feeling that there are messages in there, messages I can sort of sense,

but can't quite see. I'm not talking about a cipher, I mean messages behind, or beyond, the words themselves. I'm not sure if I'm on to something or if my imagination is running away with me. But anyway, they had no specific locations for meetings or anything. Most initiates simply had normal lives, working ordinary jobs and just spending their days *waiting...* for what, I have no clue. Mom talked often about that long, slow waiting, according to dad.

So that's what I had to go on – *if* the first premise was true. If mom wasn't simply mentally disturbed. And by now I had accepted that I'd never know for sure one way or the other. In either case, it was nothing to go on. Barely anything concrete at all. I began researching secret societies instead, in an attempt to track down the nameless order. But anyone who takes a crack at this will quickly discover it's a hopeless endeavor. For obvious reasons. It's a historical fact that there have been plenty of mysterious groups operating in society throughout recorded history. The Eleusinian cult of Demeter, the Essenes, the gnostics, the alchemists, the Knights Templar, the Rosy Cross and so on and so forth. Only a fool would believe that there are no contemporary secret societies with influence. But the problem is that only the ones that *failed* to stay hidden, can be properly researched. Once-grand fraternities survive today mainly as discussion groups, or waste their time and energy in petty conflicts with one another rather than serving their mystical purpose. The secrets are exposed. But the thing is, that very fact helps the top-notch orders stay hidden. The more "secret societies" that are pulled out of the shadows, the more the sheeple will believe that no truly secret society can survive as such. Not for too long, anyway. But that reasoning is flawed. True, the orders I have been studying have been more or less unmasked, and often defunct. But like I said, that's just circular reasoning and proves only that certain groups were less good at hiding. It's simple occult Darwinism. The ones who were most successful at staying hidden, must be hiding to

this day. And the circle that goes by no name was my prime suspect. If they'd managed to stay off the radar for this long, it follows that they must have something the others don't have. And their influence must be enormous. What was it that made all of their initiates keep the secret so diligently? Their occult knowledge must contain something so awesome that it could not even be *conceived* by an outsider. Someone like me. They might even talk about it openly, only the secret was so mystical that the rest of us couldn't even hear that they were speaking, or couldn't even understand what they spoke?

But in the end I gave up on that too and stopped looking, both because it was a stillborn project but just as much because I started to worry about what might happen if they came to perceive me as a threat. Sometimes I wish I'd never started. I know my theories are hard to swallow sometimes. But regardless of whether my guesses are right or wrong, I've come to realize some undeniable facts about society and politics that I don't care to know about. And if I'd just left it all alone, I wouldn't be sitting here now, a grown man wishing for his mother to come save him.

Maybe it really is better to live in ignorance? History is full of thinkers that didn't know when to stop, and stumbled over riddles they couldn't handle. These people all paid a hard price for their insights. Astronomers, philosophers, mathematicians driven to madness. It struck me that this might be why I make people uncomfortable taking my opinions so seriously. Maybe people suspect that they're asleep, but they prefer the devil they know? In their hearts they know I'm right, and they're frightened. Not everybody could handle having the illusion shattered and waking up to a strange reality. That I could understand. Take the collapse of society for instance. I am a modern prophet, I have seen what is to come. And nobody will heed my warning. There are days, absolutely, when I feel like I'd rather be caught off guard than have to live with the knowledge that it's coming. This had turned into one of those days. An unbearable day. I can't do this anymore.

I felt it was time, the end was drawing near. I have to stop sitting around just daydreaming about escaping with Jennifer, I have to actually do it. Tomorrow was Monday and people would return to their jobs and this would be the Last Week. I could sense it.

“Jennifer?”

She was still rolled up next to me watching some soap opera. I had gotten lost completely in the labyrinths of my mind, and been so engulfed by my thoughts that I was almost shocked to come back and find that the room was still there around me – how long had I been gone?

“If I left town for good – would you come with me?”

It ain’t just the media people neither that get ticked off when you give up the news. Some average joes too that I’ve met have been super provoked when I told them I don’t read the paper. “You gotta stay up-to-date on what’s goin on,” they say. Up to date, like I’m goin through ma life deaf and blind just cause I choose to follow the world through ma own eyes and thoughts instead of some other dude’s. Somethin important goes down, I’ll find out about it anyway. If I don’t, can’t have been that important then now can it? Most of that stuff in the papers is either crap, or ads, or just a bunch of negative energy. I’m above that stuff. Anybody could figure out that if you read on a daily basis a summary of everythin gone wrong since yesterday, you gradually train yourself to assume the worst. And then you go blind to what’s beautiful. The world really is beautiful. If you look at what’s in front of you and not a bunch of other stuff, the universe is unfoldin as it should. That’s ma philosophy.

Many years ago when I was in school, our teacher told us to read the newspaper every mornin. He gave us an assignment to do it for at least one month. So for one whole week I read the news every day. In that week I formed my opinion on the news media. One thing was worse than the other and every day I lost

forever a little bit more of my faith in the newspapers. And the worst thing I read, jeez I still think about it sometimes, it was the tragedy on Grönfoting Street.

Grönfoting Street was a street in a kind of upper middle class area in the city. In one of the houses there was this family, right? Then one day – see they had gas ovens in those neighborhoods, and somehow the valve didn't close properly. I mean, Jesus. Me, I would never live in a home with a gas line. Never ever. Anyway, durin the night the small apartment slowly filled with gas. If they'd had better ventilation, things might have turned out better. But they didn't, so instead things turned out the way they did. The father at least woke up, realized somethin was wrong, and managed to carry his five year old daughter outta the apartment somehow. But he passed out as soon as they got out in the street, and the mother was still inside.

The followin days, more and more details showed up in the papers. The mother died. The daughter apparently also died. The father was not a priest after all (cause that's what the first headlines claimed). Some alleged friend of the family told the reporters how he was doin. The father, I mean. How he stumbled through the apartment, coughin. Almost too weak to move, he understood he couldn't get both his wife and child outta there. You see? He had to choose, and he knew it. I can't even imagine what that must have been like, I mean to – and what an asshole of a friend, too! Why couldn't these magazines just leave this guy alone? It made me sick readin about it. Not cause it was a gruesome story, although it was of course, but cause it was none of ma damn business. I probably remember it worse than it really was, after all these years. Because thinkin back, I can't imagine they would really have gone into such detail in their articles. Like when the ambulance arrived and found the two on the street. Not that they wouldn't sink that low, of course. It's just not the newspaper writin style. But then it doesn't really matter what words they printed, does it? If this is what readers remember, then apparently this is the story

they told, am I right? How the little girl was already dead when the ambulance came flashing and wailing onto Grönfoting Street. How her grayish-blue body lay crooked on the ground with her light brown hair draped over her face like a veil. Her father's unconscious body still clingin to the child when they tried to get them both on stretchers.

The so called friend told the news that the father woke up briefly on the way to the hospital and asked for her. He couldn't remember afterwards what they replied. But whatever it was, he knew right away that his daughter was gone.

I cried and cried as I followed the unfoldin of the story. The articles seemed to get sadder every day. Soon I cried not just for that poor man, but for the whole thing. The fact that the news coverage existed. And again, what an asshole friend! If a tragedy happened to me, would ma friends too run to the press with our private conversations about it? How do they sleep at night, whoever writes and publishes this stuff? The Grönfoting Street articles were sickenin. This ain't important to the public. And it don't make anybody feel any better, which oughta be a high priority with everythin people do, especially the media. But the worst thing wasn't those specific articles. The worst thing was that after that, once I'd seen it in one place, I could see it so clearly everywhere. All the other articles were just the same. Maybe not to the same extent, mostly. But still just the same, right? And at the end of the week I put together some statistics based on the biggest papers. I recorded how many articles were actually "important", how many were a waste of time, and how many were directly harmful to read. Later on I handed in a voluntary essay about my opinions to that teacher who told us to read the news. But I got an F.

Not much time seemed to have passed when I woke up again on the street. I was sore and in shock. But at least the weather had calmed down, the pouring rain had ceased and a light snowfall had taken its place. I slowly got up, grimacing.

Several places on my body hurt, and I was wet and filthy. I could barely believe that the mugging had actually happened. But the bruises were evidence enough.

I've always bruised easily. As a schoolboy I don't think I went a single day without some mark on my body. One time we dared one another to jump over as many steps as possible down the school stairs. When I won, I hurt myself so bad that Flora Erling who was one grade below me, thought I was dead, and fainted. She hated me for the rest of school. But I hardly ever got seriously hurt, most of the time I just got dramatic, but superficial, blue bruises all over. It always looked much worse than it really was.

I caught myself wondering where the nearest police station was, but I quickly realized of course that that was pointless. I was in a hurry to get out of town. The stupidest thing I could possibly do now that I'd managed to vanish from home without a trace, would be to walk into a police station and have my identity and whereabouts recorded by Bureaucracy. I had exactly nothing to go on anyway to catch the mugger. I hadn't even seen him.

I checked my pockets. The wallet was gone of course, but I still had my passport. So in a way, this was the best thing that could have happened. Sooner or later that stolen wallet will surface somewhere. Probably after I've already been missing for some time. And that will cast more doubt on what might have happened to me. Since I still had the passport, I could go to a bank office tomorrow and withdraw as much cash as I'll need. The clerk will remember me looking battered and bruised, so once the police gets involved in the disappearance they will conclude that I made the withdrawal under some kind of violent threat. That would set them off on a false lead, while I enjoyed my new life in France or something. And I'd make sure to hide the money in my shoes and inner pockets this time. Just a few smaller bills as a decoy in the regular pocket. So I've even learned something from this experience, then.

Somehow I was starting to feel quite cheerful about the mugging. It reinforced the reality of my situation. I really had left the safety of the life I didn't want behind me. Sure, this new life may include new problems, but at least I was living it. Maybe this is exactly what I needed! My one regret was my reaction. If only I had handled the situation better. I should have *reacted*, not just kept walking like that. So stupid. I'm not saying I should have punched him out, but I could have done *something*. But I guess it's one step at a time. You can't transform yourself overnight just because you want to.

Now I just had to find somewhere to spend the rest of the night. I went to the train station and asked the woman in Information where I could find shelter. I saw the condition I was in reflected on her face. I imagined again how I would walk into the bank tomorrow and do the last thing I would ever do under the name "Elias Dillenius". Then I would let go of that identity forever. I would become somebody else, I did not yet know who. Could I be anyone I wanted? Soon I would know. The information woman gave me an address that was fairly close by, and I left the station again. I limped through the whirling snow and then almost walked right past the place by accident. You could barely tell that it was there. The door was so anonymous that it blended into the wall around it. The sign was so bland and colorless that my brain seemed to just filter it out. Oh well, after all I did spot the entrance, right as I was walking by it, and I stopped. I dubiously tried the door handle, and the door actually creaked open. A brief sigh of warm air rushed past me from down below. Immediately beyond the door, a poorly lit staircase led down into some kind of basement.

Obviously I did not expect to check into a fancy hotel or anything. But I guess I did have slightly higher expectations than this place could offer. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I wondered for the first time what I had gotten myself

into. The air down there was thick and stale and far too warm. The fluorescent lighting cast its sickly, pale light over everything. And the finishing touch, a well-manicured social worker in clothes one shade too light, seated at a table with a satisfied look on his face. This place looked like a decrepit motel lifted straight from a horror movie, and I would have actually felt better, in a certain sense, if there had been a fat, chain smoking biker sitting at that table. It would have seemed appropriate, *expected*. Instead it seemed uncanny, almost grotesque, seeing a handsome young man sitting there and smiling at me under the cold glow of the strip lights. Like a surgeon in a nightmarish hospital, I thought but then forced that silly image away.

“Welcome!”

Yeah, maybe. I tried to act like I knew what I was doing. Tried to break out of the shackles of docility. I didn’t quite succeed, but it was enough that I had remembered to rattle them at all. The man introduced himself as Albert. Like this was going to be a personal relationship. I pretended not to have heard.

“Is there – can I sleep here?”

“Of course. Is this your first visit?”

“Yes.” First and last, if I have anything to say about it.

“Then you’ve got the bathroom with showers to the left, sleeping quarters to the right and then further past them down the hall, there’s the dining room.” He pointed at the two corridors. Then he indicated a donation jar on the table. “It’s free of charge, but you’re welcome to donate any amount you feel you feel suitable. We’re practically never booked up so you can come here as often as you like.”

I wondered if he could hear how absurd he was. If he reluctantly followed some kind of script that a superior had ordered him to read from, or if he had been sitting here for so long that he was blind to how inhospitable the place was. I scrutinized his smile but couldn’t tell if it was fake or not. I have read that you can tell a real smile from a fake one by the

muscles around the eyes, but that never worked for me. There are tiny movements all over people's faces all the time. How can you keep track of all that and carry on a conversation at the same time? Besides, smiles are stupid in either case. I've often wondered, where does this feature of human interaction come from? I mean, it's all about baring your teeth. But humans are the only animal that bares their teeth in a positive way. Other animals do it for fear and intimidation. Maybe it started out as some kind of irony, making a threatening gesture at someone to demonstrate how comfortable you were around them. After all, humans are also the only animal that understands irony. Like maybe smiling started out as a primitive in-joke. To confirm some kind of trust. Like when kittens playfight. Ridiculous.

"I could use a shower."

I looked down at myself and saw how filthy I was.

"Look, I got beaten up," I explained. He couldn't think this is what I actually looked like. I wasn't some hobo. "I was attacked out on the street by a – by a mugger."

I felt stupid and didn't understand why. It was this clerk guy making me feel stupid. Why did he look down on me?

"Showers to the left," he replied with a smile and pointed again.

Who do you think you are?

"Yeah, sure. But I – maybe if I could borrow a towel?"

"We can't offer that as of yet, but we hope to be able to in the future." That friendly smile. That friendly smile was getting on my nerves. "For now I'm sure you can borrow a towel from another guest, or just air-dry. Many do, it doesn't take very long in this heat."

"Thanks for everything," I said, attempting to sound neutral. But inside I hated him. I hated this man, and it felt good. I had never hated anyone before. This feeling must be a sign that I was changing. I had never allowed myself to be really angry before, but that was about to change. I wasn't quite ready to let it out, but at least it was there. That's a good

start. This man was humiliating and violating me because he looked down on me, and I was pissed off. You have no idea who I am, you perfect, grinning idiot. In 24 hours I'll be spending \$300 a night to stay at a real hotel, so you can sit there and think you're better than me. I can't describe how amazing it felt to be upset instead of unhappy. I felt I had taken a great step in the right direction.

"Thanks for dinner," I said, when I was finished and the priest was clearing the table.

He smiled. "De Universe provides." He did read the book!

Then we sat on the couch in his living room. There were bookcases all along the walls, and the shelves were full of books except for one that had glittering crystal figurines of animals, with little black beads for eyes.

I had never seen so many books all at once before, except for the library. And that doesn't count. It's totally different. I'm gonna have this many books one day, I thought. Then he had an old lady lamp, you know, with faded pink flowers and fringes. The wooden furniture made the light of the lamp yellowish and really cosy. It felt like being in our summer cottage, where we would sit by the fireplace on rainy days.

We had tea and cookies with pink glittery sugar on them. But most importantly we talked a lot. Helge was the first grownup who didn't just treat me like a little kid. It was so great to finally really talk to someone. And the best part was that he knew so much about Kitten Lickle and I could ask him stuff that I'd been wondering. Like for instance:

"Why does it mix in so much English?"

Helge smiled and twirled his beard.

"I heard miss Ehinger discuss that several times when the book was first published. A lot of people asked about it."

"Sandra. The language in your book is quite unusual. Where does that come from?"

“Well – haha – hahaha!² Okay, part of it is just my natural voice, I think I watch too much TV. My dad is always telling me to speak Swedish. When I mix in English. But then I think – or well, at first I was annoyed by myself too. *But then I was like: why?* I mean, why is it frowned upon to mix Swedish and English? People know what I’m saying, isn’t that the point of language? In the eighteenth or nineteenth century everybody who was anybody used to mix in gratuitous French in just the same way. But *there’s your reason*: back then it was the upper crust throwing French around, these days it’s the upper strata looking down on English. Maybe precisely because it’s associated with television. Or, you know, not TV *as such*, but more specifically the stereotypical American *lowest-common-denominator* culture. But I don’t think so. I think the more words you allow yourself to use, the more you can express with your language. See, there’s only one language, and it’s the one you use, right? Am I making any sense? *Kittens* and *kattungar*³ isn’t the same thing, right? Or like, we don’t have the word *fear* in the Swedish language. We have a word for fear. But we don’t have the word *fear*. Now that more or less everybody understands both Swedish and English words, is there any reason not to use both if you feel that enriches your communication? It seems patently absurd to me to cripple yourself by separating languages like that.”

“So it’s really all about – being able to express yourself... more clearly?”

“No, no, no. Just the other way around, the total opposite. But you’re right, I did say that, didn’t I? I’m sorry. I always tell people not to listen so much to what I say, so I’m telling you too. But it’s more like this: I used to have a hobby – well, I

² This whole passage makes more sense when it’s bilingual. Sorry. To give you international readers a vague idea, I’ve italicized the fragments that were already in English in the original. I know, it’s not perfect. I did warn you though. Go learn Swedish!

³ Swedish for “kittens”.

guess I still do, more or less – *conlanging*. That is, artificial languages. It’s an amazing way to learn linguistics, by the way. At least I think it might be. *Anyway*, at first you tend to be sort of, too careful about avoiding fuzz, you know, like double meanings. What’s that word I’m looking for? You know, *ambiguous*.”

“Tvetydigt?”⁴

“Exactly. You’re figuring out how to conjugate all your verbs and then you go: ‘wait, if I do this then that phrase will mean both this thing and that thing.’ You won’t know which one you’re saying. But all of the natlangs – natural languages – are chock full of ambiguity. It’s unavoidable. So if you want your language to seem natural, take for instance Tolkien’s elven languages and so on, then that fuzz is a plus. But then there’s stuff like lojban – a conlang where the goal is to be absolutely exact. There should be no room for misunderstandings, because every possible sentence should have one single possible interpretation and no room for ambiguities. I thought that was so cool as a teenager. Then I became an extremist in the other direction. Ask me why.”

“Why?”

“We humans use two kinds of communication. There’s ordinary conversation, where your aim is to transfer data from your brain to somebody else’s brain. If that’s what you want to do, then it’s useful to be precise. If you’re purchasing something in a store or making a date with someone. But *let’s face it*, that is the boring kind of communication. All the communication that’s really important in our lives, is more poetic. It’s not a matter of data transfer from A to B, it’s more of a creative team effort. Where meaning that did not exist to begin with, arises from out of the void of ambiguity. I tried to create a conlang based on this idea, an opposite of lojban

⁴ Swedish for “ambiguous”. See, you’re already on your way to mastering Swedish!

where the goal was to maximize fuzz. *Didn't work out*, but I learned a lot by trying."

"I'm not sure I see the connection to your Swenglish?"

"Because – Swedish – wait. Let me think. Err... Oh yeah, now I remember where I was going, I think. Like I said before, natural languages are ambiguous. There's an inherent fuzz. Let's call it – *the conversational uncertainty principle*. There is an *irreducible* out-of-focus-ness in every conversation, or perhaps even in Conversation as metaphysical concept. That fuzz is unavoidable. *But that's a good thing!* Because all beauty arises out of those fuzzy, creative gaps and cracks of every conversation. When the subconscious mind is allowed to add to the interpretation. The downside is that there will be misunderstandings. But misunderstandings don't arise because of the fuzz itself. They arise because people forget to account for the *the conversational uncertainty principle* – we think we're using 'communication one' when we're using 'communication two'. *We lose track of the fact*, that what I'm hearing you say is pretty much never identical to what you said, in your world. I like to say that an insult is just a compliment that the listener didn't think through. Or kind of an IKEA compliment: some assembly required. Because every insult contains the seed of a positive interpretation. I guarantee it. If you're willing to hear it. So it's all about never forgetting that, uhh – where was I again? Yeah, whatever. I want everyone to talk fuzzy and mix their languages, so I'm just setting an example. If everybody did, maybe that would remind people, or indirectly force people, to think more about what is being said. Or maybe I mean think less. To listen for what people mean instead of what they say. The actual meaning instead of the words that meaning is clothed in. To process what we hear instead of just storing it like a machine. We are in fact not just biological machines. '*With machine minds, and machine hearts.*' But seriously. This is pretty much all bullshit, I'm clearly just on some kind of hippie rant. Why are you letting me go on like this? I think the truth is that I

simply can't stop using Swenglish. Everything else is just rationalization, desperate attempts not to come off sounding like that singer in that old YouTube clip. On the other hand she's been vindicated by history, everybody under 40 sounds just like her now. She was just ahead of her time. *Oh god.* Please, stop listening to me."

"Haha. Okay, Sandra. So the question was: where does the bizarre language of 'Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer' come from? I think we got some idea. Am I right? Haha. So I've got one more question."

Later that night we talked about god and stuff, too. First I asked Helge if he believed in god. I was curious since he was a priest and everything. Then he said that you almost have to believe in god to be a priest. But only almost, he said. But he did anyway. I said I didn't and then he asked me to tell him what god was. I don't really know, I said, because I don't believe in him. But then he said, how can you know if you believe in god, if you don't know what god is? I never thought of that. But I thought for a while and then I sort of tried to explain what I think most people mean when they say they believe in god. Because I figured that should be right. But then Helge said:

"I don't believe in that either."

What a weird answer. That's not at all what I thought he would say. After that I still didn't believe in god but I thought maybe I would start – if he'd told me what god was for real. But he didn't. Instead he reminded me that I promised to help him with something. And I did make that promise.

I regained consciousness on a concrete floor. Last night was lost to the merciful fog of legend, from the point when I imbibed my second Professor. Which would mean that I successfully kept at bay what I wanted to keep at bay, thus there is no reason now to give any more thought to that so more importantly where am I? I sat up, groaning.

I do not suffer hangovers. At least I do not literally suffer from them, to the extent that I have observed that other people seem to. The worst side effect I get is the revolting taste. The next twenty-four hours after a night of drinking, I always feel as though I have begun to slowly rot from within, beginning underneath my tongue. But a vile taste in one's mouth is certainly a tolerable – and temporary – problem, so I deem it to be worth it. I looked around and to my considerable surprise saw beautiful paintings. And this room was dry and warm. I had never been here before. It was slightly too comfortable for me to ever return to, but since I was already here I might allow myself to at least enjoy the art, although I should not.

But then I was even more surprised to see Liv sitting on the ground, leaning against a slipshod doodle of a tree on the nearest wall. Why was *she* still here? What's more, why was she ever there in the first place? This was the second time in as many days that I woke up next to her, and I had no idea who she really was. I examined her for a while, at the same time becoming more conscious of the two-dimensional tree against which she had her back. It set itself apart from the others in that it was significantly less well-made. Or rather, it appeared to be. However, it was most likely an intentional stylistic choice by the artist, in order to accentuate the remarkable *trompe l'œil* that was painted next to the tree. Some two meters in width and framed by the two amateurish tree trunks, an area of the concrete wall seemed to have collapsed, forming a gap through which could be seen a misty glade in the faint, shadowless light of a northern late summer sunrise. At a distance, the illusion was compelling. The lighting was flawless, the grass on the ground was green and fresh, the mist so lively that it almost seemed to move, rolling slowly through the glade, like weightless tufts of white cobweb suspended in the air. My intellect had to convince my eyes that it was nothing more than a painting on a concrete wall.

And the woman, like the glade, was a little too good to be fully trustworthy in the present context. Certainly, people

sometimes kept me company – most of the time, presumably, more to flatter themselves than anything else, but perhaps some were genuinely well-intentioned – but for brief moments only. They might buy me lunch and talk for a while. But this, to stay by my side through a drunken stupor and the entire subsequent night, this was unprecedented. This young woman must have an agenda. And there were only a rare few conclusions to draw from that. A horrible thought seized me, and I started to panic. No! I forced that train of thought out of my mind, for I knew full well where it would take me. And yet – I ought not to stay in her vicinity. I had best err on the side of caution. I got up off the floor.

“Thank you for your kindness and your company. But I shall be going.”

She remained on the floor with an unperturbed look on her face, eyes radiating an invisible smile. “Sure. I hope you’re feeling okay after last night.”

“Well enough.”

“It’ll get better. Goodbye until we meet again.”

I waved goodbye and left.

But as soon as I rounded the corner, I felt silly. Although I could not remember much of last night, I was fairly certain that Liv had been nothing but a helpful friend to me. She must have been the one who brought me here, and why would she have done that if she... If my suspicions were warranted. If that were the case, undoubtedly she would have seized her opportunity to get what she wanted while I was defenseless. And if she had gotten what she wanted, she would hardly still have been there by my side when I woke up. What was I doing? When did my wariness go beyond the boundaries of reason?

Not one hundred meters past the corner, I had thought it through and decided to turn back again. When I entered the forest room she still sat in the exact same spot. This further reinforced my faith that she was simply an unusually kind-

hearted person. In fact I felt a tinge of shame that I had almost turned my back on her company.

“We meet again,” she said, still wearing her implied smile, as she saw me standing in the doorway.

“I decided to come back,” said I.

“I’m grateful.”

This woman was different from anyone I had ever encountered. Constantly she seemed to be simultaneously solemn and playful. Always smiling peacefully, the innocent curiosity of a child gleamed in her eyes. And yet I could tell she was carrying a heavy sorrow. The whisper of past suffering was upon her face – around her radiant eyes, which were only emphasized by it; they rested in the middle of that sorrow like diamonds on black velvet. I caught myself *wondering*. Wondering who she really was. Wanting to know more. It was strange and unfamiliar, and I could not remember the last time I had felt anything like it. The desire to connect socially with another human being. To carry on an active conversation about something. The longest exchanges I ever had were with Julius. And we talked about small, harmless things – nothing social. Never getting too close. In fact, I felt increasingly disturbed. Perhaps it really would be best if I – but of course it was too late to change my mind now, I could hardly turn around and leave *again*. Just push these awful things away until they’re gone. Carefully walk the line and don’t lose your balance. You will do fine. So far it always worked and it will keep working. And in that moment, I think I still believed in that myself.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere. Just the further away the better.”

The further from here, girl, the better. I sat up and turned off the TV so we could talk.

“Did something happen?”

He shrugged, got out of the couch and started pacing around the room.

“It’s not that. I just have a bad feeling, that’s all. Something is about to *happen*. I just want to get far away from here.”

I didn’t know what to say. This was more concrete than usual. I mean, Finn was always going on about the collapse of society and the various conspiracies of the so-called world government, and he always said that we should settle down far off in the north and live off the grid. But that was all just daydreaming. He was just like those people he always complained about, although I’d never been angry enough to point that out to him. Just as I never called him out on denouncing mainstream society and at the same time deriding the homeless. They’re simply doing exactly what he is advocating. That man is all talk and no action. But this time he was apparently being serious for once. He was talking about actually leaving society *right now*. And that was fucking unsettling.

One of Finn’s favorite stories was about the strange Dyatlov Pass incident. I’ve heard it countless times, so let me try to summarize it real quick: in the late 1950s, an expedition of nine experienced adventurers attempted to ski across the northern Ural Mountains in the Soviet Union. They never made it. A few weeks later, a rescue party reached their last campsite. In the middle of the mountains, surrounded by endless snow in every direction. There were no signs of an avalanche, but the tent was cut open from the inside and shoes and valuables had been left behind. Footprints in the snow led away from the campsite as if they had been scared off. After following the footsteps, they found two dead bodies from the expedition. They were wearing only socks and underwear. Scattered a little further off they found another three bodies in the same condition. All five had died from exposure.

It was two months before the four remaining members were found. And that’s when the story stopped being a tragic but not

very historically relevant accident, and ascended to the realm of legend. These four people were wearing the clothes of the first five, and none of them had frozen to death. There were no outer wounds on their bodies, but there was major internal damage. Skull fractures, shattered ribs, heavy organ damage. Their clothes were found to be radioactive. And one of the women was *missing her tongue*.

The official investigation arrived at no particular theory at all concerning the incident, and the vague conclusion was that the nine dead succumbed to a “compelling natural force”. Thus the investigation was closed, classified, and is now presumably gathering dust in some Kreml archive.

When my dear companion tells this story, there’s never any doubt that what *really* happened was, some kind of secret military weapons test was going down, with the members of the expedition as involuntary, perhaps inadvertent, guinea pigs. He’s hung up on the outer circumstances. I am more captured by the actual experience of it. Not so much what might have *happened* out there in the snow – to be honest I don’t give a shit about that (so called) mystery. To me, it’s all about what it must have *been like* for those poor people that died. To be so terrified of whatever that you don’t even bother opening the tent but have to cut your way out with a knife, in the middle of the night, leaving your one safe spot behind and just taking off in your underwear, straight into the ice cold darkness. Into your own fairly certain death, whatever mysterious form it might have took.

I don’t think what happened was military or conspiratorial at all. I think it simply happened in somebody’s head. You never know about people. What if somebody who seems totally harmless, suddenly gets something twisted in their brains and suddenly they’re – well, *harmful*? That’s why I’m on my guard. And that’s why I found Finn’s desire to leave so unsettling. Where did this weird personality change come from all of a sudden? What if he was turning into some kind of psycho? I

knew what happened to his mom, and even if he really wanted to believe that she was a secret agent or whatever, I mean... I have to say, as an outside observer, that she was without a doubt delusional. I was ashamed of what I thought next, but I had to think it: isn't that stuff genetic? Then again I also held a deep respect for the complexity of the human brain. It's got a certain ability to string together loose threads in the subconscious, and sometimes offer up true insights from the depths. Something useful can at any moment pop up in your consciousness, seemingly from nowhere.

In other words I wasn't sure if he might be going crazy – *or if he might be right*. He was such a conspiracy nut that I wouldn't really be surprised if he snapped one day, decided I was a space lizard and tried to poison me with bug powder or something. But it also wouldn't surprise me if he was among the first to figure out when something really was going down out there. And I probably believed, when I answered his question, that my decision was based on a thorough analysis based on a dispassionate weighing of these two possibilities against each other. But to be honest, in retrospect, I think I just wanted him to be right because the alternative would be too terrible. I did love him. He was the love of my life and I would stand by him as long and as far as I could. No matter what.

Got out of the couch to get dressed.

"Let's go."

At first it seemed as though Gustaf started to peek out a little from behind the thick, thick walls he surrounded himself with. But after some time I asked if he was interested in philosophy, at which point all the colors literally faded from the room. Bewildered, I looked around at the forest paintings. It was not just the light or my mind playing tricks. And they might have faded figuratively as well, because even though he said nothing, I could tell that Gustaf was disturbed by the question. That was unexpected.

"I only ask because you tried to tell me something last night. But I couldn't quite make it out. It almost sounded like you mentioned Socrates."

Obviously, what happened to the colors was almost certainly connected – materially speaking – with what happened to my legs. Quite interesting. I was filled with a vast gratitude that this happened right now, instead of five or ten years ago, or even earlier for that matter. I would not have taken it this well back then. Not at all.

"Can we change the subject?" Gustaf asked.

"Of course," I said immediately. I didn't want him to disappear again now that he seemed to be making progress. People help themselves when they are ready. In the meantime you support them by being there.

I let my fingers wander along my thigh: the paralysis had crept upward. I looked up at his face.

"I'm going to have to ask you something that might sound odd."

He looked suspicious, almost frightened. "What?"

"Do you think you could carry me? If we're leaving."

His face twitched for a split second. Why?

"If I could *carry* you?"

"Something happened. I can't stand up." I lifted one leg with my hands, and dropped the lifeless limb back onto the floor.

"Is this some sort of joke?"

"No," I said, "it's probably pretty serious."

He came up to me and bent down.

"What happened to your legs? Do you need me to find a phone and call for help?"

"I don't know what happened. And I don't want doctors." I sat up straight, but didn't start tugging at him or anything. He hadn't agreed yet. "I don't really believe in medicine. When my time is up, it's up."

He nodded silently.

"So where do you want me to carry you?"

I shrugged. “Where would we go if I could walk? There ought to be some breakfast out there.”

He stared at me as if I was a crazy person. “Are you...” He groped the air for the right word. “...ill? Sorry, I don’t know how to – you know what I mean. Have you – do you have a psychiatric diagnosis?”

I laughed. “I’d say that not being anxious about things you can’t control indicates exceptional mental health.”

He sat crouched in front of me for a while with his mouth half open and his gaze far away, like he was trying to process what I said. At last he seemed to accept it.

“I see,” was all he said. Then he turned around and let me grab his shoulders and climb onto his back.

He carried me out of the forest room and we went to find breakfast.

The rain had stopped. Jennifer and I hurried toward the train station in the warm evening air. Her saying yes to coming along did nothing but escalate my sense of urgency. But soon we’d be safe, headed far away, and everything would be okay. The rainwater had started draining from the streets, and in the void left in the air after the rain, it seemed you could hear every lingering droplet in the city. The dripping sounds and our footsteps across the pavement echoed between the canyons of buildings. People were still indoors, the streets nearly empty and the town seemed deserted. The sky was indigo and purple, mirrored side by side with neon signs in the street water. I could see the train station up ahead. I walked even faster.

“Wait!” Jennifer wheezed.

“Later!” I said, panting and dragging her along.

I thought she’d left something in the apartment. It could hardly be important at this point. We brought next to nothing with us. The plan was to return and pack properly a little later on, if nothing went down for a while and I felt safer. And if that day was never to come, if we could never return, then we were in a severe fucking hurry right now.

“But I think I saw someone lying on the street.”

“Some drunk probably, just ignore it.”

“I think he was dead. Seriously, he looked dead.”

My body froze and I shot a glance at her in terror as we ran.
So it has begun.

We finally reached the station and I crashed into the slide doors that did not open for us.

“What the *fuck!*”

I staggered backwards and held my nose.

“Shit, are you okay?”

I was okay. It hurt like hell but nothing broken.

“Why the fuck won’t the doors open?” I waved my arms and walked back and forth in front of the glass, but nothing happened.

“Maybe it’s closed.”

“It’s a fucking train station, god dammit. They don’t close, they got trains running around the clock.”

“Calm down. Is it really that urgent? Couldn’t we—”

I looked her right in the eyes and, shaking, grabbed her by the upper arms. Instantly I felt terribly ashamed. Even though it was a loose grip, it felt like an act of violence. Maybe because I felt violently emotional internally. But I still held her. Slowly and sort of composed, I spoke: “There – are – *dead – people – on – the – streets!*” I raised my voice. “Any time now *everybody* will be trying to get out of here. If we’re not far away by then we’re *fucked*. Don’t you get it!?”

She wrested away from me and took a few steps back. I faltered. I shouldn’t have touched her that way. I didn’t mean to scare her – or at least, I didn’t want her to be scared of *me*. But then I saw her eyes. She wasn’t scared, only pissed off.

“Get a fucking grip!” her tone was cold, and that actually did snap me out of it. “Listen!” She held up a hand, and I listened. The night was quiet except for the water dripping from eaves above. She continued rasping. “Look around you – it’s the calmest god damn night ever. There’s no fucking *riot* going on. We’ll get out of here. But there’s no stress.”

“But—”

“You’re acting as if the army is marching down the streets mowing down the populace.” She approached me again and took my hand. “Try to see this from my point of view. I love you. I’m coming with you because I trust your gut instinct. I think you might be right. But there’s no way in hell I’m following a complete lunatic anywhere. Understand?”

I felt the warmth of her soft hand in mine, comforting me in a way.

Okay, I would calm down. I was not crazy. It was just a heavy burden to carry, knowing what I knew. Like being cursed.

“Why is the train station closed?” I still had a bad feeling about this. Really bad.

“Who cares. At least we’re together.” She smiled, now, and hugged me. “We’ll just have to take a cab.”

We got hold of one pretty quickly. Closing the door, we vanished from the dripping in the silent void outside, engulfed instead by the soft chugging of the car engine inside the dry, warm taxi. The dashboard gave off a rhythmic clicking noise.

“Address?”

“Drive north.”

“Must have address.”

“We’re not going to an address. We’re going as far north as you’ll take us.”

“City cab only. I can take you Halhättan.” Halhättan was a suburb some ten minutes from the city, and there was no way I’d settle for that.

“How much do you want?”

He shook his head.

“Can’t go. I have boss, you know.”

“Five thousand cash if you take us to Skogtofta.” I started counting the bills. Jennifer looked concerned. The driver smiled widely.

“Deal, my friend! Thanks you!”

And off we were toward Northgate. I was exalted. I was right! I had been right all along, and now the time had come. And whatever it was that was coming, at least I had managed to use my foresight to my advantage, saving the lives of myself and my beloved before it all went down. Because Jennifer was right too. We had plenty of time to get out. I freely admit that part of me looked forward to watching the cataclysm from a safe distance. Another part of me was concerned about how far a “safe distance” really was. But yes, we would be safe from harm in any scenario I could imagine right there in that cab. Any scenario I could imagine.

We could take the train from Skogtofta. Failing that, we’d find a better cab, or rent a car. We were saved. Jennifer leaned against me, I put my arm around her gently, caressing her. I love her, my sweet little Jennifer. I would protect her when it all came crashing down. Her breath was slow as we sped through the night. Through the windows of the cab, I saw the street lights drifting by up above, throwing twisted rectangles of warm, yellow light on her face.

Monday mornin the sun shone again. Hardly a trace of the rainstorm. I stepped outta trailer and groped the grass with ma toes. Today I got just the one job and not til noon. Most of the day was mine to do with what I want. First I went to the pond to take ma mornin bath. Then as usual I lay naked to sun dry in ma favorite glade. It was sorta part of a larger cow pasture that sloped to the south. But ma spot of it was off to one corner at the top where cows nor people didn’t usually go to. Though one time a couple years ago when I came there one day I did find the glade occupied by – for real! – a couple, fuckin. I guess I was glad for the glade really. Like the grass and the earth could sense that there was love goin on in the nearby. Me, I daredn’t move. I was afraid to make a noise and interrupt the lovers. I hid behind a bushes til they were done and left. Wonder how somethin like that happens. I mean did they come all the way out there just to get it on. Or did they start off enjoyin the glade

just like me, and then like spontaneously get undressed and start screwin.

That must've been the sexiest thing I seen in a while. You don't get a lot of action as a forest hermit. And the plumbin business ain't as hot as porn movies make it out to be. Believe it or not, right? But it's okay. What is sex, am I right? A jacuzzi, that's what it is. Sure, it's great, but it's an unnecessary luxury. Ain't nobody *need* a jacuzzi. That was ma two cents most of the time. But I guess right now I kind of did daydream about being immersed in somethin warm. Ma memory of the couple was very vivid. Now I'd thought about it for too long and in too much detail. But I could handle that on ma own. Nobody else was in my glade and I had all the time in the world. I saw that girl's bouncin tits in ma mind and played her moans on repeat. Oh wow. Then after I spattered the grass I could focus on the view again, and I forgot about the couple and the jacuzzi.

There's somethin about this field. It's got somethin special, you know? From my restin place right nere you could see the cows grazin in the summer. I seen a bull or an ox once too. Majestic creatures, man. But now they took in the cows for the winter already. Nothin but piles of poo left. Funny how somethin as simple as poop affects people so much. Like my entire career exists only as a side effect of people not wantin to deal with excrement. They built this impossibly complicated labyrinth of subterranean pipes that span the entire globe, just so they can hide and get rid of their own body waste. But it's still down there. Everywhere, our secrets flow together beneath us. Unitin, followin those tunnels toward the end station. And then we need hundreds of thousands of people all over the world to keep this huge underground system runnin smoothly. What does this all mean, anyway?

I for one, when I'm at ma crumblin outhouse enjoyin the moist scent of old wood and fresh soil, I get to thinkin. I think a lot about some deep stuff actually. I always have. Anyway, I heard there's this Jewish prayer that you're supposed to recite while you're poopin and it thanks god that the body has the

ability to poop and that the poopin goes smoothly. That is bloody insightful. Anybody who was ever constipated gets why this prayer exists. But jeez, what an under-appreciated job for the body parts involved.

And think about the symbolism of it all. You eat food, the body absorbs what it can use, and discards the rest. It might sound stupid, but that don't make it not beautiful. I mean, our brains are the same. Impressions and ideas that are useful stick in your memory and become part of you. And all that other stuff is flushed into the subconscious. Mostly never to be seen again. But you know it's down there, bobbin around in the great brew of the brain's sewer system. Yep, there I go again. All of my thought trains seem to end up at the same insight. I think I might be, like, on to some higher truth or somethin, man.

The corridor had six doors. One was labeled "Janitor Closet" and the other five would appear to be bedrooms. I hoped to find another so-called guest to lend me a towel, so I opened the first door on the right. But there was nobody there. Apparently that room was vacant. I looked around. So this was where I would spend the night. The Stepford Groom guy spoke of "beds", but apparently that had been a euphemism. What a goddamn moron. The room was terribly warm, like the rest of the building. Three worn-out mattresses were tossed on the floor. There was a small table full of graffiti and a stool. Fluorescent lighting in here as well, and an inescapable stale smell.

A note was posted on the wall, with various regulations. According to the note there were at least sheets available, but you had to ask for them at the desk. That's something, at least. The mattresses were full of revolting stains. With any luck there'd be a better room behind one of the other doors, but I tried to stay realistic. But I still tried the next door, since I still had to find a towel.

I had this strange déjà vu-like sense coming back to me intermittently the whole time I was in the homeless shelter. It wasn't quite like a regular déjà vu, in that it never fully wore off. It was more as if I really had been here before – here, or somewhere similar. But when would I have? I tried to think back but couldn't dig up anything relevant, and then I'd forget all about it again. Until the same feeling resurfaced a few minutes later.

The second door I tried opened up into darkness. I poked my head in. In the light of the open door I saw two persons in a corner. One lying on the same kind of stained mattress I'd seen in the vacant room. He whimpered, tossing and turning and gleaming with sweat. The other kneeled beside the sick one, whispering into his ear. Before I could open my mouth to speak, he turned around and hissed:

“Come in and shut the door!”

Startled, I did as I was told without even thinking about it. I can't believe it's this goddamn hard to change a behavior. The air in this enclosed space was even hotter than in the corridor, thick and moist. The room was dead silent except for the moans of the afflicted man and an eerie, electrical buzz that trickled through the walls. But it wasn't pitch black after all. Now that my eyes were used to the darkness, I could see a flashlight covered by a piece of cloth on the floor near the two men, giving off a very dim light in the room.

“Why do you keep it so dark?” I whispered.

“He's sensitive to the light,” the man said. “He is very ill.”

As if I needed that pointed out to me. That man was not long for this world. A dreadful fate, to suffer like that in a place like this. I never imagined that some people actually *lived* like this. I was already looking forward to getting this filthy basement far behind me in the morning.

“Why isn't he in a hospital?”

The disease victim lifted his arms in a spasm and made an incomprehensible gesture, mumbling nonsense. I don't know if

he was even aware I had entered the room. There was something disturbing about those arms of his, but it was hard to tell in the dark. Almost like they had *spots*. My skin crawled. The other man squeezed his friend's hand affectionately. He wiped the sweat from his brow and soothed him. Leaning closer, he whispered: "It's all right, Alex. Calm down. It's going to be okay."

Then he turned to me again.

"He won't go. He's scared. We're hiding here so they won't come for him."

"He clearly needs help. What's he afraid of?"

"The others that got sick were picked up by ambulances. Then they disappeared."

"What do you mean, 'the others'? That guy's *contagious*?" I was upset. Why did he tell me to enter the room when he was keeping this guy in here!?

He shushed me, spraying spittle. "Quiet! It's not the same disease. Everyone got something different. But it's only happening among the homeless. I think somebody's trying to exterminate us. Alex believes it too."

"I believe that you're both paranoid. But good luck with everything."

I turned around to get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Wait! Wait." He waved at me eagerly and I stopped, fingers wrapped around the door handle. The metal was warm to the touch as I grasped it. "I can't leave him here alone. Could you get food for us later, when they serve dinner? You can't let the staff see it."

Now make an actual, true decision – *think*! Most of all at this point, I wanted to have as little as possible to do with these two. The mattress guy was plainly dying, and I was not inclined to join him. But I didn't want to seem like a bad person. I definitely wasn't a bad person. And really, what would I risk anyway? He said it wasn't contagious. If you could trust the word of a desperate, mad hobo. He was obviously not right in the head. But I wouldn't actually have to get any closer to them

to just give them some food. And if the disease was airborne, it would be too late by now anyway. Fine, I'll get food for you. It's better anyway if they stay in this room with their germs, so I'd be happy to contribute to that.

"Get soup for Alexander. He can't eat anything else. I'll take whatever there is."

I nodded and hurried back out in the corridor. The man in the corner twitched and gasped when the blade of fluorescent light cut across his face through the crack in the door. The air in the corridor, which seemed so warm when I came in from the street, now felt like a cool breeze. The whole building stank, but at least the corridor was a distinct improvement over the room with those guys. Only now did I become aware that I had unconsciously held my breath as much as possible while I was in there, and I took some long, deep breaths with my mouth turned away from the door. I closed it immediately, relieved to get any kind of barrier between myself and them.

I asked him what I could do for him. He said he'd been a priest for so long and preached so much that he was running out of things to talk about. Now he didn't know what to tell his congregation next week. That's a real problem.

"Talk about Kitten Lickle," I said.

"Perhaps, indeed," Helge said. I felt proud that he took my idea seriously. I hadn't expected him to actually listen to my suggestions. He twiddled his beard with his left hand and looked focused.

"Which scene from the book would be most apt, would you say?"

And the best part of the entire book is totally the chapter "Catabasis", the one where she goes to find Sophia.

It's like halfway through the book. Kitten and Hermes have walked for so long but they're still nowhere closer to finding the Twee Wisperer. But then one night in a thick fir forest, they run into Ahma. He's a wolverine who says he's got magic

powers. (At first he just wants to eat Kitten and Hermes but it's such a long chapter I can't tell the whole thing now.) They find out he learned his secrets from Sophia, an otter. She's the queen of the forest and a healer. Of this one forest, I mean. But now she's not anymore because she died. And the problem is that she never had time to teach Ahma all of her secrets. But anyway, he says that Sophia in turn learned from the very Twee Wisperer himself.

Ahma takes them to the queen's underground palace which is a spooky place. The rooms are full of thick roots dangling from the ceiling. They're all carved full of Sophia's secret lore, like a living library, but it's all in a language that nobody else can read now that she's gone. So now they just hang there, like tombstones over her and her predecessors, inscribed with knowledge forever lost. After Ahma had learned everything that Sophia knew, she was supposed to teach him how to read the signs on the roots, that was the last lesson. But now they didn't even get halfway through his training, because she died, obviously.

Kitten Lickle is so sad because she was *so close* to find out where the Twee Wisperer is and then it was too late. But Ahma says there's one thing they can do. Sophia is in the Underworld now, that's the realm of the dead, but there is a way to speak to the dead and then return. It's really dangerous but he knows how. Hermes tries to get Kitten not to do it, but she's stubborn because she has to save Solomon. She promised she would do anything. She can't come back home without finding the Twee Wisperer even if she dies trying, because that's what she promised. Then there's a bunch of stuff where she goes looking for everything that Ahma needs for the spell, stuff from the forest and the hairless ones' ruins. And then she has to find her prayer of fear. But after all of that, she goes to the Underworld.

The thing is that the Underworld is not like a place where you can just go, like the way you can go to the forest. The only way to get there is to die. Ahma says that using his magic he

can kill Kitten and then bring her back to life. He mixes up a poisonous goo from all the ingredients she gathered. Hermes is so scared and nervous.

“Please don’t do it. What if de magic not working & yu dies for reals? Or if it *does* work and something even worse is happen? Magic is dangerous, spells go wrong, what if yu go crazy in de head or if–”

Ahma hisses at him, and Hermes cowers in fear. The wolverine stares him straight in the eyes.

“Fuck what de spell might do with your mind. What might *your mind do widde spell?*”

Kitten walks around the cauldron with her tail swaying low, watching Ahma’s preparations with her curious cat’s eyes.

“Yu done this befoar, no?”

“Yaas,” says Ahma. “One tiem. When Sophia taught me how to mix up de poison.”

It’s finally time. Kitten Lickle lies across a lump of root, holding her breath. Ahma dips his sharp claws in the deep violet magic brew. He has to claw her just right at just the right place for it to work. The poison has to enter the wound and mix with her life fluids in order to take her to the realm of the dead. But if she gets too much, she might not be able to come back. Ahma promised Kitten Lickle that she won’t get stuck inside the Underworld, but even though she trusts him completely, Hermes is super worried. Everybody knows to stay away from these things. What has gone into Kitten to make her this fearless and foolish? He thinks Ahma hypnotized her with her magic or something, but he’s too scared to say anything. And she did promise. You don’t go back on a promise. *Anything* to help her beloved.

“Close de cat eyes.”

Wolverines very much enjoy clawing. A little too much, according to Hermes, who doesn’t even dare to watch what’s about to happen.

“It’s to be going good dis tiem.” Ahma raises his paw and aims carefully. “When me and Sophia did this, I got – a bit eager.”

It’s the best part of the book because up until then, Kitten Lickle is just a cat after all. Every time Hermes says they ought to turn around and go home, he’s actually in the right. It doesn’t seem like the Twee Wisperer really exists at all. That would mean that it’s all for nothing anyway. The first time I read the book, I agreed with Hermes and I thought Kitten was totally stupid to risk her life and allow the wolverine to scratch her with that poisoned claw. How could she trust him just because he tells her to? I could barely keep reading, I was so scared what was going to happen next. But she really does come to the Underworld. And as soon as she’s there, she *knows* that magic is real. And if magic is real and the Underworld is real, then the Twee Wisperer should be real too.

What happens next is the weirdest part of the whole book. I can’t even describe it, it’s just – weird. (I asked Helge about that too. But he just said I should reread the book every now and then, and one day that the Underworld part would have changed completely.) Anyway, as soon as Kitten has returned from the Underworld, she can see... *other things*, below or beyond the things that happen and the places they come to later on. Once she’s back in the realm of the living, she has magical powers of her own. And from that point on, *she’s* in the right.

Liv was heavier than I thought. We made a lot of stops so I could rest. But I was glad to be of help. I had been right about her. That was crystal clear by now. Briefly during our walk, I had to keep talking, to avoid losing myself again – and yet we spoke not a single word about *me*. As though she understood. She understood my wish and respected it. This fact was more than enough to vindicate her. We talked instead about the rain. About locations around the town. Her mindset, which I – what

is the word? I didn't envy her, but perhaps I was intrigued. I may have even admired her outlook. At one point we were seated on a park bench, when a leaf fell from a tree above – a sycamore tree, if I'm not mistaken – and landed on her lap. She was delighted to the point of childlike wonder, like she'd never seen a leaf before. To my eyes it wasn't even a particularly beautiful leaf. It was covered in black spots. But she sang its praises in an impromptu speech, describing its perfections until I could almost see in it what she saw. Almost...

She held it up against the sun and inspected every fiber and nuance. She explained how she saw new, strange worlds within the ugly black spots. How she was tempted to travel into them and explore the unknown in the darkness. Merely observing her apparently powerful experience of this simple, amazing leaf, was in itself quite a blessing. So much so that it stirred in me a budding wish to share in her awe. Her voice was so calm and soft, motherly despite her age. She handed me the leaf then, and I watched it as intently as she had. The circular patterns of the black spots reminded me of the infinite Mandelbrot set, God's fingerprint on the universe. Then instantly, just like the other day, an awareness of how this scene seemed to echo the Pentateuch. Genesis, now; her handing me forbidden fruit to eat. Perhaps this was a warning about what was going to happen. But it was no less an intriguing synchronicity. Two times now in as many days since she showed up. Improbable, I thought slowly to myself. I allowed myself yet another brief glance toward the forbidden, overgrown path within the space of my thoughts. She had brought something with her. It occurred to me that this woman might be a, some sort of – a living talisman? I know there's a term to describe exactly what I want to say. But it escapes me now, even though I can almost taste it. Something archetypal. As though her mere presence somehow impels space and time to manifest the–

No! I aborted that mind walk. Two steps taken along the path, and that's two too many. This was fast becoming more than disturbing. This was *dangerous*. I handed the spotted leaf back to her immediately and made sure we got moving again fast.

So this was hardly where I would've wanted to be right now. Confined in a cab wishing we'd just waited until the trains started running again. I didn't even want to leave town. Nothing up north but endless forests. I'm a city girl precisely because I hate forest stuff. But no matter how much I wanted to stay in town, I wanted to stay with Finn even more. So I endured.

It turned out to be a short trip anyway. The driver started coughing before we even got to Northgate. It kept getting worse until he was coughing and whooping so uncontrollably that he had to pull over. He opened the door and staggered into the street. I heard him throw up on the sidewalk. Finn freaked out, of course. He screamed that we had to get out of here and threw himself across me to open the door. We scrambled into the street. He held my hand tight but I twisted myself loose when he started just running like a crazy person, in a random direction. "Run!" he yelled at me. Jesus Christ. But I did run after him of course. Not hysterically, like him, but fast enough not to let him out of my sight. He didn't slow down until he rounded the corner a block away.

"Sweetie," I said, panting, "even if something", deep breaths, "is really going on—"

He didn't seem to hear me. He paced along the street, peering resolutely into all the parked cars. I could tell he was meaning to steal a car to get out of here. This is where I started to get seriously fucking concerned. Not just for his mental health, but for all of society. Because I realized that if enough people reacted like he did, civilization *would* come crashing down any day. It wouldn't even take an actual global disaster.

Just people panicking. Finn went off his rocker because the price of rice went up. And then a taxi driver had a stomach bug. These things happen.

I pulled at his arm until he turned around.

“Finn, what the fuck are you doing?”

He stared at me, eyes wide open and darting this way and that. I had never seen him like this. Something about him reminded me of an animal. There were no thoughts behind those eyes, just seething instinct. His voice was tense and he ejected his words in short bursts. “We gotta go. Gotta get out. It’s a matter of minutes and seconds.”

“You’re overreacting again. Sit down for a bit and breathe. Please.”

I spoke slowly and stroked his arm. But I was deeply disturbed. When did he get so unstable? Should I have seen it coming? And most of all, *how bad was it?* If I’d seen this on TV five years ago I would have said: call an ambulance. That guy needs help. But this wasn’t some guy. This was my boyfriend. I knew him, loved him, and above all... it had all been so goddamn... gradual. I didn’t call an ambulance ten minutes ago when he spent five grand to escape a probably-imaginary calamity in a taxi cab. Why should I suddenly call them now, when the situation was really only marginally worse? Again. Was it me overreacting? I could still handle this. I didn’t want to make things worse if it wasn’t absolutely necessary. Sure, maybe something was going on with him. But I mean, what, do we lock people up now for wanting to get out of the big city for a while? No, I was definitely not calling an ambulance. This was pretty much under control.

Finn sat down on some dry stairs under a roof and looked around.

“Where is everybody?” He straightened his back, looking up and down the street. “Don’t you think there ought to be more people here besides us?”

“It’s late. It’s Sunday. People have work tomorrow.”

But uttering those words, all at once I got so sad. Sorrow just flooded into me. I wanted to cry to let out the overflow, but I couldn't. No tears came. At first I didn't understand what had happened. But after a few seconds of the silence and the dripping sounds from the streets, I managed to relax and breathe again. And then I saw the two of us from the outside. Like I was an ordinary person, standing in my safe living room behind one of the windows all around us, looking out at those two people on the street. The guy sitting on the stairs twitching his head and looking paranoid. His girlfriend standing resigned next to him, not knowing what to do. And I knew who we were. We were the people who did not have work tomorrow. Somehow, in the space of an hour or two, we had slipped through the cracks and fallen out of society. We were the others now. We were in the Dyatlov pass. Life was no longer normal. And nothing was under control.

If I sacrificed Finn to the white-robed priests of Elizabeth, I could still save myself. Was this the same crossroads where his dad once found himself? How I wished I could speak to that man now. He was the only person who could have helped me through this. But Finn's dad was long gone. I'd never even met him, he was dead by the time I came into the picture. I had to do this all on my own. I closed my eyes, tried to breathe calmly and get a grip.

No. There was no way I was getting anybody from mental healthcare involved in this. I know it would be the right thing, but I don't give a shit. I couldn't betray Finn, and I didn't want to lose him either. Even if he turned out the same as his mom, at least he wouldn't turn out *exactly* the same. Not if I had anything to do about it. That's the one thing I could truly do for him. He was not getting locked up in some fucking ward never to see me again. I felt a bit better thinking that. The best thing I could do right now was stay with him and make sure he didn't get into trouble. I could protect him.

If I'd thought ahead at all, I would have seen where this path must rationally lead and how it would surely end. So I

chose not to think ahead, so I wouldn't have to see. And a good thing too, as it turned out. Life is a strange place. The paths it takes are not quite rational.

By the time we got to the shelter, I couldn't discern any colors at all. Everything was in grayscale. The loss of color vision had been gradual and barely noticeable from any one moment to the next. But it had happened. I didn't mind so much. The last thing I saw in color was a blazing autumn leaf, its beauty so astounding that the mere memory of it held all the color I'd ever need to see. What did it all mean though?

I don't mean medically speaking, obviously. With the paralysis of my legs and now this, I realized that I must be suffering some pretty serious neurological issue. My body was very likely about to die, and soon. But I couldn't have cared less about the purely material aspect of it. What I mean to say is, what was the *meaning* of it? How could I make the most out of this situation with regard to spiritual development? And while I pondered what the Universe might be trying to tell me, Gustaf stopped. We were there.

The gray door to the homeless shelter led to a staircase. The ceiling was so low that I couldn't ride Gustaf's back anymore but had to sort of inch my way down one step at a time. He helped as best he could, of course. The ceiling was concrete, and the concrete was, as always, decorated with those secretive, comforting glyphs that seemed to cover the city wherever I went. And at the bottom of the stairs, fluorescent tube lamps. Apart from them, it was a pretty comfy looking place. I don't much like fluorescent lamps. They don't shine with a welcoming or beautiful light at all. It's a false light, a dead light even in grayscale. Maybe that's what people said about incandescent lightbulbs too when they were invented. Maybe we'll get used to this too. But I wonder. In either case, a soulless light is still better than darkness.

“Hi, Gustaf!” a man said in the lobby when we came down the stairs. He was apparently responsible for greeting the guests in this establishment, and he was very friendly. He offered to find me some crutches somewhere, and when I explained that both my legs were completely immobile, he told me where to go to apply for a wheelchair. But I wouldn’t be needing any wheelchair.

Gustaf carried me on his back again, showing me around the place. He told me he rarely spent the night here, but sometimes he’d come here to eat. There was a large shower room, an out-of-order toilet, five guest rooms with three beds in each, and a dining room with a TV. We sat down at one of the tables in there. A huge clock on the wall showed 08:15, and the news was on. They were reporting about all kinds of misery as usual, so we changed the channel. There were no other guests there watching, we seemed to have the whole place to ourselves. And then, with a nature documentary about ants in the rainforest or something running in the background, we hung out in the dining room, eating muesli with powdered milk and a ton of cinnamon. The guy in the lobby said there was some issue with the fridge in the kitchen, so they couldn’t offer any perishables. But I had never actually had powdered milk before. It was fun to get to try a new experience.

“Is it always this empty here?”

Back in – how long ago? – when I was last in the city, there used to be tons of homeless people wandering the streets with me. Some were like friends. Some were like Gustaf, and wanted to keep to themselves. But since I got back, the only one I had seen was him. They weren’t even here at the shelter.

“Gone,” he said. “Like I said. Seems fewer every time I’m here.”

I remembered his friends, gone away one by one. I felt so bad for him. I could almost feel his sorrow, like it drifted through the air from him to me like a scent. I could almost see it. But that was probably a trick of the light and me not being

used to seeing everything in grays. In either case, his sorrow was mine. I wanted so much to do something for him.

“Don’t you want to try Russel’s apartment again?”

He wiped the milk from his beard with his sleeve, but said nothing.

“What if he was there before, but he couldn’t come to the door because he was ill?”

That worked, almost too well. His eyes got nervous. I thought I saw something quake around him. I blinked.

“Let’s at least go and make an attempt.”

He nodded. I finished my muesli, Gustaf was already done. There was just one more thing I wanted to do before we could move on.

“I’m going to have to ask you for another favor.” This time he just smiled. “Could you help me with the shower? It’s been a while since I had the opportunity to really wash off.”

He seemed bewildered, so I calmed him down, continuing: “I mean, I can wash myself. But I’ll need to sit on a chair, and some help hanging my clothes up so they don’t get wet.”

Somehow he shrunk in his chair. No more than another trick of my eyes, of course. Something was definitely strange in my nervous system. But then, even hallucinations have their roots in something that’s there. Gustaf looked unwilling. I hope he wasn’t offended. But then he agreed to help.

Right then and there’s where everything turned around. I sat on the stairs in the twilight, staring along the street. Trying to wrap my head around what had happened. Jennifer stood next to me, gently unyielding, like a calm cloud. I no longer felt that it was a life or death matter, getting out of the city. Getting out of here.

I looked up at the windows on the other side of the street. Lights were on and I saw people moving in some of the apartments. Jennifer was right, the city was full of people. They were just at home indoors tonight. So it really hadn’t begun quite yet. I looked from one window to another and felt

a little overwhelmed by the thought that all these people have entire lives of their own. Lives just as infinite as my own and everybody else's, as full of love and woe. But the sonder itself wasn't what did it for me. What blew my mind was that I became a *part* of these strangers' lives at this moment, simply by sitting here looking in through their apartment windows. Even if our paths would never cross again, and barely even crossed right now, my life's thread was inextricably woven together with theirs on the mystical loom of life. I was tangibly aware of the interconnectedness of all things. And that's when it happened. I don't know, I must have seen something in one of the windows – a painting or a sculpture or something – but something made me recall something my mother once said.

"In time, you will understand so much more than you do now."

That's what she said, exactly that. *In time, you will understand so much more than you do now.* Until now I never comprehended the true meaning of the words. That in itself made them so much deeper. *In time, you will understand so much more than you do now.* I hadn't even thought about that for years and years, had practically forgotten all about it. And that's exactly what she was referring to, of course. It was hardly a coincidence that I remembered her words right here, right now. I'd been reading about this when I did my research. *Memory implantation.* It sounds like science fiction, but techniques exist and have been in use by several intelligence agencies and other groups since the 1950s. It's well documented. I knew the basics of how it worked. It's all about using the natural memory storage and retrieval mechanisms of the brain. But you exploit them by conscious manipulation so that you can control where the memories go. The brain can be programmed like any computer as long as you know what you're doing. And who, in addition to military intelligence, do you think would know something like that? A certain order that managed to stay hidden for hundreds of years, huh? Oh

wow. Oh wow. Everything exploded into my mind. *In time, you will understand so much more than you do now.*

It is possible to plant memories that are sort of active right away. But in this case I had activated a dormant memory. That means the implanted memory lies “forgotten” in the subconscious at first. But the memory is connected to a specific trigger, a kind of key. That key could be anything, a scent or a phrase, a melody, an image – in this case, like I said, a piece of art I saw in some window. I was almost certain of it, even though I couldn’t say how I knew. That in itself was evidence that something *bigger* was at work here. How could they know I would end up right here right now? And yet I could feel it in my entire body that it was *meant* this way. Besides, it’s very typical of the circle to use a work of art for a trigger. Most members were creative types, that much was always obvious. I wonder if it’s your creative urge that leads you to the circle, or if it’s the circle that awakens one’s inner creative spirit? Or the two flow back and forth equally. Soon I might find out. In time. The key stimulus must have been programmed into my brain since I was a child. Hidden in the subconscious recesses of the mind, waiting to be activated to unlock my mom’s knowledge. I looked intently at each and every window once again, to coax more memories into awakening. But nothing happened. Fortunately I knew what was going on. No, not fortunate. They had planned this very carefully. That much was an incontrovertible truth.

Probably, it was just one single memory that unlocked this time. The overwhelming sensation was simply because the engram, the particular nerve tree representing that memory in my brain, had been inactive for so long. Now that the biocircuit was up and running, the sensation was gone. But there would obviously be more memories rising to the surface of the mind soon. The gate had been cracked open. This was just the beginning of my initiation into the order.

I breathed out a deep sigh and felt my chest fill up with relief. How long had I carried the weight that finally fell off my shoulders? At last I could stop wondering about mom. It was all true after all. She had actually told the truth, to me and to dad both. I could see it all so clearly now. Everything was ridiculously obvious. She had been *training* me, of course. Mom had raised me to follow in her footsteps, *and I didn't even know*. Even her strange disappearance – *that in itself must have been part of the training*. A central part, even. I mean, just look at where I was right now. I would never have comprehended what just happened to me, with the window and that thing she said ages ago, unless I had been well versed in the science of mind control and brain manipulation. Which I was as a direct consequence of her disappearance. She had done the one thing she could to make sure I would follow her path. That in itself said a lot both about the dedication and the skills of her secret society. I was piecing the whole puzzle together now. *In time, you will understand so much more than you do now*. I had a hard time not bursting into laughter right there on the stairs, it was just so comical. Just imagine, I'd been carrying all of it around in my own brain this whole time and I never understood it. I didn't even know about it. And like I said, this was just opening the door a little crack. So far. Now that the process had begun, all I had to do was keep going. Like mom, I would live my life undercover. My cover was all that which used to be my life. But now, while I lived an outwardly normal existence, all the necessary knowledge would ooze up from my subconscious, all in the right time as it became necessary. Yes, I was walking in her footsteps. Everything was prepared long before. Perhaps hundreds of generations back? And at last I knew for a fact that the collapse of society *was* on its way. But we didn't have to worry, because I was in on the secret now. The circle would never let us come to harm. With their unlimited influence, I couldn't have wished for better protection for myself and my woman. Everything was exactly as it should.

“Hey,” I said. “You know what? Let’s go back home.”

Jennifer hesitated before answering. “Are you sure?”

I put my arm around her and smiled the most sincere smile I had ever smiled.

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

I didn’t get up off the grass right away even after I dried up. I lay there and thought about deep stuff, watchin the clouds float by up in the sky. They looked like giant toilet bowls and sinks made outta cotton. An airplane passed by high above the glade, too, several miles above my naked body and most likely packed with families on vacation, on their way to... somewhere else, I’ll bet. You ask me, I couldn’t tell you why people spend their time and money travelin all around the world to visit fancy exotic places several times a year, when there’s at least as much to be discovered right here in your average cow pasture, and it’ll cost you nothing. And those airplanes ain’t good for the environment either. I shook my head at that plane and the suckers inside it. People who don’t get that the hamster wheel they’re trapped in would stop spinnin if they just stopped runnin. Then I went back to the trailer, got dressed and went for a long walk in ma forest.

I used to like walkin past the mine. Even with its dark past, it was one of the most important places in this city. A real piece of history. I used to stand by the entrance sometimes and just stare at it. Ma head reeled from the thought that everythin was still there, down inside the mountain. Right past that pile of boulders and the first few meters of collapsed tunnels. Like a whole nother world beneath the surface, right. It ain’t no surprise that that Home fellow had his urge to get inside there. Of all them city weirdos I can think of, it’s those *urban explorers* that I can relate to the most. I even opened up a newspaper one time just so I could read an interview with Home. And that’s somethin I very rarely do, lemme tell ya. He talked about his fascination with tunnels, forgotten spaces and locked doors. He said somethin like: think about how many

doors we pass on a daily basis, without really seein them. Doors that ordinary consciousness filters out, because they don't seem relevant to us. And if you do happen to notice one, you forget about it instantly. You don't even try the handle, cause you just assume that it's locked and it's none of your business. Even though you have no idea where it leads. You assume it's a utility closet or electrical maintenance. *You ought to try openin one of those doors some day.* Once that thought has crossed your mind, Home said, you've already taken the first step. Then you just keep walkin. And one day you're standin in the ruins of an abandoned mental hospital, snappin photos of the graffiti in the ECT room.

It ain't hard to see where he's comin from. What spurs them all on to get bolder and explore all kinds of abandoned places. And what can I say. The thing about the doors... I'd lie if I said it never crossed ma own mind. I took that first step. So I'll bet there's a little urban explorer inside me, too. Yeah, I could feel it tuggin at me whenever I was outside the mine. I ached to get inside and explore the tunnels and shafts. I was so eager to see somethin that nobody else had seen. But it was too late now. The boulders blockin the entrance were too many, and too heavy. It'd take a whole team of workers to clear a path through there.

After my mornin walk I had a modest breakfast and then took the car to the city. I had a job at the shelter, yet another one. I'd been there several times to remove meter-long blockages from their toilet pipes. And every time I showed up, they'd put up even more angry notes about all kinds of stuff you weren't supposed to flush down the toilet. You ask me, I'll bet those notes just provoked people to flush more stuff. People don't like bein told what to do. It's only human, right. You come into a bathroom and the first thing that stares you in the face is ten hostile notices basically tellin you off for somethin that some other guy did a year ago. Waggin fingers at people like they're little kids, with obvious shit like "do not

flush electronic gadgets”. Crikey, even me when I came in there ma immediate first thought was: “Aha! There’s nothin about *clothes!* *That’s* what I’m gonna flush!” I work with this stuff professionally and I deal with the fallout, so trust me, I know, angry signs do not work, they aggravate the problem. Trust, on the other hand, will get you a long way. And then if somebody is irresponsible enough to clog the pipes... Well, then we’d have the exact same damn situation that we already do. Only with happier customers.

I slammed the car door behind me and crossed the street to the shelter. It was an amazin weather today, the sun was shinin and here in the city the ground had already dried after yesterday’s rain. I was a bit sad to have to leave the sunshine behind to descend into the fluorescent underground again. But this time was not like any other time, or anything else at all. This time I was *destined* to be there. Because this time, *she* was there.

The job was simple routine, I was done in no time. But just when I was finished with the bathroom and about to leave, this harrowed old man showed up. He just came out the next door, the one to the shower room. He carried his daughter on his back and she had her arms round his neck. Give me a whole year to talk about the one second I laid ma eyes on her, and I still couldn’t do justice to her beauty. She was fresh outta the shower, and her wet hair clung to the contours of her face in wavy strands. She smiled the smile of angels, and her eyes were so full of life... She had a look of genuine childlike wonder that was hard to accept on the face of a grown woman. But uh, with her dad carryin her on his back and apparently joinin her in the shower – could she be mentally challenged somehow? But then she waved hello to me with one hand and I’ll never forget her silky voice and the first words she said to me:

“Hi! Great to see someone else around here! My name is Liv, and this is Gustaf.”

Oh, I thought of another thing. That man Alex made me realize yet another reason why I made the right choice to quit on my family. *Disease*. It strikes at any time, snatching you right out of existence. Death is an uncomfortable thought, but we all have to think it. Because one day we are all going to die. Sooner or later, it's simply inescapable. A man who can't accept that, can never be happy. Because there's no greater motivation to seek happiness, than the fact that there's a literal deadline to the search. I was right at the heels of happiness now. Whatever happens next, at least I'll know I started taking steps in the right direction. I could have stayed behind, gotten sick, and died. Imagine that. They would have suffered an even worse tragedy than a mere disappearance. And me, I would have spent my final moments regretting my entire life. Wondering what could have been. Wishing I hadn't postponed the decision until it was too late. But that could never happen now.

I'd given up on finding a towel and resigned to "air-dry". But on entering the shower room, I was further shocked. I'd never imagined that anybody could allow something to decay to this extent. The room was so filthy and disgusting – in fact *despicable*, and I don't throw that word around. It leaves a bad taste on my tongue. But it was apt. The shower room was probably the most revolting place on Earth. The air was thick with the stench of a green, living tissue that coated every inch of the room. I had never experienced such a foul smell, and no man should ever have to, either. The showers had no hoses, just rusty showerheads mounted directly on the walls. I can only think of three kinds of places where they use showers like that. None of them are pleasant. Fountainheads of pain, brutality and dread. The walls were thick with filth and mottled, greening streaks of life. The room was, in a word, an abomination.

Worst of all was the floor. Swollen and uneven, the tiles gave and sank slightly under my weight. They were covered in

disgusting growths to the point where you could barely make out what might have once been a checkerboard pattern. I hesitated for a long while before actually entering the room. In any other situation I would have turned around in the door and never ever sat foot in this nightmare. But the dying man in the bedroom made me nervous. I felt viruses and bacteria creeping all over my skin, looking for places to crawl in through. To get inside of me. I had to take a shower as soon as possible and there were no two ways about it. I simply had no choice but to go in there.

First I had to humiliate myself by undressing right outside the door, or else I would have had to put my clothes directly on that spongy, moist floor inside the room. Not that there was anybody around that saw me, but that was irrelevant. I still felt violated. Indeed, I felt *unsafe*. I looked at my body. The bruises from the mugging really did look awful, but didn't hurt much anymore. On the other hand I seemed to have a rash developing in my armpit. My heart pounded faster when I recalled the strangers in the dark room and the spotted arms of the dying man. But the rash couldn't have anything to do with them. I have to calm down. I was there no more than a minute or two ago. No disease breaks out that quickly.

Then I forced myself to walk. Step by mushy step, the whole vile way toward the shower, where I turned the water on. I didn't know what to expect, and barely dared turn it on for fear of what might come out. But the water was surprisingly fresh. I'd held my breath without noticing again, but now I breathed and relaxed again. Clear, clean water, that's something at least. We have excellent water in this town. That's probably the one thing I'll miss once I'm traveling around Europe. But clear water was still not enough to make up for what I had to endure in this room. To be forced to wash myself right in the middle of a mold infestation, naked behind an unlocked door where any random hobo could barge in at any moment.

I was constantly driving off the thought: "*Did I leave Amanda for this?*" I could see her standing there in the stairs

in her red dress. Strong, opposing feelings fought over the space in my chest. Was this really happiness? In this dreadful place? But I also remembered how trapped and unhappy I felt in our house. At least now I was free. Yes, this was worth it after all. Besides, I only had to endure one night down here. One single night. Tomorrow I'd go to the bank, get money, then get so far away from here I'd never have to set foot in such a filthy place again.

That disturbing sense of *déjà vu* again. I *must* have been here before. But when on Earth would I have been in a place like this – and then not remember it better? But I shrugged it off again. One single night.

After showering, I got dressed again and entered the dining room. I was still wet and my clothes clung to my skin in a most annoying way, but I had to deal with it. At least it was very warm down here. I ought to dry out quickly, just like the smiler said. I was alone in the room, and so far no food was served. I turned on the TV to pass the time. The picture was choppy and distorted, naturally, and the sound was cut up and filled in with white noise so I could only make out fragments. But that was enough. The evening news were on and somewhere between the bursts of static I heard a serious lady presenter. She was just done reading the headlines. And there it was. Splintered into the thick white noise.

“Peter Carsten, Head of Medicine at Eliza[]
alert concerning a potential epide[]
] of patients at the hospital wh[]
] and the same pathogen. []
] several diverse symptoms and dia[]
] to be an as of yet unknown contagion, which
apparently–”

Then more static. When the picture came back on, there was a new lady speaking, and only the doctor was in the shot.

“–sturbing word. Is it really that bad?”

“Unfortunately, we are at a point where[]

of pa[] and progno—"]of public health. The number

White noise and static. Then the reporter said something more but I couldn't make out a single word. Back to the Head of Medicine.

"—so far unknown disease which is now []with the classification TR3M9."

"What can you do to protect yourself?"

"It's [] usual: good hygiene, avoid [] risk groups, but at this stage it appears—"

The TV jumped and flickered, and the next time a signal could get through, it was about something else.

I'd heard enough. I started my new life mere hours ago. I was not dying in an epidemic and I was not dying in a basement. I had to get out of here immediately. I ran out of the dining room, past the smiling god damn receptionist and up the stairs three steps at a time. All the time I felt the wet fabric against my even wetter skin, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. Water, the source of all life. What was breathing the air down here? What was alive and multiplying all over my skin, colonizing my body at this very moment? I pulled hard on the door handle, but came crashing back down the stairs. Hard edges struck me all over and my already battered body got even more bruised, but miraculously, I didn't break anything. I lay at the foot of the stairs staring into the ceiling, confused. What happened? I sat up, woozy, and discovered what I still held tight in my closed right fist. I had torn the door handle right out of the door. I twitched and dropped it, and it clanked to the floor, echoing through the underground halls. *There was something about it.*

It got too late way too early. I had so much more I wanted to ask him, but Helge said he needed his sleep and we could talk more tomorrow. Then he tucked me in and read aloud to me before he went to bed. I wanted him to read Kitten Lickle of

course, but he said you have to taste a lot of different flavors of thought before you truly know what agrees with you. Then he read poems from a strange book. I didn't really understand any of it, but it still sounded pretty. After he left, I lay in the dark and looked at the ceiling. It was full of scary shadows from the street lights outside, but I wasn't afraid. I even felt almost invincible when I watched them. I mean, they were nothing but patterns of light and dark, and they were stuck up there in the ceiling, too, and couldn't even reach me. I was safe down here. The bed was huge and soft, way cosier than the bed in my room at home. And you know what? I was lying on my back. I didn't have to sleep on the left side anymore. And I didn't have a bucket next to the bed or anything, and I still wasn't worried about having to get up and run to the bathroom to throw up. And I hadn't had *that feeling* come back one single time since I ran away from home. My stomach still tingled when I thought about it. I really did it! I ran away! And it went so well, too. Kitten Lickle was right. On a journey with a higher purpose, everything will come to you as you need it. De Universe provides. I fell asleep safe and happy.

Monday morning I woke up when the sunlight struck me through the window. At first I wasn't sure I should get up already, because if Helge wasn't awake yet, I didn't want to wake him up. I heard noises from birds and cars and people out on the street, but it was pitch silent in the apartment. I stayed in bed, waiting. I tried to read a little from the book he left on the nightstand, but I still didn't get it at all. It wasn't as pretty either now that I didn't hear it coming from his slow, secure voice.

I think I must have stayed in bed waiting for hours, but then I had to pee so bad that I *had* to get up. But I never made it to the bathroom, because as soon as I stepped into the living room –

* * *

The mushrooms we gather in the forest are just a very small part of the total organism. The visible part above ground (the botanical term being sporocarp) is only there, in the words of one ethnobotanist, for sex thrills and sunbathing. The true organism is the mycelium, a complex network of hyphae, microscopic strands below ground which can span across considerable distances and permeate the soil in a highly compact web. A cubic inch of soil can contain eight miles combined of these tiny threads. An entire mycelium can contain more synapses than a human brain.

* * *

– he was lying there on the floor. I peed myself and couldn't move for a long while. I was frozen, just staring at the body, as if he might get up and start chasing me if I moved. Kitten, Kitten Lickle, something. There had to be something. *Panic: no*, she would have said. That's a good start. It was a good thing we talked so much about the chapter with Ahma and the realm of the dead last night. It's kind of all about not being scared. Or about how to stop being scared.

Because, the last thing Kitten has to do before she can enter the realm of the dead, is to find her prayer of fear. Helge talked a lot about that the night before. I had only ever heard of fear prayers in Kitten Lickle, but he knew so much about them. He said not only have people used prayers of fear for thousands of years, but the one in Kitten Lickle is actually borrowed from another book. "Fear Mantras", it was called, and some lady called Alicia Hoyle wrote it. Helge said it was the most rare book he owned in all of his bookcases. And that lady Alicia Hoyle in turn learned the prayer from a monk, Helge said. But that doesn't matter. I only wanted to say that I'm glad he had time to tell me about some of the secrets in Kitten Lickle. Not everybody knows. Now let me tell you the rest of what happened in the forest.

Okay, so Ahma recites Sophia's old prayer of fear to Kitten Lickle and Hermes. And then he recites his own, too. It's usually better to find your own than to use somebody else's. Nobody knows which fear prayer will work for anybody else, but you know yours when you hear it. *If it speaks tu yu*, then you know. Sometimes you also outgrow your old prayer and you have to find yourself a new one. But Kitten didn't have one from before so she had to find hers for the first time ever. Ahma's and Sophia's prayers aren't in the book, but it says they were *"very beautifluff, but did not speaks tu her"*. So he teaches Kitten Lickle how to find her own.

There's this one place in the woods where there's a deep hole underneath an uprooted tree. Down inside that hole, a strange flower grows. Nobody ever saw such a plant grow anywhere else, and nobody knows its name. But there it is

underneath the tree roots, and it blooms once a year, with the whitest flowers you ever saw. As soon as you see this plant, you can immediately tell it's holy. Kitten follows the wolverine's instructions to the letter. After she's climbed into the hole at dusk, Hermes and Ahma pull a black cloth over the opening. It's magic fabric from the ruins in the outskirts of the forest. Oh, because it's kind of common in the animal societies to keep certain magical relics from the hairless ones. Kitten Lickle's dad for instance was a thing-finder who wandered dangerous ruins all over the land to bring home rare objects. That's probably why she's so brave. But then again, the last time her dad – no, wait, I got sidetracked again. That's from a different part of the book, and it actually happens much earlier, too. Sorry. Back to the tree pit.

After the sun has gone down that night, and the shadows of night rise in the forest, not even Kitten with her sharp cat eyes can tell if she's got them open or closed in that dark hole. She sits in silence in the blackest darkness there ever was. Everywhere around her, she can hear faint sounds closing in. Leaking out of the very earth that surrounds her. It's the overwhelming scent of the flower, attracting that which lives in the dark and the underground. The walls of the pit are drawing nearer and it is as though the uprooted tree closes like a lid around her and the white flower. Kitten Lickle is alone with the unknown.

When the sun comes up and they take off the cloth in the morning, they think she's disappeared at first. Perhaps she was eaten alive by fear itself. But when Ahma calls her name, she crawls out from under a nook between the roots down there. Her white fur is ruffled and she has a bloody gash in one ear. He asks if she followed his instructions, and she gives a single, silent nod.

“What happened down there?”

Hermes glances nervously at the hole in the ground. But there's nothing inside. Just roots and soil, and the secretive plant, snow white and silent.

“Nothing. I founded it.”

I am not a fool. I am wise.

I will run from my fear. I will outdistance my fear.

Then I will hide from my fear. And I will wait for my fear.

I will let my fear run past me. Then I will follow my fear.

I will track my fear until I can approach my fear in complete silence.

Then I will strike at my fear. I will charge my fear.

I will grab hold of my fear.

I will sink my fingers into my fear.

Then I will bite my fear. I will tear the throat of my fear.

I will break the neck of my fear.

I will drink the blood of my fear.

I will gulp the flesh of my fear.

I will crush the bones of my fear.

And I will savor my fear.

*I will swallow my fear, all of it, and then I will digest my fear
until I can do nothing else but shit out my fear.*

In this way I will be made stronger.

When she read the prayer to the others, all sound seemed to fade from the forest. The fear withered away and became part of her. And when I stood there, frozen in the door, looking at the dead priest at the other end of the room, I read the prayer of fear to myself over and over again. I was too scared to tell if it *spoke* to me or not. But it was the only prayer of fear I knew. And if it could help Kitten pass through the realm of the dead, it ought to help me pass through the living room. And it did. Eventually, the freeze thawed. I took the first step forward. And I was made stronger.

The shower went smoothly. I helped Liv undress and mount the chair. Then I stood in the corner, turned the other way, holding her clothes while she showered. There were no hangers in there. The situation felt quite relaxed and natural. She was young enough to – far too young. In addition, I had committed a calculated assassination of my libido a very long time ago. I didn't pull it off in a single day, but I got it done, spurred on by a vast force; the utter contempt for any emotions that seemed to imply that life might one day go on. Lust was the worst perpetrator of all and the one I despised the most. The slightest spark of such sensations brought about actual nausea. And I welcomed that nausea, I egged it on, because I realized that by that nausea I would eventually erase lust from my life. And at length, I was successful. The woman behind me was, to my eyes, beautiful only in the way one speaks of sunsets as beautiful. Abstract, detached from bodily desires.

Then I helped her get dressed again. In that situation I couldn't even think of her as a woman at all, my mind was more inclined to – *nothing*, because I'm in control of my mind and not the other way around and I demand it to *stop doing this*. What is happening!? I feared I may not be able to persevere much longer. But once again, I managed to forget before I could remember. We left the shower room.

Right outside we ran into a pipefitter who was there to work repairs on the out-of-order toilet. I recognized him, having seen him here once before. But he did not seem to recognize me. We started talking to him, and all three of us sat down in the dining room for a while. His name was Cláudio. He appeared a charming fellow. Obviously intellectually inclined,

if lacking in classical education. I always appreciate an autodidact.

Cláudio was a few years older than Liv, and they got along well. As soon as he realized that she was – well, the way she is, I guess that covers it – he made sure to introduce himself as a “holistic plumber”. They proceeded to discuss the philosophy of plumbing. I tried to stay in the background, young love has no use for the meddling of old men. But I did catch myself smiling at them, after a while. I couldn’t recall the last time I had did such a thing, but it must have been long years ago. I shuddered. The smile died instantly.

Tuesday morning. I wake up to find Finn’s side of the bed empty and cold. I get up, find him in front of his computer in the study, wearing dark red briefs and a short-sleeved shirt, buttoned wrong.

“Honey? How long have you been up?”

He didn’t even turn to look at me, he was glued to the screen. His voice was thick and somber when he replied.

“Look.”

I walked up and leaned over his shoulder. He had a myriad windows open on the screen, showing more and less alternative news sites. All of them were reporting about TR3M9, some kind of disease that just broke out. He showed me headlines about “AIDS 2.0” and “the modern plague”. Even later on, after I had seen the normal news on TV and it was clear something was really happening, I had a hard time believing most of what Finn told me. According to him, for instance, patients had been secretly removed from hospitals by the military and their families weren’t even told where they were taken, politicians had fled to underground bunkers and the media had a hard time getting quotes from authorities on medicine because most people who knew what was going on, had committed suicide. Implicitly due to their understanding of what was going to happen next. When I pointed out that I had already seen both a politician and a Head of Medicine interviewed on the TV, he claimed they were planted as misdirection to keep the populace calm. There was obviously no reasoning with him on that point, so I didn’t even bother trying.

The new pestilence quickly got the nickname *Tremp*. And while they started out describing it as a potential epidemic, it wasn't long before they had to reconsider the problem as being more of a definite pandemic. Magazines everywhere published lists of early symptoms, which seemed to be endless and cover just about any symptom imaginable. No two sources had the same list. But among the most common ones you could find nausea, fever, "flu-like symptoms", respiratory problems, body aches, fatigue, confusion – and then a couple of strange ones, like "sensitivity to light", "cognitive dysfunction", and "abnormal time perception". *Cognitive dysfunction*. I thought of Finn, of course. He had suddenly started acting really fucking weird – but then again, wouldn't it be weirder if he carried on as usual? In these circumstances? He had basically been proven right. His hunch to leave town the other day had been spot on. But now that we were in the middle of it, he seemed to have changed his mind again. But that was my darling in a nutshell. He came out guns blazing and then discarded everything halfway done when something new came along. I had a hard time keeping up, I can't even be bothered anymore. As long as I get to be with him, it's all good. As long as we're together, at least we have each other.

"Jesus Christ. You have to see this."

He showed me a shaky, blurry video he found online. The morning sun bathed the room in light, so it was hard to follow what was going on on the screen. But I could make it out. Big black bags being dumped out of a camouflaged truck into a big pit. It was a chilling sight, my spine shivered and the hairs on my arms stood on end. But I was still not convinced it was real. It looked like a scene straight out of a horror movie. So much so that it might have literally been just that. A short snippet of any random crappy American horror movie. I stood up straight again and put my hands on Finn's shoulders. Besides, even if the video was real, that could be anything in those bags they were dumping. Several of them looked sort of swollen, bulging out in grotesque lumps that no human body would have, bubonic plague or not. But it was definitely a disturbing sight. The weather outside was gorgeous, as if this was just an ordinary day. I wished I could go back in time a few days. Go

away, hide somewhere before all of this went down, just like in his daydreams. I stroked the back of his neck without thinking about it, and I don't think he noticed either.

In the silence of the night, oblong bags were being disposed to the underground by the hundreds. I was afraid. But not so much for the Tremp virus, more for Finn's mental health. What would this do to his already overactive imagination? And even worse: I feared for the city itself. For all of mankind. I was afraid of the panic I could sense brewing beneath the surface. Remember what I told you before about what happened to me. That morning, when I stood next to Finn and we watched the first outbreak together online, my memory of the panic was still deeply repressed. I *never* went there. But it was there. Underneath the surface of the mind. And deep in my brain, a premonition was building, even if I didn't understand its origin. A dim hunch, rooted in my own terrible experience of what true panic can be like. In my mind I saw an entire society collectively struck by the same hysterical urge to get out that I felt in the tree. And I saw that anything could happen. Absolutely anything.

The plumber was an interesting person. His entire sphere of perception consisted of reflections of his labor, and he was hypnotized by them. He was fun to talk to. He seemed like the kind of person who doesn't take reality too literally. It's always refreshing to run into somebody who shares that view. But I knew I couldn't stay with him. He was already looking into my eyes like he would cease to exist if he let go of them with his gaze, and a spiral turned and turned in the center of his chest. I didn't want to hurt him, so I decided to leave before he got too ensnared.

It's not the first time this happens. I have chosen to abstain from romantic relationships and live in celibacy. I'm not a virgin, biologically speaking – I had time to have my share of experiences during those years when I was a drinker – but spiritually I have regained my innocence and taken the vow.

Many people misunderstand the purpose of a vow of celibacy. Certainly there are as many reasons to do it as there are people who do it, as always. But this is my personal view. There is no tribulation that can not be turned into fuel for

personal growth by those so inclined. And to abstain from carnal love, and indirectly from motherhood, is an ideal tribulation for a number of reasons. Consider that it's available to practically anybody. Not everyone can take a vow of silence, for instance. Next, the risk of troublesome side effects is next to none. If you fast for too long, on the other hand, you will die. Third, the amount of willpower it takes is enormous, even though it ought to be the simplest thing. It is very easy to underestimate the difficulty of living in celibacy. Celibacy is *really, really hard*. But once you are on the path, every difficult experience is an opportunity for spiritual growth. That is why I chose to abstain from physical intimacy.

I gradually found that my chastity turned all people into my lovers. I discovered that giving up motherhood made everybody into my children. The one thing I still had a hard time dealing with, was that hearts were broken. To be celibate is to break a powerful taboo. Especially as a young woman, ironically enough. Many could not understand my decision, men and women both, and in their eyes I was withholding something from the world that I was not allowed to keep to myself. Not that most of them would have said that out loud, of course.

Anyway, I usually tried not to get too close to those who would get hurt. People like Cláudio. So when Gustaf got up and said he had to leave and go back to Russel, I reached out for him.

"Wait, I want to come with you!"

His head grew and shrank, and he had a puzzled look on his face. He must have thought Cláudio's obvious feelings for me were mutual. But then he nodded quietly and let me come along. Cláudio asked if he could see me again and I said I didn't know. I don't plan out the future, it just happens. Apparently this leaving it to fate appealed to his romantic streak, so he accepted our goodbye.

By now I couldn't feel anything below my waist, and everything was constantly moving around in my field of vision. For the most part it was beautiful, seeing the surroundings shift and transform all around me. The sun flew above us on giant wings. Being carried felt strange, but in a good way. I had

my arms around Gustaf's neck and bathed my face in the sunlight. My wet hair dried as I wagged on his back all the way home to Russel. It was easier now than at first. Smoking bits of him came off and fell to the ground with each step. He had really lost a lot of his sorrowful burden since I first met him in the rain. But there was a lot more to go, too. I thanked the universe for the privilege of seeing his troubles ease, if only slightly. But it would get even better. Beloved Gustaf. What happened to you?

He reminded me of my dad a little bit. A specific memory of my dad, from when I was little. It must have been one of the earliest memories I could recall. He carried me in his arms, an ice cold, clear winter's day, we were out walking in the snow. We walked past a snow-covered field that winter had turned into a vast white softness. The smell of ice and smoke filled the air. Above the naked trees, the winter sun shone down at us, thin, crisp rays of light. And dad had tiny, tiny beads of ice in his beard, glittering in the sunlight, so close to my little face, my winter-flushed cheeks. Frozen breath, something invisible made manifest. And I squinted and saw those pearls sparkle in the sun, and I knew that my dad was Jack Frost from the picture book we had at home. I had never felt so safe.

And now I was all grown up and my dad was Gustaf, and it was my turn to pay him back if I could. I hugged his neck and said:

"You know, a sunny September day is beautiful even in black and white."

But he said nothing, just kept on walking.

I couldn't reveal anything to Jennifer yet. But I had been contacted during the night. They were probably monitoring certain key websites to keep track of who visited them, and they had tracked my computer. I hung out at some pretty unusual places out there. The internet is infinitely vast. You enter in one place, swirl around inside its infinity for a couple of minutes or hours or days, and eventually you're spat out in a completely different place. It's like a giant brain, and we are its thoughts. The internet is an enormous mycelium of wires and terminals. A labyrinth where you have a degree of control over where you go, but not full control. The only sure thing is that

it'll change you. Once you get back out, you're another person, you've brought something back that you didn't have on entering. And this time I brought back the nameless circle.

At first I thought it might be a trap – you can't be too careful. But I quickly realized that those in power wouldn't know enough about who I am to bother laying out that kind of trap for me. I launched into my latest research only *after* the state-controlled media released the news about Tresp. Believe me, just about the entire fucking country would be reading the same websites right now. I wasn't on their radar. But mom's organization, on the other hand, would have had me under surveillance since long before. That's how I knew it was their message I received. It was amazing. Obviously, I can't go into detail about how they communicated with me, but there was no doubt in my mind. They tried to reach out to me, and I picked it up. In addition to that, I had sort of retroactively started seeing through other hidden messages they had implanted in my brain long ago. *In time, you will understand so much more than you do now.* Yes indeed.

I had unconsciously been taught some of their secret methods for sending and receiving messages, and my concern for the future was even more assuaged now that I understood it all. It was fully clear to me now how vast their influence was. Many public persons I had suspected to be members, were suddenly confirmed by secret greetings. I don't mean literally, of course. There were no silly gestures and code words like on TV. It was deeper than that, you just looked at one another and you knew.

But the really empowering thing was discovering certain members all around the world that I would *never* have suspected. We were in key positions everywhere. The nameless order was the one hope for the future, and everything pointed to the good side emerging victorious from this. There was no doubt in my mind. These were exciting times.

But concrete information was scarce. The central message of all communication from the group was that we should all just stay calm, stay hidden, and wait. Wait for what? We'd know when the time came. As long as we just laid low and stayed ready. Nothing could happen too fast. There is an

inevitable gradualness woven into the fabric of the universe itself. There was so much I still didn't know. I'd been shown some members, but only the ones that chose to show themselves to the rest of us. Probably in order to create that empowering feeling – that we couldn't lose. But who were the others? How many of us were there, really? How much did the world government know about us? Were they even aware that we existed? I had so many questions. But for now I had to restrain myself. Right now it was all about sticking to the cover, hiding the secrets inside my brain. Nobody could know. Not even Jennifer. Silence was extremely important. In addition, the silence in itself was further evidence of the circle's existence. If I could know about something this huge and still keep my mouth shut about it, I never had to doubt that huge secrets could be kept secret. My own existence confirmed it. Later on I would tell Jennifer, of course, but not before the right time. Oh, but even more important than silence, most important of all, was that we totally avoided unfree news media. TV broadcasts and major newspapers are subconscious brainwashing tools for turning us into zombies, obeying and watching as they slaughter us. I tried to convince Jennifer to stop following the news too, but she was stubborn. It was hard to argue when I couldn't tell her everything I knew. But I decided it didn't matter after all. The hidden message of the circle was really out in the open. Even if not everybody could see it, it still seeped in through subconscious cracks. Some day she would be initiated into the open secret too. Once the circle decided it was time for her, just like they decided it was time for me. Until then I'd have to let her carry on. I couldn't say too much, not before she was initiated.

That in itself made her into one of the others, in a certain sense. Made her dangerous. She was receptive to the signals, and if she didn't know *everything* that I knew, she might misunderstand if I tried to tell her. She might do what my dad did with my mom, get me locked up. I understood now that mental healthcare is really a covert prison institution for keeping people down who know too much. The ruling elite are scared of the contents of my brain and they would do anything to protect themselves. If I screwed up now and blew my cover, they would find me and lock me up in the psychiatric prison

forever. All hope would be lost. But *that in itself was hope!* Now that I knew the stakes, I had every reason to lay low and stay hidden. And as long as I didn't allow myself to be paralyzed by the world government's many tricks to turn off my brain and turn me into a docile puppet person, I could save Jennifer when the time came. That was the most important thing of all. That me and Jennifer survive this together.

We had a great talk. Liv was the first person I met who was as much into philosophy as me. We talked about ma theories. I told her how my "patients" had mental issues that seemed related to their homes. Then she taught me this new word, *synchronicity*. It's all about how a flooded toilet can be related to the homeowner's repressed feelins and their outbursts, while *at the same time* the flood is of course just caused by blocked pipes. Get it, like stuff can be related on this really important plane even though they're totally unrelated in the sense of "cause and effect". Just like I always suspected. I could tell she was like me, someone who thinks a lot. It was so cool runnin into someone else who just got it. We talked for so long and I forgot all about her dad who was sittin at the same table. He was so quiet. Like he was so lost in thought he wasn't even there. But then after a while he stood up and said he was goin to see a friend. I said I should go too, I mean I fixed the toilet ages ago. I'd rather get back out in the sun than hang out in some basement, you know.

"Wait, I want to come with you!" Liv said and held her arms out toward me. I looked at her dad to see if it was okay with him that I snatched his daughter away. But he nodded at us and smiled. So I took ma beautiful paralyzed lady in ma arms, and ma heart pounded like a teenager's when I carried her up the stairs and into ma car.

First I took her to the best lookout. We lay on the roof of the car, lookin out over the rooftops and the forests and the sea. You've gotta love this town. A scent of damp earth came from the woods. Some of the trees around us were fully covered in fall colors already, but most of them had just started to turn yellowish. We bathed in the fresh forest light and admired the autumn skies above. All the way up here we could hear the

shriekin seagulls that circled around way down by the pier. I let ma hand accidentally brush against hers. She kept lookin at the sky.

“You know I’m going to die, right?”

The leaves rustled in the wind. I didn’t know what to say.

“We all gotta go sometime.”

“Yeah. But in my case we’re probably talking about this week. Maybe today or tomorrow.”

She had told me about that stuff with the paralysis and whatever. I didn’t get why she wouldn’t see a doctor. I mean I liked to use natural remedies too when I got a bug. Traditional medicine, you know. But that’s like for when you’ve got the cold or somethin. This wasn’t like that, I mean this was for real. She was probably right that she was dyin. Whatever it was, it obviously couldn’t keep goin in this direction for very much longer. She was screwed. But I couldn’t exactly force her to go to a hospital against her will, could I. Not even if it killed her. Or, well. I guess some people might have forced her. But I couldn’t, anyway.

I looked at her. Her hair had dried in the sun, but that blissful, childlike smile was still all over her face. Despite the topic she was talkin bout. You couldn’t help but love her. It was the love of a lifetime. No, even more, it’s like *she was love*. If love itself was a human bein, Liv would be her name. I wanted to laugh and cry from sorrow and joy just from lookin at her. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t believe this happened to me. That it could even happen to anyone. Liv, I love you! This was even bigger than the songs make it out to be. And I couldn’t believe that I would lose her again so soon.

But in that moment, I felt a love so enormous that I didn’t care. Like one moment of that incredible love was enough to feed me for a lifetime. I blinked away tears. I was like totally overwhelmed.

Her hand was completely still. She didn’t move it away or touch me back. So I touched her again and said:

“Then I’m glad I got to meet you before it was too late.”

She turned her head now to look me in the eyes.

“Before your feelings run away with you, there’s something you should know. I have chosen to abstain from romantic relationships. I’m celibate.”

Ma first thought was: are you shittin me? Ain't nobody our age that's celibate. Are there even people *in this age* who are celibate? That's like for old people in monasteries in the middle ages. But maybe that's what you get when you fall for these spiritual types. And it didn't even matter anyway. This was still better than if she already had a boyfriend. It could work. Maybe she could even change her mind? And even if she didn't I guess I was glad just to be near her, as much as possible. I'd never felt like this before, about anyone ever.

"Can I be by your side this week? I wanna take care of you."

"If you want to keep me company, gladly. But that's all it can ever be."

What was I gettin into? But I ain't got no choice. I was head over heels in love.

I stared at the door handle. It was on the floor, glinting with reflected fluorescent light. I had, for a moment, forgotten all about escaping the contamination. Instead I sat there, staring. Because I knew this door handle. It was the exact same one I had on my own front door. Not identical looking. *The same one*. I knew every scratch and blemish of it. How could it be here? I picked it up and held it for a while. Even my fingers recognized it. So many times I'd grasped this handle. There was no doubt about it. I wasn't feeling well at all. What is happening?

That strange memory surfaced again. That time when I had an experience so uncannily *similar* to all of this. I recalled more details now, but it was still impossible to place the event on any kind of timeline of my life. Could I have dreamed it, some night long ago? But how could the same thing be happening now, if I had dreamed it once before? I don't believe in things like that. It can't be real. But whenever it happened – that time, I'd been stuck in a basement too... And the diseased man had been there, just like now, he'd been raving in his bed, on the brink of death... But I had no memory of the door handle coming off. But like I said, I was *somehow* trapped. There was no way out. None of us could get out of there. As though there *was no door* leading back out again... or maybe the door was locked... or the stairs leading up to the door were missing. And I was terrified of the man and his sickness.

Terrified of being infected. We were all breathing the same air down there, all of us. The man had told me something, too. He'd whispered something to me while he could still communicate – what had he said to me? I couldn't remember now. And then – then... Something happened down there. On the third day the diseased man was missing from his bed. He'd been too sick to stand up. We couldn't understand how he had disappeared. And despite looking for him – even though we searched every centimeter of every room and hallway down in that basement, and even though none of us could escape that place – as much as we looked for him, we never found him...

"What happened? Are you okay?" the clerk guy asked.

None of us. I became once again aware of my surroundings. What a horrifying memory. Jesus Christ. I was soaked in cold sweat and confused. *There had been several of us down there.* But I ignored the smiling imbecile and climbed back up the stairs again. A little more careful this time around. I didn't want to get injured any more today. Thrice was quite enough. *There were several of us.* I started trying to fit the door handle back in its socket so I could get the fuck out of here already. How could it be so ridiculously difficult getting this stupid thingamajig in its place!? *Who were the others?*

"Excuse me?"

You and your god damned, mother-fucking smile, who do you think you are? What do you want from me? Leave me alone!

"Do you know there's a dead guy in one of your rooms?" I said, in order to get rid of him. It came out angry and a little too loud.

"What?"

Finally the door opened. The man called after me but I didn't listen. I was already outside, and I was going far away from here and never looking back.

The first thing I noticed when I came out was that it had stopped snowing. That's a relief. But then – I halted, confused. *Snow?* Yes, it had definitely snowed when I walked into the shelter. But it *couldn't* have. It was late summer. But I remembered it so vividly. Didn't I? Actually, that's not quite right, now that I thought about it. I was so confused. I

remembered it, but not that vividly after all. It was a fuzzy memory, vague. I must be in shock after the mugging, of course. It was all in my head. So that's nothing to worry about and I stopped thinking about it right away. The epidemic, on the other hand, that was a real danger. I tried to visualize the city map, where was I exactly? Which was the closest way out? Eastgate.

I started to walk right away, hoping I'd find a cab. Unless everyone was already hightailing it out of here. But then it hit me that no taxi would stop for me. Not the way I looked. Dirty clothes and covered in bruises. One look at me, and they'd think I was some hobo without a penny to his name, looking to rip them off. Then again, that was basically accurate at this point. How the fuck did I end up like this!? Nothing was going like I expected. On the other hand, what had I expected? Wasn't it the best thing that could happen if everything was turned upside down? A new life that's no different from the old one, what's new about that? *Exactly*. Yes. I felt better already. But what about, er, the others? I briefly searched my memories, not finding their names in there. My body turned ice cold. Calm down. You're not that old, it's nothing like that. This is just stress and shock messing with your mind. Of course. You've got a wife and two children. Your wife's name is Amanda. Oh right, ex-wife. The twins' names are John and Axel. I sighed. I almost got all worked up over nothing. I'm okay. And yet, something was gnawing at the back of my mind. Something was not right.

My family never aged well. My parents both died fifteen years ago. Since then I've always felt the presence of Cancer and Dementia right next to me. When I go to bed, I can almost *see* them looming over me on either side like demons, licking their lips and quarreling over who gets to eat me first. Sometimes I actually hope for cancer, just to get away from the *other things*. And I don't just mean Alzheimer's. Age brings horrors too many to enumerate, and I know that I carry the entire legion inside of me. Resting within my genes, waiting, longing... I am terrified of going blind, like grandma did toward the end.

If I went blind, I'd go insane as well. I have an active mind. I'd start hallucinating, like in that ping pong ball experiment. And even with hearing, how would I ever know which sounds were real and which were just in my head? I might not hear voices right away. But after spending a couple of weeks without sight? A couple of months? *A couple of years?* I would become a vegetable, because I wouldn't dare to move or speak. I'd lie still and gradually lose touch with reality, and nobody on the outside would understand that all that really happened was I lost my sight. Jesus Christ, what a horror. There are so many ways to get cut off from the outside world. And it's inside me. *I know that I have an expiration date, but I don't know when it is.* Maybe this epidemic wasn't so bad. In a certain sense, anything was better than aging.

I was starting to wonder if everybody else had left town already. I couldn't see anybody on the streets. I couldn't have been the only person watching the news, could I? Suddenly the scene from the shelter felt so unreal. Just like that memory I couldn't place anywhere in my life. What in the world *was* that thing I remembered in there? It seemed so convincing while I was down there, but now it seemed silly. Everything was foggy and elusive. Even the shelter itself seemed sort of surreal. I got to wondering. All of the strange things that had happened the last few hours... What if they were – they probably were – something I dreamed while I was unconscious? That would explain everything. The snow, the unsettling underground lobby, the appalling bathroom, the delirious man – the dreadful sense of *déjà vu*. All of it, just a trauma dream. It never happened. I was immensely relieved, like when you wake up from a nightmare. It had all just been a bad night, that's all. An incredibly bad night. But nothing more. There was no shelter, there was no epidemic, and I never met the dying man in the basement.

And yet I couldn't fully convince myself. I tried to steady my breathing but my heart was still pounding after I worked myself up with hideous imaginings, going blind and diseased and whatnot. I had a terrible headache and I was nauseous. It couldn't hurt to get out of town anyway, just in case. Yes. I had to get out of here.

In this way I will be made stronger. It worked. Thank you, Kitten Lickle, thank you, thank you, thank you. Panic: no! What was there to be afraid of anyway? It was just as if Helge was just asleep on the floor – pretty much. And that’s not so scary. The only difference between a sleeping person and a dead person is the dead person doesn’t wake up. (That’s not really true of course but it was true as long as I was in the apartment, because *if* it was true then I wasn’t scared, and that’s how you have to see it.) I got undressed and cleaned my pee-soaked pants and undies in the shower. Then I put them in the dryer, and after a while I worked out how to turn it on. I washed myself, then walked naked back into the apartment. I saw the dead body again, lying in the exact same place, and I almost peed myself again. It’s so weird, it was like everything else became super quiet as soon as I looked at him. I could hear every little sound in the silence. But I didn’t pee myself after all. Then I walked as close as I dared to look at Helge. I felt the glass animals in the bookcase looking at me as I crossed the room. But they were friendly.

Helge didn’t move, obviously. From the door I could only see his beard, but now that I was closer I could tell he died with a smile on his face. He looked like he was having a good dream. But he was so pale, almost blue. It was creepy, just knowing he was dead. But not as much as when I first came into the room.

I read the prayer of fear in my head one more time, and I felt better and pooped out what was left of that puny fear. Then I pulled the white sheet off my bed and spread it out over Helge’s body. I’d seen people do that in movies, but I always thought they did it because – well, just because the person was dead and that’s kind of what you did. But now I understood it’s so you don’t have to look at them.

I hadn’t eaten since the night before. I was starving, but I didn’t really know if it was okay to eat when somebody just died. There’s so much I never learned. And I wasn’t sure how to learn it, either. They don’t tell you about this in school. They don’t teach anything important at all. They don’t have a class on what to do when somebody dies, and they don’t have a class on how to digest fear, and they don’t have a class on knowing

who to trust. There's a class on gym! You know, let's learn volleyball! I guess sometimes you have to just think and try for yourself and see what works. Then it struck me, that's what Kitten Lickle does all the time. I learned so much from her by reading a book, but she never had a book. She seemed to know everything already. But she didn't, though. She was just learning as stuff happened to her. And this never happened to her, so I had to think for myself. And I thought, that when you're hungry, that's the body telling you to eat. And it's the body that needs the food, so it ought to know what it's doing. So I should eat. So, I went into the kitchen and made sandwiches.

Helge didn't have the same bread mom and dad always bought, but it was still good. The dryer was still running when I finished eating, so I explored the apartment some more. I really wanted to see Helge's bedroom, but I was a little scared he might grab my feet when I walked past him. But then I ran past anyway, and he didn't grab me, obviously. I'm not an idiot, you know. He was dead. But can you guess what I found? He had Kitten Lickle & the Twee Wisperer on his nightstand, with a bookmark right at the place we talked about last night. And the coolest thing was, when I opened it, I saw it was signed! He must have met Sandra Ehinger for real, the woman who wrote it. I was a little jealous, but mostly sad because I would never get to ask him about her.

For pater Helge Grögel, from Sandra

And this weird symbol:



I carried the girl back to Russel the Wine Guy's apartment. It was easier now than at first. Moreover, I was getting to enjoy her company. But then there was also a moment where she gave me an unprovoked hug and said:

"A sunny September day is beautiful even in grayscale."

I felt dejected again. Beautiful days are not for me. It's not that I fail to recognize their beauty. Quite the opposite. Once I had cursed the glory of the clear blue sky, and the sun for continuing to rise in splendor each morning. There is nothing worse. Creation, this spirited celebration, a festival in honor of itself. Is it not the worst thing one can endure, then: the impotence one feels when this dazzling display of cosmic carousal insists on lasting beyond the point where one would do *anything* to call it off? There is no humiliation like that experienced when the world continuously excels its own magnificence, while one lies beaten to the ground beside it, shattered, dying inside bit by bit. There is nothing to do but surrender. The world will never stop turning in this mad, wanton ball. But at least nobody could force me to participate in the damn festivities.

Days like today, when the skies were clear and the sunshine glowed through turning leaves, this warm confetti of green and gold and red, sporadically releasing coruscating pearls of molten crystal from yesterday's rain – days like today, when the sounds of singing birds and children at play carried on the mild winds through the city over sun-warmed cobbles – days like today, I had to struggle hard to close my eyes to the beauty of the universe. I must force myself to remember that it was all an empty show. Remind myself again and again of what I really knew. That beneath the apparent beauty, it was all corrupted and vile. Infested with worms and shot through with rotted fluids. That the world was a stinking piece of rancid flesh.

If it is really true that God killed himself in creating the universe, then everything we see around us is his rotting carcass. We would be carrion-eaters clinging to the corpse and consuming the body of God in order to prolong our own miserable lives. And each day meant another bite of the spoiled hunk of flesh, a lump to hold in your mouth and masticate from the moment you wake up and until the sunset calls you back home to its hidden world of nightmares again. Even with

the worms crawling around in your mouth and the sting of their tiny bites into your tongue, you are still forced by the pointless powers that be to work the glutinous mass between your tired jaws. You don't get to swallow until you go to sleep, and during the night the flesh sprouts like a seed in your belly. From this seed grows all manner of pain and disease in your dying body, where it wafts bloated down the tainted river of time towards the inevitable end. This pain is what wakes you up the next morning, to tear another chunk of the decaying God-carcass we call the universe, buying yourself one more useless day on this lonely, forsaken planet. I curse this wicked life! I never, ever wanted to forget what I was chewing on.

For a long time my being had revolved around eating the decay and refusing to join the dance. Apparently the existence of beauty is non-negotiable. I assume it is some sort of joke at the expense of all living things. But I refused to look at it, and that worked just fine for me. I had refused for – I don't know, at least fifteen years. I was no longer aware of what actually happened to me so long ago. What once and for all ripped the veil of the world apart and exposed to me the rotten core and its disgusting decay. That memory was buried deep, the tombstone withered and its inscription covered in moss. But I had chosen to forget, that much I knew. I abstained from dwelling on it, because I knew that if I ever began to deal with it, it must sooner or later pass away. And losing that sorrow would be like death to me. I no longer called on Socrates, because he said nothing but things I did not want to hear.

But this sunny Monday, when Liv and I arrived at Russel's apartment complex, I suddenly had the feeling that I slipped up somewhere. After all these years, somewhere along the line, I had made a terrible mistake. I had unwittingly started a chain reaction without even noticing, and now it was too late. I couldn't go on refusing for much longer. But with things being the way they were, how could I stop? I wanted my world to be empty and dead and black. This was my choice then, and it was still my choice today. I never wanted to dance again.

I knew now that I was about to face my own death, or something even worse.

"Do we have to go inside?" I said, helplessly.

“What do you mean?” said Liv. “We’ve come all this way. Didn’t you want to see Russel?”

I sighed and braced myself. With any luck there’d be nobody home. We entered the building and walked up to Russel’s door. The old house had thin walls and I could clearly hear music leaking out from the apartment. I listened carefully and to my considerable surprise I believe I recognized an *allegro* I couldn’t quite place. Quite odd, since Russel as far as I knew never listened to classical music. This sounded more like something out of John’s old record collection, the one in the ghostly room I barely dared to enter as a child. I turned to let Liv ring the doorbell, and she rung it thrice in quick succession. What if my mother was sitting in there, crying? What if *John* was sitting in there, listening to his gramophone records? I don’t know why these thoughts came up. Both of those scenarios were obviously impossible. Never could I have believed that what actually happened when the door opened, was far more unlikely than my mother or father or anybody else coming back from the dead. Sometimes things happen that nobody could have ever predicted.

I heard steps from inside the apartment, drawing near the door. The sound of the lock turning. The handle was pressed down then, and the door opened. I stood and stared, frozen and mute. I immediately recognized the man in the door.

“Hi!” said Liv and her whole face beamed as always. “You must be Russel!”

“No,” he said. “That is not my name. Come in.”

The rest of the week kind of runs together in a blur. I’m not sure if it really was a whole week or if it was all one and the same day. In that case it was probably Wednesday. But I think there were several days. Like it matters. Anyway, I saw the headlines. The last issue of the papers before reporting the news ceased to be a thing. There were more details now in print about Tremp. Doctors had a better understanding of what this disease really was, and nobody compared it to AIDS or the black plague anymore. Tremp was more than that. Tremp was the terminal illness.

All three major newspapers had worked together to pick the same headline and the same picture to go with it. You could

only tell them apart by the logos. They knew, and everybody else knew, that it didn't matter anymore. There were no "competitors", none of that had any meaning now. One single word stretched across the page, in fat, black letters: "NIGHTMARE". Underneath that headline, a photograph. The cracks in the pavement seemed to expand where I stood, open up into black maws that swallowed me, and I was in free fall. Down into the bottomless abyss of my own brain. My train of thought rushed ahead at full speed. Against my will I saw my mind follow step by step the same inevitable chain of reasoning I assume we all went through inside our heads on that day. At least those of us who still had some kind of grip on reality. Many were already too far gone. But bizarrely enough, it seemed that *I personally* was specifically chosen by the collective coincidences of the universe, to be the prime recipient of the terrifying realization at the end station of this train of thought.

The photo showed the head of a Tresp patient, or by the new official name, *Hodgson's Syndrome*. Parts of the skin were discolored, and on the side of his face there was a – a sort of growth – not an abscess – it was something never before seen. Not on a human body, anyway. Somebody later named the phenomenon *troma*. The difference was simple, but ghastly. An abscess or a cancerous tumor looks like what it is: a part of the body that has become diseased and grows out of control. But this... this had nothing to do with the human body. On the contrary, it looked like something alien growing inside the body, growing *out of the body*. Something that was at once rotten and living. As though two separate aspects of biological life had been torn apart and then reassembled *wrong*, like the grotesque deformities once exhibited in glass jars at freakshows. That was a troma. Like the body was birthing a strange life form from some other species, out of its own, purple-mottled face. *And the patient was still alive.*

This particular example of a troma wasn't even from the later stages. Not like the ones we would soon be seeing all around us, in our loved ones – in our own reflections in the mirror. But even in this early stage it was all too clear what was actually happening to the patient. The disease was growing in

his body, converting it to Tresp. Little by little, he was *turning into mold*, and mushrooms sprouted from his flesh.

Nightmare.

And the train rushed by stations, one by one, towards the end. Each station was an attempt at a way out, increasingly far-fetched ways to escape the disintegrating truth. But the train never stopped to let anybody off. There was no way out of this. The spores that caused Tresp didn't just merge with people and animals, they bound themselves to other spores in the air. Tresp's spores had copied themselves through the atmosphere at an exponential rate since at least twelve months back, apparently. Spreading across the planet, like a prionic disease burrowing through the brain of its host until all that remains is a spongy mass of abnormal protein. *The spores were already ubiquitous.* They were in every cubic meter of air, from the Roof of the World to the deepest boreholes. In every country, in every home. Inside everyone's very body. What had seemed, from our arrogant, anthropocentric perspective, to be the first stage of a pandemic, was actually the last stage of a new life form's insemination of the cosmic egg of planet Earth.

I was surprised to see several of Finn's bizarre theories suddenly proven right. Even if it was a mere fraction of his full repertoire. We were living through the last days of our species. And the funny thing was, there wasn't even time to panic. It was like everybody understood. Even I just stood there quiet on the street, looking at that hospital photo, depicting my worst fears manifested in real life – and when the speeding train at last arrived at its destination, it simply slowed down, stopped at the platform, and humbly opened the doors to let everybody off. And I felt so calm.

I could tell right away something was wrong. Strange long lines through the air flickered out of Gustaf's body. He carried me quietly into the apartment and put me down on the couch. Russel's eyes, or whoever he was, followed us through the room. He mirrored Gustaf's silence while he turned off the music. There was something going on in the air between them, but I couldn't tell what. Gustaf got smaller and smaller.

Something very interesting was definitely going on. Finally, he turned to the man and said:

“Tell her your name.”

“Socrates,” the man said.

The silence that filled the room was excruciating. There were puddles of something on the floor.

“That’s unusual,” I said to lighten up the mood.

“Are you doing this?” Gustaf suddenly asked me. His eyes were sharp and pointed, there was a barely noticeable accusation on his face. Bordering on anger. But primarily, it was an honest question, whatever it was supposed to mean.

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re – *doing* something.” He gestured, attempting to clarify but failing. Illegible, letter-like symbols floated through the air around him, changing shapes. Dividing and then globbing together. “Things *happen* around you. I want to know if you are consciously producing it somehow. Or if you are – I don’t know, some sort of...”

He kept grasping at the air, almost as if he too could see the hovering glyphs and was trying to catch one of them. He was clearly annoyed at not being able to express his thoughts in words.

“If you are somehow some sort of, passive – agent of–”

“Cut it out,” said the man who called himself Socrates. “I am yours alone.”

“I didn’t ask you to be here. Where’s Russel?”

“Not at home, it seems.”

“How did you get in here?”

Socrates shrugged, and I thought I saw a hint of a smile. “I don’t know anything.”

I pulled at Gustaf’s sleeve like a small child.

“I don’t understand. Would you enlighten me on what is going on?”

So Gustaf told me about the voice in his head. He never told anyone before, and he thought I would call him crazy. But instead I calmed him down. Everybody’s got voices in their heads. It’s just that most people seem to irrationally assume that it’s their own voice talking to them all the time.

If this offends you, try right now, for one minute, not to contemplate what position your parents were in when you were conceived.

If you could pull that off, now try making the voice in your head shut up completely for ten minutes.

See how your influence over “your” inner voice is only marginally greater than your influence over what the people around you are saying? And yet people suppose that they hear nothing but their own thoughts and that they are in total control of them. And why would you believe there’s just one voice in there all the time? They keep disagreeing with one another. They can even get into hostile arguments. Some have a personality so completely different from yours, and some are smarter than you are, and so on. I’m often treated to long, philosophical lectures that sometimes are well thought-out and wonderfully composed, in a way I could never imitate. I couldn’t recite them to anybody else, nor write them down. These monologues come unbidden, at their own convenience. The unconscious mind is populated with plenty of strange things and beings willing to communicate. If you ask me, I’d say Gustaf was less crazy than most for figuring out so early in his life that there were doorways inside of the mind that allowed you to go *out of your mind*, to access something beyond your self. Insanity does not lie in thinking bizarre thoughts, because we all do. Insanity is merely a lack of ability to express your bizarre thoughts in a way that other people understand. And of course, there are rare cases of a more serious nature where insanity is a lack of ability to determine what is a credible source of information. Don’t believe everything you’re told, whether by inner or outer voices. But my point is... One isolated human being could never be insane, no matter what. It takes an outside observer for the word “insane” to have any meaning.

“You don’t look a lot like Socrates,” I said.

“I look like Walter Schultes.”

Gustaf threw his arms out in resignation. There was nothing to do here other than accept reality as it presented itself. The

air cleared around him and the puddles on the floor drained away into nothing.

“Walter was a priest in our church when I was a child. I didn’t know what the real Socrates looked like, but pater Schultes was the wisest person I could imagine at the time. So I imagined that Socrates looked like him.”

The wise man chuckled.

“I don’t know what to do,” Gustaf said. “What is happening to me?”

The air turned around his head and it pained him.

“Just stay calm. Whatever it is, it’s not just you. I think something big is happening. Bigger than...” I thought of the monkeys again, the monkeys sharing my moment of wonder before the holy place and its mystery. “...bigger than we can suppose.”

“The two of you are vital,” Socrates said. “Liv, remember your training. There are invisible landscapes where things grow and water flows, and you’ve been there before. When the water breaks and everything is swept away by the flood, you will be able to orient yourself and navigate through the darkness and into the light.”

I gawked at Gustaf. “You really think that much of me? What did I do to make such an impression?”

“I don’t know what any of this means,” he mumbled and flushed, turning a dark grey underneath his beard.

“As for you, Gustaf, it’s time you allow yourself to exist again. Liv has practical experience, but in order to fulfill her purpose, she needs your knowledge.”

Gustaf was now even smaller.

“I don’t want to.” His voice was frail, like a scared little child’s.

“Would you rather see these people die? Do you want to see families sundered, children torn from mothers that vanish into nothing, all because you were too self-absorbed to help them?”

Quite harsh. I was concerned about how Gustaf would take this. Maybe it was too soon for him. Then again this was a showdown against himself, so there must be something inside of him that believed it was worth it. What was it that he knew in the recesses of his mind? I looked at him, and he in turn

stared blankly at Socrates, or rather through him, eyes wide open and fixed on an invisible horizon.

"How, how could you say—" he began, but then he choked and froze, wide-eyed, mouth open, dead silent. I saw him penetrated by black spears and my eyes teared up.

"Nobody gains anything from you clinging to your sorrow like this," Socrates went on.

Gustaf fell down on his hands and knees, gasping for air. Three thick, black iron beams now pierced right through his chest in three directions. They revolved and it was painful to watch. I steadied my breathing.

"It's not all on you. Remember that I was there with you. I told you what to do. We made the right call together."

He lay on the floor, twitching in spasms as other things appeared in the air and burrowed into his body. Above him I saw two shadowy figures in a fog. I felt an obscure but real pain wash across my own body, despite the paralysis, just from being in the vicinity of his torture. I stayed with my breath and dealt with it. Perhaps I was absorbing some of his suffering, perhaps I was ever so slightly easing the load on his heart. The figures in the fog were getting clearer. One was large, the other one smaller. They stretched out their arms toward Gustaf's tormented body.

"You couldn't have carried a full-grown body in the state you were in."

He was breathing again, but he was still lying down, whimpering and trying to beat his fists against his head, where I saw black screws being drilled into his skull. It was like he felt them too. I had to do something for him. I grabbed the couch and pulled myself into a lying position. Socrates glanced at me with compassionate understanding as I was struggling with my paralysis, but then continued with Gustaf.

"You had to prioritize getting the little one out of there. There was nothing else you could have done."

This sounded somehow familiar. His sobbing increased along with his breathing. The shadows above his head had clear forms now, a woman and a small girl. Gustaf gagged and seemed to vomit, but nothing came out. Just a bunch of dark grey dust which was all in my head. Fuzzy beings of darkness were crowded around my helpless friend, torturing him. I tried

to roll off the couch, but the paralysis had spread so far that I couldn't work up the momentum. I could tell my arms were going soon, too. I got a hold of the bottom of the couch and pulled my body to the floor with a heavy thud.

If a part of your body is paralyzed, or even your entire body, is it really right to speak of it as a part of you? If so, why? I felt more like I had a big, heavy sandbag tied to myself that I had to lug around whenever I wanted to move. There was so much pain now. The walls closed in on us and Gustaf's head cracked and burst open like a tulip. Mechanical parts fell out and melted on the floor. They bubbled and sizzled. The shadows reached for him in vain.

"Oh, God..."

"And that's just a fraction. Why do you think the gas was on in the first place?"

That's when I remembered and understood everything.

"You're him!" I exclaimed. "You're the survivor from Grönfoting Street!"

At that point he just screamed out loud. Fat spikes ran through his skin from the inside, sticking out in all directions. But Socrates was still calmly going on with his talk.

"Even if you had managed to save her, she would just have made another attempt. The incident came to you in order to occur."

He squirmed on the floor, sometimes banging his head against the ground. More and more strange items were falling out of him. By now the floor was black with them all. He threw up more of the grey dust.

"Why won't it end?" Gustaf wept and sniveled.

I felt terrible. His anxiety was flooding his entire being so forcefully that it seeped into my own awareness, and it was the worst thing I had ever experienced. I relaxed. I could barely keep breathing, but I did my best. There was nothing to do but endure – but the suffering brought me closer to God. I licked the floor and started eating the black lumps. In these seconds of eternity, I understood. And I took Gustaf's anguish into myself. I wondered how large, or small, my cut was. How much worse this felt for him right now. But I can take more. Let me carry more. I felt the tears stream down my face as I ate and swallowed the things on the floor. I crawled and dragged

myself forward, painfully slow. I felt like a desperate fish jumping around on the pier and never getting closer to the water. Centimeter by centimeter across the worn-down linoleum floor toward Gustaf. I ate the black. I crawled. I ate. I crawled.

The strange thing is, I had a personal connection to the tragedy on Grönfoting Street. I was just a little girl still in kindergarten when all of that happened. But the tragedy on Grönfoting Street was well known to the collective memory of the entire city, perhaps the entire country. And I don't believe in coincidence. Remember how I told the story of how I left the city once, after a spiritual guidance talk? The same hand holding the sickle that had cut down Gustaf's will to live, had also sown the seed of the spiritual journey I was sent on as an adult.

My patron, for lack of a better word, had been the same age as Gustaf's daughter. She had shared his trauma. The girls were in the same preschool, they used to play together, until one day when her friend didn't come to school and never would come again. The kids quickly found out everything. People were talking about the tragedy on Grönfoting Street everywhere. Even now, years and years later, she still felt the heavy impact on her entire life from that shock and her premature acquaintance with death.

A difficult force of that magnitude however, is still a force of the same magnitude after you've managed to transmute it into something more useful. So I had hope for Gustaf. Something quite out of the ordinary was going on in the world. I was convinced that he could do absolutely anything, simply because he was clearly meant to do it since forever. I didn't understand it, but somehow I knew something that meant everything. *What* I knew was a mystery even to me. But somehow I had a strange, wordless and empty awareness that calmed me. Somehow guaranteeing beyond the shadow of any doubt that everything would turn out fine, somehow. Inside me, my body was absorbing the blackness. Everything I had allowed into myself was spinning and vibrating, and I saw a white light that seemed to emanate from me. The shadows flickered a bit. And Socrates was still talking to Gustaf.

“There was nothing you could do.”

His voice was friendly, but firm.

“But there is now.”

And I finally reached his shuddering, aged body, torn apart by pain. With the last of my strength, I embraced him. The black spears fell off him and clattered to the ground when I touched them. Gustaf convulsed and cried, but he was calmer now. Every time I breathed in, the black smoke got in my lungs, but that meant the air around him cleared. I took it deep into me. Socrates said nothing more. The thunderous anxiety was winding down inside me, and I could both see and sense how it poured out of Gustaf, too. The shadows had faded away. Tears streamed down his face, through the beard, soaking into my forest-grey sweater. Black tears, like they were mixed with soot or ash. I cried too, but my tears were ordinary, glittering salt water. And I wasn't crying from sorrow or angst, but mostly out of gratitude over everything that just happened. That I finally, after waiting all my life, had been granted the honor of carrying someone else's suffering. My fingers were numb already, but I kept stroking him as best I could until my hands too were just dangling like rubber.

Then I said something. I had an overwhelming impulse, an intuition that could not be denied, and I whispered in his ear. I'm not even sure what I said anymore, much less why I said it, I just blurted it out on instinct. But I could tell that something changed in him at soon as his consciousness swallowed what I said. The words must have held deep meaning for him. The room filled with light. All the darkness was gone now. Everything was back to its normal size. Gustaf suddenly went limp in my inert arms. He breathed peacefully, but his eyes stared into space like he wasn't registering anything around him. He was gone. I was still sure everything was as it should be.

Only then did I fully accept that all of this was really real. That everything that happened to me was a gift. That I had really achieved my dream and my purpose. And that Socrates was right. This was *destiny*.

Spores can survive just about anything. They can survive without water, without nourishment, without oxygen. They can

survive extreme heat and extreme cold, nuclear radiation, ultraviolet radiation. They've even discovered some kind of black mold growing inside the Chernobyl reactor. It doesn't just live *in spite of* the radiation in there, it actually lives *off of it*. Cryptogamae, as they are known, are classified neither as plants nor animals. They are a something of their own. But they are actually closer relatives of animals than of plants. They have no photosynthesis, but instead a sort of external digestion. Some scientists believe – although most people are too brainwashed by the state-controlled zombie manipulations on TV to accept this theory, which in addition has been intentionally silenced – that cryptogamae do not have their origin here on Earth. They did not originally evolve side by side with plants and animals, but instead they came here, over a billion years ago, in the form of spores, on a meteorite. A broken shard of an older planet that was destroyed somewhere in the universe. If it was inhabited by animals, they were annihilated, if there were plants, they were annihilated – but the mushrooms managed to evacuate.

For how long did those spores endure the slumber on that cold rock as it fell, fell, silently through the infinite emptiness of the cosmos until it finally made landfall here? How many other life-bearing pieces of space debris were crushed against dead planets with no atmosphere? How many burned up in distant stars, or kept on falling and falling for all eternity? But at least one seed fell on our soil and could produce a crop. Could this new organism have come from the heavens too, traveling on a splinter of the wreckage of another world?

Or did it come from another place entirely, neither from Earth nor from space? Perhaps the origins of Treppe were stranger even than our human brains were capable of comprehending.

I'm studying any and all theories I can find. I need to know what is really going on out there. "Out there". Like it's not going on right *in here*. And I can tell I'm not the only one trying to do some research. The entire internet now seems to be a tool exclusively for discussing, theorizing, and philosophizing about tremp. The big riddle everyone's trying to solve is: why is this happening *now*? We've been forced to

accept that our time is finally up, but human curiosity will be the last thing we relinquish: we want to know *why*. Where did Tremp come from?

There's one theory that I like best so far. Most people will be blind to it. Thanks to the also very human phenomenon of denial. It's understandable. The power elite will always use fundamental psychological mechanisms to kill all brains and create their remote controlled puppet people out of us like empty robot shells – like I said, that's how brainwashing works, by exploiting the basic functions of the brain and using them against themselves. Maybe that in itself is a part of natural human behavior? The will to power over others. What if we're born with the brain programming already in place? What if the world government itself is a victim to the same mental warfare it wages against the oppressed masses? Maybe there is no enemy, just a self-perpetuating conflict. Whatever, let me tell you about the most plausible explanation for Tremp. You can deny this theory all you want, but I believe it. It's that Tremp was here all along. It might be older than our species. But it has been hidden away somewhere, inactive, like a dormant volcano, for hundreds of thousands of years. The theory goes that we *woke it up*. By gradually altering our own atmosphere until by pure coincidence – or was it fate? – we had created the ideal habitat for the spores to activate. Just like the unfathomable energy that slumbered inside the atomic nucleus and never made any fuss. Until we simply had to go and poke at it and never stop pushing until we forced it out.

Then there were also those who claimed that it was all unavoidable anyway. That if we had done it another way, some other forgotten organism would have surfaced from its own hidden depths and snuffed us out instead.

Yet another popular theory was that Tremp waking up had not been an accident at all. That too had a parallel in our abuse of atomic power. The following is a historical fact. When the first atomic bomb was detonated in the Trinity test on July 16, 1945, they weren't sure what would happen. A bunch of physicists and mathematicians had made a bunch of calculations, sure, and of course they had a solid theory about it. But in reality, nobody knew exactly what would happen.

More specifically, they weren't 100% sure that the chain reaction would stop. Consider that for a moment, I dare you. I'm saying that they took a calculated risk – sure, a tiny risk, but a known, actual risk – that the first nuclear explosion might ignite the atmosphere and annihilate the continent or the whole fucking planet in a giant firestorm. But they made the call that the potential gains were so large and the risk so small, that it was a risk worth taking. *A risk worth taking.* See the human being in action. See the power elite in action. And here we were now, with the logical end result of that kind of attitude right in our laps in a big steaming pile.

Perhaps Tremp had been another risk worth taking. You can't end up on the right side of statistics every time. Perhaps we were about to be wiped out by a military bioweapon gone haywire. Mycotoxins have been used for biological warfare several times throughout history. The Korean War, Vietnam, the Gulf War. Not to mention whatever hidden number of secret operations might have been carried out and never revealed or leaked to the public. Who knows how many? But personally – and keep in mind, my confidence in earthly rulers is below rock bottom, swimming in magma – personally, I actually think they're innocent. Of this one, at least. This time we're all equally guilty, or equally innocent. Maybe the conspirators themselves have lost control over the zombie project. Maybe they are just as fucking remote controlled as their own victims, and we're just one big planet populated entirely by TV manipulated puppet people who oppress and slaughter one another at the initiative of someone or something that died ages and ages ago, to serve some purpose that nobody remembers anymore.

But what the hell, it didn't really matter anyway. Maybe the planet simply had an expiration date, and how exactly it was spoiled after that was up to chance. Like who cares if the meat is rotten or moldy, either way you can't eat it. The very earth is sick.

Some of the alternative websites were now saying that the mysterious planet Nibiru was approaching on a collision course with Earth, and the cataclysmic crash between the two planets would have wiped out all life on Earth even if the

sickness hadn't gotten to us first. Then again other websites claimed that the whole Nibiru thing was a lie planted by the hidden world government several years ago to justify a huge budget increase to the "space program". The space program is systematically used as a code word for projects which officially don't exist, but which require so vast funding that you can't hide the paper trail. The extra money was actually going to fund the construction of a secret colony ship that the people at the top could use to escape in an emergency much like this one. (Could they have *known*? Or why would they start building the ship?) Still, the proponents of that theory were awarded the last laugh by cosmic justice. Because the hypothetical colony ship would be useless in either case, since it would be impossible to rid it completely of Tremp spores. Suck it, ruling elite.

And as Jennifer pointed out at some point during those last weeks, we dodged a fucking bullet there. You see what she's talking about, right? I mean, just the word "Armageddon", it calls up a lot of brain activity. Even though people have been brooding over The End ever since mankind first developed the technology of brooding, there's somehow always been an inherent conception of life *after* The End. Like our fucking monkey brains can't accept the definition of the word. We can't help but imagine a handful of people waking up when it's all over, still breathing. A new stone age. History starts over from scratch, primitive tribes eating cockroaches and huddling together for warmth in the radioactive darkness of some demolished fucking bomb shelter. And despite that misery, we have this thirst for life, this completely irrational desire for prolonging our lives at any cost, that runs so deep inside us that we all *want* to find ourselves among those poor bastards who make it through The End. But now that it was finally here, it came for everyone. There was no tremp immunity. Once the spores begun developing – what a perfect word by the way, "developing". I can see it unfolding from one single point inside the body, like a seed. From this first inoculation something starts to grow, like an internal flower blossoming inside you. Unfolding and growing and unfolding again. Thousands of petals bursting out like concentric rings wrapped

in one another ripening through flesh and blood and sinews and tissue. Everything turning into Trepmp.

Sorry, I lost my train of thought. Once the spores begin developing, the body is no more than a substrate. A nutritional reserve for the growth of the mushroom. Our species wasn't the only one affected by this, of course. But to be honest, the ravages of the disease among our own kind was all most of us cared about, really. We're a really fucking egocentric species. But any organic matter could potentially develop Trepmp. And everything indicated that anything that could potentially develop Trepmp, eventually *would*. It was just a matter of when. And once the Trepmp fungus was done, there would be nothing left but Trepmp. The planet's entire biomass would catch the mold and turn to Trepmp. What went down during these weeks or months was, indeed, the oh so long anticipated Armageddon, finally arriving, in our time. Once this was all done, there wouldn't be a stone laid upon another or whatever the saying is. This entire fucking planet is going to be one big, silent ball of Trepmp mycelium, hovering in space, surrounded by the equally silent, hovering shell of Trepmp's spore-cloud. Because Trepmp has no agenda, Trepmp desires nothing but its own increase, and everything is as oil to its flame. Everything will run together and grow together in threads that bind it all into one and the same humongous, organic mass of Trepmp. Like a huge, dead brain made of Trepmp, which can think only of Trepmp, which has nobody to communicate with except its own Trepmp, and everything it communicates will be Trepmp. It will be glorious.

Shit, I got sidetracked again. It's hard to focus. But anyway. So Jennifer was right. Good thing nobody would be able to escape Trepmp in a spaceship. Because what kept people so calm was the awareness that we would all die from Trepmp *together*. Within just a few days every single one of us would be gone forever. In a certain sense, this was mankind's absolute peak of equality. The extinction of our species should have been a horrifying thought. But now that we were forced to stand eye to eye with Trepmp, we all discovered it was the other way around. Being put face to face with ultimate fear, gave us all a sense of perfect serenity. So you see what Jennifer was talking about. If there had been a spaceship that could save a

few, that would have been an unprecedented disaster and we would have stomped each other to death, trampled one another and turn the eyes from our brothers in order to get on board. But there were no lifeboats. Tremp was an omnipresent reality. We would all go gentle into that good night.

When we arrived at ma glade, Liv's paralysis had spread to her fingertips. I carried her all the way to ma spot at the corner of the cow pasture and lay her down in the soft grass. I wanted her to have a nice time and be comfortable if she didn't have long left. We lay there quiet together in ma little corner. She stroked the grass back and forth for a while, like she was pettin the green fur of a giant dream animal. Then she stopped.

"Liv?" I said right away. I was scared she was dead.

"Yes?"

I breathed out.

"Never mind."

We looked at the clouds driftin by silently up in the sky.

"What do you think is gonna happen?"

"It. Everything. There's no point in speculation. The future is uncertain."

I didn't get it at first. But she must have thought I was talkin bout the whole world or somethin. Is this what normal people feel when they say I'm too philosophical?

"I meant what do you think is gonna happen to you."

She made a weird gesture that I didn't get. "Eh. I can still breathe." She tried to swallow. "I can swallow. Everything seems to work internally."

A moment of silence. In the meantime I figured out at last that the movement she made before had been a semi-paralyzed shrug.

"So unless it gets worse, I might be okay for a while. As long as you bring me food and water, I guess."

I didn't know if I ought to be offended or what. She said that like there was actually a chance I was gonna let her starve to death. Not just that, she said it like it wouldn't even bother her if I did. To be honest, I got an impulse to test her. She was really provokin me with that stoic positive attitude to everythin. It's just not possible for anyone to be so fearless. She had to be bluffin. But I fought it back of course.

“How do you do it?” I said instead. “I don’t get it. Why ain’t you scared?”

“What is, is. There’s nothing to be scared of.”

“Sure, whatever, man. But that’s just a sayin though. Sure you can talk about stuff bein the way it is and nothin gets any better from gripin about it. But you’re still gonna feel the way you feel, you can’t talk your way out of an emotion.”

“Not by talking, no. But after you...”

Then she stopped talkin. I waited for her to go on, but she didn’t. I prodded her arm, happy to have a reason to touch her. Not that she could feel it anyway.

“After what?”

She didn’t respond right away.

“Do you mind if I use religious terminology to explain it?”

“What do you mean, do I mind?”

“A lot of people have preconceived notions and associations to certain words. Religious people and otherwise. Can you hear through it?”

“I reckon. But why use those words at all, if you’ve already figured out they just make it harder to understand you?”

She ignored ma question and started preachin.

“Did you ever tell anybody about something amazing you experienced, but you noticed the listener didn’t seem to fully get how amazing it really was? That’s because it’s impossible. How could the experience of hearing a description of something, compare to actually living the source experience itself? That’s why you get the impulse to exaggerate the story. Not in order to make it sound better than it was. Quite the opposite. It’s so that the listener can get closer to the truth of the experience. Get it? An exaggerated retelling of a memory is *more genuine* than an exact account of the concrete events involved, because the experience of hearing the tall tale is closer to the experience of the reality behind it. And because all religious experiences are Huge to go through, you need Huge words to describe them. But the listener has to participate by listening from a position of childlike wonder, and not take it at face value. Get it? You can’t drink water, because ‘water’ is just a mouth-noise that a minority of the world’s population make when referring to that liquid they drink. But that-which-they-drink is something that’s been around for way longer than the

word ‘water’, even longer than the phenomenon of spoken language itself. Even considerably longer than there have been people, or any other animals for that matter. You can call it ‘water’, you can call it ‘aqua’ or ‘djal’ or whatever, but it is what it is, and it’s got nothing to do with the sound waves that make up the words ‘water’ or ‘aqua’. Get it? A similar case occurs when people speak of ‘God’, ‘Allah’, ‘Nirvana’ and so on. It’s just words that different people use to refer to something that is not God or Allah or Nirvana. It is what it is. God is something that can be experienced, but not comprehended. ‘Allahu Akbar’ means ‘God is greater’, and those two words really contain all the spiritual guidance that anybody could ever need. Allahu Akbar. That which all of the words, all names of God, point to, is a paradox. The Creator is the Creation, from everlasting to everlasting. One cosmic point whence everything originated and towards which everything is drawn back. The sum total of major and minor events of all the cosmos are pulling us in towards this point of infinite closure, which is Allah or Nirvana or whatever you want to call it. But the thing is, if everything leads toward God, and God transcends time, then everything is God already. God is everything. Everything in the universe is a manifestation of one aspect of God. Whatever God is.”

There was a moment of silence. I wasn’t sure what to say. I was stunned. Creeped out that I’d fallen for a religious nutjob. But at least she seemed to invent her own religion instead of just followin somebody else’s. That’s somethin, at least. But come on, I couldn’t take her seriously with a rant like that. She was about to say somethin more, but I interrupted her.

“You really believe all that?”

“That’s a meaningless question. It’s like I would ask you if you believe in water. I don’t believe in it, it is a description of my experience.”

I cringed mentally.

“Your *subjective* experience.”

“Obviously, on an objective level it would have to be described in terms of psychological mechanisms. The experience was a production of my brain.”

“So you admit it wasn’t real.”

“I admit that it took place in my mind. But what can anybody ever experience that is not produced by the mechanisms of their own brain? Your mind is *the only reality*. At least the only reality that will ever be relevant to you.”

“But the rest of the world is still out there. It’s not dependent on my brain.”

She changed the topic. “What if I put it this way. This started with you asking me why I’m not scared. That question is the answer to this dilemma. Because you have to admit that my peace of mind is real. So the cause of my peace of mind must also be real. Because if you don’t consider that which effects changes to reality as reality, then what do you?”

We were never gonna understand each other on this point. So I dropped it. I like philosophy, but whatever she was going on about right now, it ain’t what I call philosophy. But it’s better to let it go than to start arguing over it, right?

I didn’t mind even if she was religious. I still loved her. And I guess she was kinda right that if it helped her deal with her situation, then at least something good came out of her delusions. Kinda like her religion was a placebo medication. She could use that. If it was me getting paralyzed, I would freak out. The least I could do was let her tell herself everything was fine, since she obviously couldn’t cope with the reality of it. But I still wished there was more I could do for her.

I don’t really believe in any god or nirvana or any other superstitions. But I do believe that stuff is connected. That synchronicity thing, I believe in that. I know from experience that house plumbing and personal well-being are connected. In some damn way. Beats me how it works, but that doesn’t mean it ain’t so. So I tried to consider her paralysis from that perspective. She was homeless. On the vagabond trip since years ago, apparently. And now her wandering days were over. What would be the equivalent of that in my personal holy space – the bathroom?

Our brains absorb what they got use for and the rest is flushed down the drain. Not having your own bathroom would be like not being able to let go of the thoughts you don’t need. Like unnecessary information. She clearly had a lot of that. But what’s the connection to paralysis? Especially since she

seemed to retain control of her toilet muscles, so to speak. She only lost her legs, and her arms... which are... *indispensable* to bathroom visits... if you're a vagabond. She has to be able to get herself to and from public toilets or suitable places outdoors. Was that the connection? Could she have lost her mobility so she'd be forced to sorta stay put? Maybe she was meant to end up with me, specifically? Seein as how I had an understandin of these things. In that case, I oughta be able to save her just by lettin her live here and by bein maself. The paralysis was a way to get her to settle down and make a home for herself. And ma home was her home. Ma outhouse was her outhouse. She didn't have to die. All I had to do was open ma home to her. Help her live without mobility. Maybe we were *made* for each other, almost literally. We could live here for the rest of our lives. Maybe everythin would turn out okay.

And yet, I already suspected that our time together wouldn't be so long as I hoped.

Night had fallen. Motionless puddles of rainwater reflected the starry sky. I walked along the street, knowing something was wrong inside my body. I knew it with the utmost certainty. I was aware of it with the same self-evidence one is aware of being sleepy or hungry. It didn't hurt anywhere, but somehow I sensed that something was – *damaged* inside of me. I thought about the myriad internal body parts that make up a human being, how complicated a machinery it all was. I thought about how vulnerable we are. Some little part inside me had burst. I simply knew. Some tiny little organ, so insignificant that there weren't even nerves to warn me, to communicate to me, through pain, that it was injured. And yet that tiny, insignificant part still belonged to a perfect whole. And now that whole was *defect*. Instead of a well-tuned machinery, I walked around with a leaking fissure somewhere inside me. Through it, my well-intentioned heart pumped out all of my blood, little by little, into the abdominal cavity. I was bleeding to death on the inside. What treachery, almost laughable somehow. Without actually spilling a drop of blood, I was being drained of it all. I could feel my life pouring out of me, second by second. My skin turned cold and pale. No new energy was being generated. With each and every movement I

made, I was brought closer to the abyss. I panted and started getting dizzy. My steps got heavier until I couldn't stay upright anymore. There was nobody in sight when I collapsed on the asphalt.

The empty street was dead silent. Somehow I managed to get on my back. I looked up at the stars. Breathed in. The night air was cool and smelled of leaves, the autumn sky was dark and quiet. This could be my last breath. What would it feel like to die? Would I just drift off, like into sleep? Or would I have to lie awake and struggle in agony to breathe when the time came and my lungs gave up? I breathed out. Now, now, *now*. But nothing happened.

I breathed in again. The stars twinkled like a thousand eyes. It was nice to surrender. I thought everything up there in the night sky whirled around, pulsed and did all sorts of strange things. What if this is where the stories of alien abductions come from? That it's got more to do with near-death experience than extraterrestrial experience? Thank god I at least got to die like this, quickly, suddenly, and outdoors. Not cooped up in some white, sterile room after a long, bedridden struggle against a rotting, deranged brain. I breathed out. Slowly, slowly.

The only thing I found a little sad, was that nobody was here with me. Nobody would know that I accepted death's invitation and went with him voluntarily. They would find me dead on the street and believe I was a *victim*. A victim of the pandemic. I breathed in. I could see them shaking their heads at me, what a shame, that poor man. All alone on an evening walk, the illness struck him down. Probably screaming in vain, waiting for help to arrive on the empty streets. That's what they would say. I felt very frustrated imagining such a disturbing misunderstanding. But I realized I was fortunate that kind of frustration was my only regret as I gave my last breaths. If something like that is your only complaint on your deathbed, you have to consider that a success. I couldn't understand how I wasted so much of my life worrying about this moment. "Death". How could I think death was this big, bad thing? It's as natural as being born. The whole notion seemed silly now. Like there was no death. Isn't it said, I thought to myself on the

street, that we die a little each second we're alive? In that case, the so called moment of death is really nothing but the second you finally stop dying. I breathed out.

I wonder if this had still happened if I stayed with my family? If so, if it had happened at home, would that have been better? But no. It would have been much worse. I love them, but I can't stand them. Right now that was clearer than ever. I definitely did the right thing to break the shackles and get out of there. I did the right thing. I was glad they weren't here. In that sense, it was a relief dying alone, without any demands or regrets.

But then I breathed in again. As ready as I was, death never came for me. Even though I could hardly have a drop of blood left in my veins by now. I could even feel my abdomen getting bloated with all the blood collecting inside it. I was dying. It was so clear. And yet I kept breathing in and out, and still nothing happened.

I left the library Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer on Helge's nightstand. I took the signed one for myself. It wasn't stealing, because he was dead. Dead people can't own things. And if nobody owned it, nobody would mind if I borrowed it for a while. And also, I think he would have wanted me to take it anyway, even though it didn't have my name in it. I wondered if I should take Alicia's book too, so I could learn more prayers of fear and maybe find an even better one. But I didn't know where to find it in all of his bookcases.

The more I thought about it, the sadder I was that he was dead. There was so much more I wanted to talk to him about. What was I supposed to do now? I couldn't just leave him there. Somebody had to take care of him. Dead people need to be buried. Especially since he was a priest and everything. I borrowed his phone and called the emergency number like I know you should, but it didn't work. The phone just beeped like it was broken or something. I had to go find a grownup. The dryer was finished, and I put my dry clothes back on. So there, I can even use the drying machine and everything, all by myself. I waved goodbye to the glass animals. Then I left the apartment.

Helge lived on top of the church, so I didn't even have to go out on the street. I knew that churches were always full of people. But when I got out into the huge hall, it was totally empty. I walked around looking for someone. It felt way bigger now than I thought last night. Most doors only led into tons of empty rooms. But in the end I dared to try the big closed door right across from the door to the street. That's the one that led into the real church room. I didn't really want to go in there, because I wasn't sure I was supposed to. I didn't even know if I believed in god, can you just walk into the church if you don't? But I had to find someone who could help me. So after looking in all the other rooms, I walked in. The door led to a church hall that was like enormous, and there was an altar and a cruxiflux and stuff. And that's where I found all the people.

Nobody seemed to hear me when I came in the room, even though all the benches were full of people and the whole place was super quiet. Everybody was facing the altar – even though there was no priest standing there – so they all had their backs to me. It was like in the ghost story about the midnight mass of the dead. But I wasn't scared. Now that I knew the prayer of fear worked, I didn't even have to use it. There was no point getting scared at all if I knew I could take it away again whenever I wanted. I walked up to a man in the back row and touched him on the shoulder. He twitched and turned around, like he had been sleeping.

"Sorry," I whispered. "Why is everybody so quiet?"

"We're listening to the sermon," the man whispered back.

I was quiet for a while because I was thinking.

"But there's nobody talking."

"It comes from within. We're listening on the inside."

"I need help," I said.

"Afterwards. Sit down and listen, you too."

I sat down next to him and listened for a while, but I didn't hear anything. Just the weird silence. It was kind of creepy for such a large crowd to be so quiet. I'd never seen a silence this loud before. Like the whole room was screaming silence. There was a weird, dusty smell. Inside myself all I could hear was my breathing.

"Hey." I prodded the man a little with my elbow. "Sorry. But I don't know what to do."

"Just be really quiet and still, and listen carefully."

So I sat there quiet, trying to listen. I stared at Jesus hanging on his cross up there. I didn't know so much about Jesus. We weren't studying world religions yet in school. I knew his name and that he wanted everyone to be nice to each other. But why did they put him up on the cross? I didn't know. I waited and waited and nothing happened. I didn't want to bother the man again so I just sat there.

But then, I started to hear the sermon.

"I'm not sure he's okay."

She sounded concerned. Gustaf lay on the floor with a blank expression, eyes not seeing. He almost looked dead, except that he was breathing. Liv lay beside him. At first glance she might have looked dead too, at least from the neck down. But she had all of her vitality concentrated in her face. If you ask me, I'd say her paralysis turned out nicely, relatively speaking.

I walked over and sat down next to them.

"How do you define okay? Was he okay before?"

"Sure, it's all relative. But even then, he seems relatively worse than before."

"A person who ate something bad and got sick from it, does he feel better or worse at the moment the food is disgorged?"

"I shouldn't have said what I did. He wasn't ready."

"It's okay. If he truly wasn't ready, he wouldn't have heard you. You just have to finish what you started."

"How?"

"The same way you will help the others. Just be yourself and do what you do."

"You said we needed his knowledge too. Who is he?"

"Gustaf was a well-liked professor of theology and the history of literature, once. Before the accident. He was incredibly well-read, gifted, destined to change his entire field sooner or later. But as you know, he left all of that behind."

"It's terribly sad," said Liv. "To lose everything like that..."

"What is gain and loss? Can you really tell them apart when you're only halfway there? And when are we anything but halfway? Consider this, if it weren't for his tragedy, the two of

you would have never met.” And after a pause, I added: “Didn’t you once say that every event in the cosmos draws us towards the point of infinite closure?”

“Well...”

She was silent for a while.

“But... If he’s so well-versed in theology, what do you need me for?”

“You know that. At the bottom of your heart. But you too have chosen to forget who you are.”

“Who am I?”

I leaned over Gustaf and looked deep into his eyes, his unmoving eyes which did not look back into mine. His pupils gaped like two black tunnels winding into the catacombs of his brain. Inside them I saw my own face reflected, looking out at me. I leaned closer until I could see my own pupils in the reflection.

“At the bottom of it all you’re probably just you, same as everybody else.”

I was violently ejected from my sleep and my bed. Fragments of a shattered dream rained on the floor like glass, sharp shards underneath my hands and arms. I cut myself. The room twisted around and around. Coughing, I managed to sit up even though the floor was swaying, where am I? Then I coughed again and remembered, I had to get out of here – *the child!* Something strange was happening to my skin. Water trickled out of the pores. I had to cough again but I didn’t have the strength, only a tired puff came out. Of course, that’s why the floor is rolling like this, because I’m at sea. How many times have I been here? I struggled to breathe. What if the water never stops. What if this is the Deluge, what if this is how it starts: with one human being who starts discharging endless water. What a terrible burden for that person to bear. Could it really be me? There are so many people in the world. What are the odds that *I*, one among billions, would be that person? But probability only exists in hypothetical projections of the future. In the present moment, the totality of hypotheses collapse into a singular reality: there is only 1 and 0, where 1 is that which is happening and 0 is everything else. So the probability of this, the person being me and the time being now, was 100%.

Nothing could be more obvious, of course it was me. The world would end through me. *Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.* I almost blacked out. *The gas!* I was still headed towards the door, but it moved sideways when I tried to approach it. Thousands of impressions flickered through me, I saw star systems and fates of men. Underground halls, cities in ruin, and the gruesome Weeping Prophet, who disturbed me deeply. Just stay calm, said a voice within. I had a notion that the voice belonged to Kitten Lickle. Who? I didn't recognize this room at all. Where was my wife, why wasn't she sleeping next to me? I remembered that cats believe in thieves and ghosts. Just stay calm. Who do you think you are? I just stood still then, and even though the room was still shifting and turning every way all around, I saw the door come floating upon the water towards me. The way out, oh, at last! Everything would be okay. But as soon as I got the door open I remembered the boy again, the patriarch. Everything is in order. He is safely asleep and beyond harm's reach. God, what a relief. I dropped to my knees on the threshold, had to breathe, couldn't breathe. The glass animals stared at me. Their black eyes were dead, but life glittered in the crystal bodies. I was going to the realm of the dead. This is not my home. Just stay calm. I looked around until I could not keep my eyes open anymore. It felt so good to lie down. It would feel so good to rest. I knew this strange home. Everything was in order. I heard and I saw the water keep pouring out of my skin, gushing out of the cadaver and flowing across the floor, the deluge spewing out of me, out through me, I drowned and bubbled. It was me, it was me the whole time. Everything dissolved into nothing. There was nothing else. I was inescapably encompassed by a void and cloudless sky. The boundless circle without center twisted through itself and started to pull me in all directions. But I became aware this was happening to somebody else. This was as far as I could come along. But soon everything would be restored. Everything sundered by time would be united again. Hang in there! You just have to endure for a little longer, just a short while more, this is the final stretch. Just a little longer, and all I had to do was to fulfill my purpose.

I got up and brushed myself off. I was reeling. The last thing I remembered was Socrates in Russel's apartment. The terrible truths he finally forced me to accept. It was all behind me now. But the love was still there. And finally, for the first time, I realized that I missed them.

I looked around, and I was still in Russel's apartment. But I saw everything in a new light now. Something that held me back before had finally snapped. I was delivered to something new. There was such a rush of energy surging through my body, I could physically feel the force rush through me like warm, vibrating waves. Other than an indistinct scrap of memory from early childhood or something, I had never felt anything like this. I skipped across the floor, wringing my hands just because I had to *do something*. I would have done cartwheels if I only knew how. But I had to relax. I gathered my strength and punched my fist into the concrete wall for fun. It hurt really bad and the paint cracked, but I loved the pain and the concrete. And I succeeded in taking the edge off that extra energy.

I sat down on the couch and stared ahead. Breathing, calming down again.

"What in all creation just happened?"

I was obsessed with it. The sense of fearlessness. No, more than fearlessness. An utter fucking non-existence of fear. Ever since that day when the rotten tree swallowed me, fear had lived inside me like a constant background noise. Now I felt like someone had put out a hand, reached deep into me, grabbed the fear and simply pulled it out of me with roots and all. All that was left was a hollow space of gentle serenity. And I couldn't leave it alone.

I groped and groped at the blunt edges of the hole. Could even tell by the contours what shape the fear had when it was there. But it was really gone now. I smiled and delighted in the gaping crater, which was all the fear had left behind. It was nowhere inside me anymore, gone forever. I couldn't get enough of this feeling. I was completely lost in my thoughts of mushrooms and the indescribable sense of not being afraid. Can't even explain how wonderful it was. Every problem I ever

had could be traced back to the mold. And it was all gone. I could think about it all I wanted, and still feel totally calm. I was free.

If someone had described the Tremp situation to me a year ago, exactly the way it was going down right now. I can't even – my reaction, I would have – it would have been my worst nightmare. Like I said before, not what I thought was my worst nightmare. Not what I would have answered if somebody asked “what is your biggest fear?” But the real one. My *worst nightmare*. The thing so terrifying that I had rejected it from my being in a panic and kicked it into those shadows of the brain where the light of consciousness does not reach. There in the darkness it had remained, rotting and putrefying all alone. Spread and grown in the dark. Spun its thin threads out of the air and then weaved them together, until it wasn't just hiding in darkness, it *was* the darkness itself. *That* nightmare. It had, all at once and with no warning, become reality. The big, black letters of the single word of the ominous headlines seemed to invade me. I was filled up with their meaning, and inside of me it grew. *Nightmare*. Almost like the copy editors somehow knew. That feeling was actually more disturbing than the fungus. I felt like somebody, somewhere, knew about my innermost secrets all along, even when I didn't even know myself. I felt nauseous, like someone had infringed on the most intimate thing I had. Violated my unconscious. *Nightmare*. But as disturbing as it was, the thought of somebody being inside my brain without permission, even that couldn't *scare* me anymore. Now that I was standing eye to eye with the absolute worst thing that could happen, the fear was finally delivered. It was a lifeless, rotting lump that had been hell to get rid of, but it had no power over me anymore. I ate it now, and I didn't just eat it, I enjoyed eating it. And the light of my mind burned brighter and the shadows faded away. Finally I could see that all there ever was hiding in the dark was–

And with all of this going through my head – as though it was all connected – I found Elias.

I had stood there staring at the newspapers for hours. Kept reading the word and looking at the picture over and over and over again, just because I could. But at length I tore myself

away and headed home again. And then when I rounded a corner, he was lying there on the ground. Somehow I knew this was the same middle-aged man I saw lifeless on the street when we were going to the train station, even though it was dark then and I only glimpsed him while running past. Even so, somehow I knew it was the same guy. But this wasn't the same street. How did he get here? Did he have a habit of lying half-dead on the ground? I briefly thought maybe he had epilepsy or something. But then it clicked that he had tremp, of course. I felt pretty stupid for not getting it immediately. But the disease was still so new and its effect on myself personally was so huge. I hadn't really considered all the ordinary people of the world, how tremp would affect them all too. Until now. Anyway, I had to do something. So I walked up to the guy. He was lying on his back staring at the sky with a tentative, maybe expectant look in his eyes. I crouched down next to him.

"Hi. Are you okay?"

He whispered something in reply, but I couldn't make sense of it. Fragmented phrases were floating out of him, all cut up and jumbled. But he kept repeating the words "The Experience". I shuddered. "Experience" to me was a word burdened with negative associations. I knew exactly what The Experience was. Whatever he was actually talking about. To me, it was the experience from that forest that autumn. That was one hell of an experience, let me tell you. Surprisingly fitting word, actually. "Ex-" meaning "out of". "Periri" goes back to an ancient root that also gave us the word "peril." That's what it was all about. Being in peril and getting out of it.

Suddenly I saw it all as though it happened again. Or like I was back in the past. I'm not saying it flashed before my eyes like a memory. I mean I *was back there*, even though at the same time I was on the street next to the stranger. As though my being was suddenly split in two, but the two strands of reality were taking place on exactly the same terms, and I couldn't tell which one was the memory and which was the present moment. They were both the present moment. But this time I wasn't overcome with panic inside the tree. I was like a passenger in my own head, just watching it all unfold. Partly because a parallel me knew it had already happened, even though the other me didn't know. And partly because I simply

wasn't scared this time. Apparently, tremp had liberated me from fear even retroactively. I tried to relax and just accept what was happening.

I am stuck.

In a hollow tree trunk.

With mold in it.

And no more and no less than that. It took a huge effort somehow, but I pulled it off. *I did it*. And after I had thought those words, some kind of strange energy vibrated through my body, and then everything became still. I'd been given another chance, and this time I got through it.

The tree, along with the location and the events surrounding the tree, slowly faded away until I was just back on the street again, still crouched next to the strange man. "The Experience," he repeated. This time I didn't shudder. All that bitter content I had pumped into that word through the years, had dried out. And for the first time in forever, I thought about Ansa. No idea what ever became of her. I remember blaming her for everything at first. Refusing to see her. Heard she was upset about what happened, but that just made it worse. She was upset! How did she think I felt about it, huh? And then, as I learned to stop thinking about the whole affair with the tree in the glade, I also stopped thinking about her. I was ashamed now. And I missed my childhood friend. I hope it didn't take her as long to move on as it did for me. I hope I'll see her in heaven, or however that works. I'm sorry, Ansa. I blinked away tears and thoughts and grabbed the rambling man's shoulders.

"Can you stand up?"

I was so happy for Gustaf that I cried. It's fascinating how many muscles all over the body are normally used for crying. I never knew until now, when I could only use the muscles of my face. Tears dripped on the floor. When Gustaf picked me up, he lifted me in his arms this time instead of on his back. He was dad again, his beard glittering with tears. Happy tears, no longer black but clear as beads of ice.

"Thank you," he sobbed, "thank you for what you've done for me."

"I didn't do anything. It was Socrates."

I make no claims to know how existence works, metaphysically speaking. Except that I'm convinced that at least it does not work the way it seems. But I strongly feel that nobody can give something to someone, that they do not already possess. In order to truly understand what someone is saying, surely you must already understand that thing within yourself? But on the other hand, I also feel that the other might be necessary to somehow deliver forgotten messages from the unconscious to the conscious mind. But on the third hand, I'm not sure where to draw the line. What if "self" and "other" is just a way for the mind to present to itself conscious and unconscious content of – something. That's the end of the line. What is it? And *whose is it*? Was that was Socrates talked about?

Gustaf had helped me back to the couch. Now he paced back and forth through the room. He was completely changed – his posture, his movements, his eyes flashed with new life. Even his voice was different. This must be the old Gustaf, before his mental suicide. His hair rippled around him like a crackling gray fire.

"This is all indeed an ontological enigma," he muttered under his beard. "At what end shall we begin? If there are ends at all to speak of."

"It's always best to start where you're standing."

"Agreed. It appears to me as though our environment is presently, how do I put it – *approximately* the same as before. But no more than that. In order to continue this at all, I must of course begin with the customary postulate: that you are real. And that our individual experiences of this here and now, respectively, are sufficiently congruent so as to enable a meaningful discussion of anything at all."

I think we were on the same page, although I would have been more frugal putting it into words. His beard rolled like a storming sea as he continued:

"Thus – can we agree, that certain aspects of Being have changed, in a way not consistent with the prevalent consensus on the structure of reality, whilst certain other aspects remain the same?"

This was not my first conversation with somebody who had spent so much time in academic literature and university

classrooms that this became their natural voice. But I had never expected Gustaf to be one of them, considering his tired and sparse remarks so far. Maybe it was just the sharp contrast making it seem more convoluted than it was, or maybe he was exaggerating to compensate his decades of silence. In either case I had to unravel his question for a few seconds before I was sure I understood him.

"I think so."

"Then we ought to delineate, to the best of our ability, how our new environment functions. What has changed?"

"Socrates showed up."

"Indubitably the most striking example. Which raises the next question: was he truly here in a real sense? How can we make certain that this is not a case of *folie à deux*?"

"He let us into the apartment, so he was probably here for real."

"Very good." He wrinkled his forehead and put three fingers against his temple, like he was invisibly massaging his arguments in there. "Assuming that we *were* let in. How can we determine that the door wasn't simply unlocked, in which case we suffer a shared delusion that somebody unlocked it for us?"

I thought about it. Turns out it's a lot harder than you might think to prove that your perception of reality is valid. Every thread just runs back to the same initial problem. Like trying to see your own retinas. I wasn't quite sure anymore what it would even mean for one's perception of reality to be "valid".

Every time Gustaf opened his mouth, books opened up all around him and spilled letters into the air. I know he couldn't see them. They were a part of my perception of reality which he did not share. However, it was hardly arbitrary. He spoke like he had several encyclopedias in his head. And he, on the other hand, saw the room in color. I didn't. If the colors only he could see were real, weren't the floating letters only I could see, also real?

I *loved* this.

"Then how did I know Socrates wouldn't look like *the* Socrates?"

"Very astute. I propose an experiment. Can you draw?"

"Not very well. But enough for what you have in mind."

So each of us drew, at the same time and with no knowledge of the other's result, pictures of the man who looked like pater Schultes. And looking at our papers afterwards, there was no doubt about it. Even though my drawing was crude and far behind that of the apparent polymath I suddenly shared a reality with, we had clearly both tried to capture the same face. Which could only mean that a part of Gustaf's psyche (or as he put it, and I vaguely recognized it from some book I read long ago, an "unconscious autonomous complex") had somehow assumed physical form.

I was privileged to see him follow the implications from there, with razor sharp deductive skills that surely would have made the real – sorry, the original – Socrates proud. Now and then I got to respond to a rhetorical question, but I was mostly there as a spectator. I definitely got the impression that this man was at his best when there was an audience. I could easily imagine him in a lecture hall packed with spellbound students. Now and then I actually saw it, too. I don't know if they were students from his past that I saw and, if so, how their faces were available to me, or if they were just generated on the fly from my unconscious. But in this way, we kept feeling out the edges of a new strange existence, and I slowly began to sort of understand what Socrates meant before.

A strange smell had begun to spread from somewhere. I hadn't seen Jennifer in days, but everything is connected, I didn't have time to notice she was missing. There was so much I had to do online. I kept reading up on mystery cults, plagues and cryptogamae. The latter to acquire reliable information on tremp, or Hodgson's syndrom or whichever of the numerous new names and nicknames of the disease you prefer. Tremp was so new and so widely discussed that searching for it directly online was hopeless. Very limited facts collided with infinite speculation. What few actual sources even existed were almost exclusively connected to the government, i.e. totally useless gene doubled 200 hertz people, spreading their fear-mongering propaganda infested with self-contradictory brain-paralyzing neural manipulation designed to slip below the sensory threshold of the masses to force us all to turn into those puppet slaves and brainless robot people remote controlled through the internet using subliminal signalling,

just like the cultural brainwashing of children's television programs that organically construct a conceptual antenna of consciousness which acts as a receiver for brainwashing for the rest of each individual's life, or in their terms, durability. My eyes were wide open and I could see it all so clearly now. I was fortunate to have had my mother to deprogram me. Everybody else was still under the thumb of the ruling elite because their brain receivers were still active. *Don't search for tremp online*, whatever you do don't listen to state sources controlled by the world government! It's not just tremp, really. Tremp just happened to be where they focused their brain signals right now, because obviously tremp was where the enslaved populace focused their attention right now. That in itself was key. Ridiculously obvious. I snickered to myself just thinking about it. Thanks to the Circle I had finally seen through the system and found the loopholes that we initiates use to live under the radar. You see, that right there is their main weakness, that *they will always be where they think you will be*. They think they're tricking us into following them, but it's just as much them following us. Once you've understood this you can escape. It's all in the brain, you have to mind your brain, until there is no brain and all mind. If you want to learn about something, never read about the actual subject. Study the *whole* that lies *behind* the subject. In order to understand Tremp, I had to study mycology. If I understood mycology, I could draw my own conclusions about tremp. As an extra bonus, unlike tremp which only existed for a few weeks, mycology existed for thousands of years. There was an inexhaustible well of knowledge on the subject. Did you know that the largest individual organism on this planet is a mycelium that spans an area of over 2000 acres? Imagine when that turns to tremp. It's fucking incredible. Think of the size of it. It's an entire village made of fungus, a tremp village. One single organism! Oh, and it's not just the biggest, it's also the oldest. Or at least among the oldest inhabitants of Earth. Thousands of years old. They don't even know exactly, since it's harder to measure age than size. That in itself says it all about everything, do you see? Dimensions! One, two and they're the same, the third diverges, the fourth is totally beyond. We exist within a pyramid. Tremp as well, it says

something about tremp. Time and tremp, tremp and time, time for tremp. Tremp is the spindle, the axis in the middle of the cosmos, and and the imaginary axis too. I devoured everything I came across, and didn't even make a blip on the shadow government radar because they were too busy tracking down and silencing those who spoke up about the conspiracy and about tremp. Always three steps ahead. They'll never get to my brain with their signals. I had a barrier around my brain.

But eventually I couldn't focus anymore because of that weird smell. It might be a gas attack from those in power, if my cover was blown! I never thought of that! If they can't get to you with the remote control signal receiver in the puppet brain, they might switch tactics and resort to physical attack. That's how it usually goes for people. But I've got something they don't have, I know something they don't know, they can't get to me, I've got a head start because I was chosen by the Circle, they'll never get to me. But now I had to find the source of the gas and get it out of the apartment immediately. I went on a hunt. I checked the bathroom and the kitchen, then the bedroom and the living room, but the smell was uniform, no stronger or fainter anywhere. It was more like the atmosphere itself smelled of something. Then I understood it had to be tremp, the spores were thickening in the air. Tremp was everywhere. But that meant I didn't have to worry. This was the work of the good guys. Tremp was like an angel sent to deliver us, there was nothing to fear from tremp. But there was so much I still didn't know about tremp – so much nobody knew about tremp. Like why did tremp affect different people so differently? How come so many had died of tremp long ago while others, like me and Jennifer, still walked around not even showing symptoms even though we breathed the exact same air as everyone else and it was full of tremp? Was that even the question? Or was it better put like this: how come so many people had *not* died of tremp even long ago, if the tremp spores had been around for so long? Didn't we all have the spores within us? Didn't we all have tremp? Maybe it had something to do with the immune system – but then how could the body defend itself against a life form like tremp? The body can't defend itself against prion disease – and tremp, which was also called Hodgson's Syndrome and which was called the

purple plague and which some simply called The Fungus, Tresp seemed to possess a unique combination of the mechanisms of prions and mycotoxins. The word *mycoprions* was something I made up myself, as far as I know – I was too careful to put it into a search engine. That'd be guaranteed to flash some red lights in the government bunker where the monitors were hiding. They were hunting us now. They were out to get the Circle. There were many questions about tresp that I had to answer, but few places I dared to look. And another thing, the most frustrating thing, as I was reading about tresp – sometimes I felt just like I had the answer right in front of me, staring me in the face, but I couldn't quite reach it. Or it couldn't reach me. Was my mind not ready for the full understanding, just like my body was not ready for tresp to fully develop and unfold?

In the middle of all this, the door phone rang. I'd almost forgotten there was a door phone. I was abruptly torn out of my tresp dreams, and picked up the intercom.

"Hello?"

"Hi sweetie, it's me. Could you come down and help us up the stairs?"

Us?

I dunno if it's cause ma plumbin-holistic diagnosis and treatment was correct or if it was somethin else. But the paralysis did stop spreadin after Liv started livin with me. She could never move below her neck again, but at least she could still speak all the way up to the end. She lay on ma bed and I slept on the floor. I fed her, talked to her, washed her and helped her get to the outhouse. Sometimes we talked about that specifically. She couldn't feel nothin down there and she couldn't actively control it so to speak. But her body still seemed to handle it like it was supposed to. What I'm sayin is that nothin came out when she wasn't actually on the john. But as soon as she was, it came right away. As if the paralysis was all in her head like.

We didn't know then what was goin on outside our little glade here. None of us followed any news and there weren't no other people around. I thought she was ill and I was well and we were just two kinda sorta normal people livin our lives here in the world. How we found out about it all, to be honest I got

no clue. Somehow we just knew, eventually. Maybe a species has some kinda collective instinct about when it's gonna die out. Just like they say some people just know when they're about to croak. But it can't be quite that simple. I mean, how did we know the name Tremp? I ain't even sure when we started callin it tremp. It's like it never really happened, it's just that suddenly we were doin it, without really havin started, you know? It's all very strange. These questions can't be answered. Not that it matters, either. But at first it was just us, so far. A healthy person, takin care of his friend who was sick.

Mostly I did her hygiene kinda awkwardly. I was all dressed and our bodies didn't ever really touch each other. I washed her with towels and a sponge and looked away as much as I could, out of respect. But I sensed that it made her a little sad that I was so uncomfortable. That I was creatin this distance between us. At first I didn't get what she was doin. I was crushin on her so hard but she didn't love me back, and she made it super clear that we couldn't be romantically involved. So what did she expect me to do, huh?

But then one day she asked to bathe in the forest lake. So I carried her there. The evenin air was coolin in the last golden rays of sunlight. I undressed her and myself. That night was the first time we were both naked together. And even though I tried not to, I couldn't help to look a little. She was indescribably beautiful. The skin on her boobs goosebumped and her nipples thrust out into the gentle breeze as we stepped down into ma lake. The water had warmed up durin the day and it was still pleasant enough. I stood at the bottom, holdin Liv in ma arms so she could float in the water. Almost like she was hoverin in the air. Underneath the water I felt the warmth of her skin against mine. She lay there quiet and still, just smilin and floatin and restin in ma arms. I had ma left arm under her knees and ma right round her right shoulder. Her lifeless arms rested limp across her belly, framin her breasts. I happened to look down and that's the first time I saw her scars.

Like the rest of her naked body, they were hard not to stare at, but I forced ma eyes off of em. I stared at the treetops above instead and thought about it. She used to be one of them angsty girls that cut themselves? *Liv*? This walkin example of inner peace? Both the happiest and the most religious person I

ever met – she used to be into that kind of stuff? I couldn't imagine. I had to ask her sometime. But that'd have to be way later on. It's a sore spot, I'll bet, so I had to be careful bringin it up. So's not to ruin anythin between us.

None of us said anythin then. We just listened to the silence of the forest and the sound of the water whenever you moved a bit. Forest silence is a special, broad kind of silence, and we both loved it. We really did have a lot in common, even though she was religious and paralyzed and I was a holistic plumber. I stood there thinkin what it must be like to be paralyzed under water. Her skin pressed so tight against mine and I accidentally looked down again. This time I pretty much couldn't help but stare. I'd put her wavy hair up in a bun, and now you could see the thin little strands at the soft nape of her neck. Her left breast pressed directly against ma skin, and it heaved and sort of stroked me when we breathed. She was so soft and smooth. I'd been starin for too long now and it was too late to look away or stop thinkin about her, even though I felt a stirrin hardon below the water. I was ashamed, I might have even blushed, but I pretended like nothin was happenin. If she said anythin right then, I didn't hear it. I was so focused on not givin myself away that I almost forgot to breathe.

But at the same time. While them old feelins were gettin frisky again after the long sleep in the woods. You know, the desire for that unnecessary jacuzzi. At the same time, one gets to thinkin. What was goin on right now, huh? She never actually said she didn't love me. Or even that she didn't want to be with me. She said we couldn't be lovers. But that ain't the same thing at all. That's part of her whole spiritual trip and stuff like that. Not bein able ain't the same as not wantin to. If you enjoy celibacy, then what's the point of it, right? She's a young woman, obviously she got needs even though she chose not to give in to them. In other words, it could very well be that ma feelings were mutual. It was her initiative to live with me, wasn't it? And she even asked for this, for us to go bathin together! Now here we were, two young, naked people. Alone and up right with skins pressin against each other in a scenic lake. The whole thing was so romantic and sexy and it ought to be obvious to anybody where this was goin. Given all of that, her vow of celibacy was totally the odd one out. This wasn't

even “mixed signals”. These signals were crystal clear. It pretty much *had to be* that she probably wanted me almost as much as I wanted her, only she was forbidden to say it out loud. Ma hardon was poundin in ma groin and then, it’s so embarrassin, I felt ma dick accidentally brush against one of her buttcheeks under the surface. I quivered from shock and arousal and almost dropped her. But that woulda been a disaster – she’d drown if I didn’t keep her head above water. So instead I reflexively held her tighter against me, which made everythin worse of course. Her tits were squeezed together and her butt rubbed against me under the water. She was *crazy* hot, man.

“What happened?” she asked.

Her voice was neutral. She was paralyzed, so she couldn’t have felt what was goin on down below, but still, she ought to get it. I mean she had to know. This whole thing simply had to be a way for her to invite me in without technically breakin her vow. I couldn’t resist no more. I bent ma neck until ma lips touched hers and then I kissed her. She didn’t exactly kiss me back. But she didn’t say anythin either, she didn’t turn her head away or nothin. Why did she have to be so unclear? But there’s no way I could be wrong. I thought it all through so much. I stepped out of the lake with her in ma arms and felt the water drippin off of our bodies. It splashed and sprinkled against the leaves on the ground as I carried her away from the glade, and her butt bounced into ma stiff, wigglin cock with each step. I had to have her.

The autumn colored trees were lit up by the final rays of the sunset. There was somethin odd about the colors. Like they were more intense than usual. But I guess that was true every autumn. I gently put Liv down on her back in the moss and admired her naked body. I lay down next to her and stroked the back of her neck. Ma lips kissed gently the hard little nipples at the peak of her gorgeous boobs and ma left hand played with the hair between her watery, soft legs.

“I am celibate,” she said again. But that was all she said.

I didn’t understand what was goin on. Totally confused. Where am I and how did I get here? Everythin seemed to be somethin else all the time. I caught maself movin, and I was shocked without knowin why. Somebody carried me. A vague recollection, leading nowhere. This reminded me of something.

Something was eating into me, I was infested with them. I was terrified. *It's finally happened.* I was either confused or terrified. They took turns, or maybe I was both all at once. I'm not quite sure of anything. So I was confused, then. Yes, I was confused. And I was terrified because I was confused. That insight alone calmed me down a little. But I had to get help somehow.

The creature dragging me behind it was the only one around to ask. For a second I thought it was a troll, dragging its prey home to eat. But I clearly saw that it was just a regular human being. I had to get the words out. I forgot what I wanted to say, and that frightened me again and then I remembered, I was going to ask for help.

"Oh yes, that's right" I said out loud and got scared again. Somehow it had been the wrong half of the thought process that made its way to my lips. And to an outside observer, it must of course have sounded like I was responding to something the creature said. Such a misunderstanding was dreadful to me, somehow. But what was the question, the one I had inadvertently replied to? My mind was at a standstill, and also in total chaos.

But then I began remembering things. I remembered my third son, wondering if it was him being carried, here... now. But that can't be? This was me in somebody's arms. Everything seemed so familiar, yet so strange. But at least I was free, or something. Okay, at the very least I was certain that *something* was *fine* and at the same time something else – for sure – was definitely *not*. Which was which, though? Everything was slightly disconnected. The one thing I didn't doubt was that I was either dead or brain damaged.

I always knew it would end this way. I was terrified. Again? Just let me die. Footsteps echoed somewhere, heavy gates crashed closed behind us. I had to find some Archimedean spot to stand in all of this. Then I remembered how everything would be swept away by the flood. That must be what's happening. What was the firm spot? Where things grow and water flows – but then it was like some part of a broken machinery suddenly clicked back into place. Inside of me, a twitching and stirring. I seemed to float upwards, upwards, and I imagined I was being carried up along a spiral. When I

finally managed to relax for real, it turned out to be correct. A spiral staircase. The world was returning.

Two strange people carried me. But they weren't so strange that I didn't recognize them. Finn and Jennifer were their names, though I had never seen them before. Then how could I know? And why were they carrying a small child? Was I being kidnapped? But I still stayed calm. I had to wait and see. In a way, being kidnapped is quite exciting, I thought to myself, and for a brief instant it was as though... But the moment was gone, the memory vanished in thought like a light pebble dropped into the dark green depths of the sea. But despite the lost insight, I was feeling better again. Slow but steady, the water drained and the whirlpools receded. Everything was rusted and dissolved where the flood had raged. The walls sagged like rotting flesh falling from the bones of the building. But at least now you could tell where everything used to be.

"Shit. What happened?"

There were two of them, a man and a woman, and it was the man asking. I saw an olive branch tattooed on his arm. That had to be a sign that they had peaceful intentions. The woman replied in a whiskey-soaked rasp:

"It's got to be tremp. I couldn't leave her on the street."

I wanted to communicate to them that I was fine. But even though I was back, I still had a hard time getting the words to come out. What was it that I wanted to say? It felt like something important. Then how could I forget so completely? Something about how nice it was that the water drained.

"It's..." I began, and although I suspect it was a matter of less than a second, at the time it felt to me like an inordinate amount of time passed before I finally managed to produce some sort of ending to the statement, "...better weather."

As soon as the words were spoken, it struck me that it would have worked even better without that last word. That cheered me up. Somehow it felt much more comforting to say the right words, but too many, than to say too few, or not right at all. And the fact that I could make that reflection was also strangely soothing.

"It's better," I repeated and had a sense of immense relief, as though uttering the words had turned them into concrete fact.

"It's better," I tried a third time, but the effect wasn't as strong then. Ice cream.

"We'll take care of you," said the woman whose name was Jennifer. "Don't worry."

"What's your name?" said the other one, whose name was Finn.

I wasn't quite sure of that. Who was I? Strangely familiar. But the more I tried to trap my identity in my mind, the quicker it snuck from my grasp. I was a husband and father, that much I knew for sure. But I couldn't picture the faces of my family. There were three or four or five of them. Couldn't recall any of their names. I didn't even know what I looked like. I caught myself moving my arms, still, in hypnotic patterns in front of me, fascinated like a child. But there was something strange about them, something I ought to—

But then I lost the thread again and forgot about the arm thing. I remembered some sort of terror that raged within me just seconds ago, but couldn't recall the circumstances. The fear was gone forever.

"Hey, what's your name?"

Right, the others. I couldn't disappear again. What is my name? Imagine, forgetting something like that. How incredibly exciting. I smiled to myself. At least I knew it was something old and slightly elegant, I think. Ephraim? That guess was so close that I immediately remembered the right one:

"Elias!" I exclaimed happily. "My name is Elias!"

The two gave each other a look I didn't understand. Then the woman said:

"Girl, are you sure you're feeling okay?"

I was so sad! Almost disappointed. Here I had been so excited to remember who I was. But the disappointment turned to fascination almost right away. Imagine that, losing your memory to that very extent — I wasn't even a man! So exciting, so exciting. Then I remembered something else and felt better still. It doesn't matter if I remember who I am. I don't have to know who I am in order to be me. I'm here in either case.

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," said a voice in my head.

“Whom did you forsake? As long as there is anything not encompassed by your love, there is a darkness upon the Earth.”

I saw Helge in my mind, and wondered if it was him preaching. Maybe he became an angel when he died. I wasn't sure how that stuff worked. But it probably wasn't him after all. He was so warm and friendly, and this voice was pretty scary. I mean, it wasn't *really*, but I felt like when mom or dad found out I'd done something bad. That kind of scary. Besides, Helge said he would preach about Kitten Lickle.

“Who will help the one who sobs alone in the darkness? Who will restore the one unjustly renounced?”

None of that is my fault!, I wanted to shout, but I didn't know how to reach the invisible voice.

“You there!” it said and I got scared.

“What do you think everybody else *do* when they are all alone?”

Huh? I thought. And if the voice was in my head it must have heard me.

“What do you do when you have a moment all to yourself? When nobody is with you, when nobody can see you? Do you dance around humming because you want to dance and hum? Do you sort pointless objects or clean your home when it's not necessary? Do you touch yourself to pass the time? Or do you lie there silent, deep in thought, with a vague sense of approaching dread?”

I didn't get it at all. The voice continued: “Why do you feel like you are being accused? It all just means that you are longing for something. What are you longing for?”

But I don't do any of that stuff. Okay, maybe the last one, with the dreadful thoughts. But that was before. And I don't know what I long for.

“You know because of your longing. You would surely recognize it when you found it. Examine your desires. What will happen on that day when you desire no more?”

I just want to feel good. But I already do! And I don't want to have to think about these hard questions.

I wondered if the voice was really talking to me. It sounded like grownup stuff. And I didn't know what the others in the church were thinking. I bet somebody else was “you there”. But then I had been thinking about that so much that I forgot to

listen to a big part of the sermon. When I caught myself and started listening again, it was like the voice had kept on talking the whole time anyway. So then it wasn't me it was asking all these questions. Whew.

"None shall be forgotten nor left behind," said the voice now. The last shall be first, and the one sobbing for so long in that darkness will finally return to home."

But I don't get it. Who's sobbing in the darkness? Then the voice was gone. It left a kind of emptiness, like if a friend had gone home. Now it was just me and my thoughts again.

I heard rustling and creaking from all over the church as the crowd started moving again. The sermon was over.

"I didn't really understand what it was about," said the man next to me. Many others seemed confused too.

"I didn't understand anything at all, almost," I said. "But I wasn't listening the whole time."

The man looked away with a sheepish smile.

"Me neither actually," he confessed. "There was just so much to think about."

We talked to several others, but nobody seemed to understand. And hardly anybody remembered more than bits and pieces of the sermon. The stuff I just told you that the voice said, was just a small part of everything it said for real. I forgot most of it almost right away. Plus I was late of course. And I couldn't concentrate, either. But for some reason, the others seemed to feel guilty after what they'd heard. I didn't get that. One of the things I've learned from Kitten Lickle is that it's a waste of time complaining about how things are. If you don't like it where you are, go somewhere else. That's what I'd done, too, and it turned out great, right? So if you have like a guilty conscience, then just do something about it then. So I told them that. Like do something nice for instance. Then they all looked happy again and acted like I said something really smart, even though it was just obvious. And it wasn't even my own advice anyway. I just got it from Kitten Lickle.

Then they all decided to do something for their neighbours. They were "the least of my brethren" that the voice talked about, they said. They were going to hand out food and gifts to sick people. I asked if someone could help me with Helge. But when I told them what happened, they said their task was

more important than burying him. Many were sad when they heard he was dead. But the strange thing was, many of them looked sort of happy, too. Then they all started picking up stuff from around the church. A few went into the dining room to get food and coffee and stuff. I asked one group if it wasn't illegal to take those things. But then they said:

"Sometimes it's the right thing to break the law. Now that – well, considering, you know–" he drifted off, not knowing what to say. "Do you– I don't know if – anyway, *since Tremp came*, all of that has changed."

Tremp?

"What's Tremp?"

He looked at me for a long while, trying to think of what to say. But he never thought of anything. "You'd better ask your parents. But it's like this. If there's anybody around who still gets upset that we're taking this stuff, then that person is wrong. The reasons for that law are no longer valid. When something like that happens, it's more important to do the right thing than to follow old laws that no longer serve society. It's for a higher purpose. This will help a lot of people that really need it."

That sounded fine to me. I thought I knew a bit about the higher purpose thing. That's what Kitten Lickle was like all about, after all. And my own adventure, too. So I decided to come with the others and help them help people. I brought a big thermos full of coffee from the dining room, and it was so big I had to use both my arms to carry it. Then we all left the church to go out and find the people who needed us. Some others were carrying baskets of sandwiches and buns. Many carried clothes from the church's clothes drive. I saw old men with priest collars walking together with the others, carrying wine and crackers and water bottles. There were old ladies with their arms full of necklaces with wooden pearls and carrying paintings of Jesus and his mom and other people I didn't recognize. Monks and angels and stuff like that.

Everybody smiled at one another and they were so happy to do a good thing. To help those in need of help. When we came out into the sunlight again, I turned around to watch all the people pouring out of the church gates. I never noticed it yesterday when me and Helge came in, but somebody had

painted a really cool picture right next to the big doors. A boy holding a shoe. And out through the gates came marching the long line of people, each one carrying as much as they could handle.

Liv and I quickly discovered that we made a splendid team in this effort of exploring reality. We had managed to get a quite decent grasp of the new metaphysical constitution of our surroundings by way of my rational thinking and her – I still lack the vocabulary for it. I would hardly call her “rational”. But she was also far from irrational. And each time I arrived at a dead end, she was able without fail to lead us out of there in ways that were beyond me. She operated on some mysterious plane I could not perceive nor comprehend. But I could observe the results, and I freely admit that whatever she was doing, it obviously worked. It reminded me of things I think I’ve read about somewhere, or heard someone say a very long time ago.

We were starting to feel ready to move on to the next step.

“Are you sure you can do this?” said I, as we both knew she had trials and tribulations ahead of her.

She lifted her eyes to the sky beyond the ceiling and said, in a faux solemn voice: “Put this cup away from me,” she closed her eyes before continuing, “but let God’s will and not mine be done.” And she smiled.

I raised an eyebrow.

“You’re a Christian?”

There was no doubt she was a highly spiritual person, of course. But I had assumed she subscribed to something more of the New Age persuasion. On the other hand, she had just massacred that bible quote, so it was anyone’s guess. But her reply came immediately, and in the form of a question:

“You’re a theologian?”

She was quite bright. I laughed, at which I felt a call of nature. I got up and walked to the bathroom.

When I opened the door, I cried out and instinctively jumped back on a flight impulse, landing on the floor.

“What happened?” came Liv’s voice from the couch.

I tried to calm my breathing. “Just Trempe.” I stayed on the floor for a while. “I’m sorry. I was just shocked. I wasn’t ready for that.”

“The trick is to be ready all the time.”

I shook my head.

“How could anybody be ready for this?”

“Oh no, it’s no use being prepared *for* anything in particular. That thing will never happen anyway.”

I got up and cautiously walked toward the bathroom door again. I pushed it open with my foot and looked into the room that had given me such a fright. A strange sight met my eyes. A fat, organic mass underneath the floor tiles had grown so thick that several tiles had come loose or cracked. Small, squat mushrooms had begun to rise from the floor in the cracks and fissures, groping for freedom. The bathtub where Russel ripened his wine was unrecognizable. But in the middle of the room... in the middle of the room...

There, a gargantuan tangle of obscene, glistening mushrooms of huge size stood like a majestic throne. They sprawled out in all directions and seemed to live off of, and on top of, one another. It was a monstrosity. The swollen heap on the floor that formed the base of this horror was a few decimeters in height, not counting the biggest individual units. The mass was stretched out between the toilet and the sink. Although it no longer bore any similarity to anything I had ever encountered, I could guess as to its origins. This is why Russel never opened the door.

For how long could this bulk have been growing? The tallest stalks that had sprung from the colony and now aspired to the skies, were so tall that they reached above my head and almost all the way to the ceiling. Even though this pillar towered in complete silence and inertia, it somehow gave the impression of being in motion. Perhaps it was the way the fat stems had twisted and snaked around one another as they grew. Or it was the mere awareness that these myriad mushrooms were still growing at this very moment, even if the eye couldn’t perceive it. Like the brain added that motion on its own.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Liv. “There is no reason to fear it.”

“I’m not afraid,” said I, sincerely. It was too late for fear.

Then I entered the bathroom and touched one of the tallest shafts. My hand fingered the long, rubbery trunk. It was too thick to grasp fully with my two hands. Not that I tried. The walls of the bathroom were spattered with large, dark stains from when the spores had been released. The spore stains consisted of particles so small that it looked more akin to a fluid than a powder. Like the black seed of some morbid ejaculation that the mushrooms had squirted all over the bathroom walls. Solid and liquid all at once. Once again the opposites were coming together. I stood there with my mouth open, just staring at all this silent life motionlessly swarming the room. It was all so incredibly beautiful.

The young woman's condition really improved a lot after I took her home. But she still seemed to have trouble speaking. And she had no idea who she was. But she sat on our couch, smiling and appearing all right. She kept moving her arms around in front of her, like she was performing some sort of slow, snakelike dance. I asked if she was doing qigong or something. But she shook her head.

"Fibers. A wind through the room."

I smiled and nodded, maybe I made a half-assed effort to figure out what she meant, but probably not.

"Did you know there are mushrooms that can grow like seven inches in one hour? *One hour*? You can literally see them growing with your own eyes!"

Finn helped me get the girl up to the apartment, but as soon as we'd put her on the couch, he returned to his computer. He was obsessed with Tremp, which meant he was obsessed with mushrooms in general.

"Some of them grow with enough force that they can break through concrete! There's nowhere they can't fucking get in."

I was so incredibly relieved to have lost my phobia of fungus. Nightmare. I was still in a state of wonder at how life inside my worst imaginings was this simple. Actually better than before. Shit, I could barely go grocery shopping without being paralyzed by terror at the sight of a shiitake, or even a pack of yeast or whatever. I couldn't deal with anything remotely connected to mold or any fungus. Now I felt like the opposite of what the headlines claimed, as though my life had *been* a nightmare, and I had finally woken up out of it. As if the

real nightmare had always just been the fear of waking up. I thought of that song again. "I promise that life will be sweeter..." But how long would this sweet life last? Whatever, I didn't care. One brief moment of this relief would have been worth all of those long years of anxiety and fear. And now these invaluable moments were piling up into infinity. Even if Tremp got to me this very day, I still would have already rested in this feeling for an eternity, somehow.

Went into the kitchen to see if I could whip up something to eat for our little patient. Most of the food was inedible at this point, Tremp afflicted all kinds of things. I realized now why it had been so hard to find rice and wheat and everything before. I wonder how much edible food exists right now, put together? What if we'll starve to death before the disease gets us? But there was no point in worrying. At least this girl would get to eat right now. Even if it was just crisp bread with pickles.

While I was fixing the sandwiches, it struck me that I didn't detect that unsettling smell anymore. There had been a strange odor all over the apartment when we came in. Finn told me he'd looked all over for the source, but it didn't seem to come from anywhere. Apparently it was gone now. Went out to the girl with the sandwiches. The living room didn't smell either. Sniffed a bit in the bathroom, nothing.

"Honey, I think we got rid of the smell," I called from the bathroom.

"Are you sure? I feel like I can still smell it."

So I walked into Finn's study, and he was right. The room was stale and sort of... A disturbing thought occurred to me.

"Hey," I said, trying to sound normal. But he said nothing.

I walked closer until I was standing right next to him, breathing.

"Finn."

He turned around now.

"What?"

"Are you like, feeling okay?"

"I feel great!" He smiled. "Did you know mushrooms breathe, just like us? They don't have chlorophyll, like plants. They absorb oxygen and expel carbon dioxide, like animals."

I stared at him. Did not really want to know.

“I don’t want to – but – I think it’s you, Finn. I think the smell might be coming from you.”

He looked at me in silence, then sniffed his armpits and the air around him.

When he took off his shirt, I saw the source of the smell. Large, violet blotches had formed from the skin on his back. Dark purple patches with a thin, cobweb-like film covering them. The skin around them was shiny and rubbery. Some of the spots had already started to sprout a troma in the center. Tremp with its tumors was burrowing its way out of his skin.

But before I could even think another thought, I was somewhere else again. I couldn’t get up, and immediately it was clear to me that I was paralyzed again. I mean, that I was *still* paralyzed. The memory of where I had just been seemed to stay behind at its own point in time. Like dreams stay contained in themselves when you wake up out of them and into dawn. But I knew I was doing something important, even if all I did was lie here immobile.

Everything was calm and quite nice, and I felt light and relaxed. As though I just lay down after a run or a workout. But obviously I had not. I couldn’t move. My comfort was more of the soul than of the body, which I couldn’t feel much of anyway. Could I even be sure that I *had* a body? I couldn’t see it, I couldn’t feel it. Assuming it was still there was just a matter of habit. But I have this other habit of questioning everything, including old habits.

Many enticing things from the past tried to ensnare me, trick me into sorting out what had happened, but I knew it would be pointless. I chose to abide in the present moment instead. I couldn’t see a lot from where I was. The room I was in was very small, and oddly shaped. Very cosy, though. This felt like just that kind of place I would like to settle down in, when the day came when I could no longer be a wanderer. And certainly that day had arrived. I enjoyed the perfection of everything. Nothing could be better than this. I loved life. And then I lay there, in this spartan home, whomever it belonged to, and meditated for a while.

My meditation ended when the door flung open and a man barged in. I saw the autumn-gray trees outside, merging into the twilight of evening. The man came up to me and got down

on his knees. I recognized him as the holistic plumber Cláudio, although I wasn't quite sure when I'd met him before. Was it the other week? Or this morning? Oh well, what does it matter. The past is the past and doesn't get further past with time. Does it? Oh well, what does *that* matter.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "Where's Gustaf?"

"Oh ma god, Liv. Would you ever forgive me? I'll do whatever you want, just forgive me. I dunno what happened. I mean I know exactly. I let ma body get the better of me. No, I don't mean it to sound like I didn't – of course I take responsibility, I made a – just say you'll forgive me!"

I had no idea what he was talking about. Other than, obviously, that he had a terrible guilty conscience about something. He started talking again almost right away, giving me no room to respond.

"I'll kill maself if that's what you want. I was gonna drown maself just now, but then I couldn't cause – what would happen to you here? But just say it and I'll do it. I'll call somebody first, so you'll be okay. It don't have to be drownin neither, it's totally up to you. I got a rope to hang maself with if you want. Please, *say somethin!*"

This was quite unexpected. When I first met Cláudio, I could see our similarities. We did enjoy the same topics of conversation. But I soon discovered we had very different ideas about the relationship of philosophy to reality. He saw them as two separate things. He practiced philosophy as a way to pass the time, never trying to get a practical use out of his insights. And now that was causing him trouble. Whatever had upset him, he had completely succumbed to the immediate emotional reaction. I wanted to do something for him.

When I first saw him, I wanted to tell him about the experience. The time when I glimpsed what's beyond space and time. To tell him that there's nothing to be afraid of. But even those words would have been nothing but words to him. So I kept quiet. That excruciating dead end is my greatest sorrow. The hopeless futility of trying to point out the path to others, even when you see them suffer and hear their cries for help. I wondered now if I should have told him. Perhaps it could have helped him after all. But what am I doing in the

past? I need to be here now. I had a very hard time focusing. Must be Trempp, I guess.

An exquisite scent of wet leaves crept in through the door that still stood ajar. The forest and the autumn night outside reached in to embrace us. But I was the only one who noticed.

I had to say something in response. I wanted him to feel better. But I didn't understand what had happened.

"I don't know if it's me you should apologize to."

"Of course it's you! I get it now. I know what I done. Don't make me say it."

"I don't know what you did. But it doesn't matter."

"What are you talkin about?"

"I'm not really sure where I am. Where's Gustaf?"

"I – huh? Are you okay?" He was taken aback. "Like, who's Gustaf? This is ma home. We've lived here for like a week. Or a couple days anyway. I'm takin care of you here."

I chuckled to myself. Maybe it wasn't the right time to laugh. But it was so funny.

"This fungus is really something else, huh?"

"Quit it. I don't get it. Like you seriously don't remember nothin at all?"

"Last thing I recall is being with Gustaf in some kind of living room. Then I was in a kind of dream with some people I'd never seen before, they were a couple, I think. Then suddenly I was here. I haven't seen you since we said goodbye at the shelter."

"We didn't never say goodbye! You came with me here to ma glade, and we been livin together since."

It was all so astounding. Worlds coming together like threads on a loom. Life had turned into a wonderful, mystic vision. Could it all be a dream? I tried closing my eyes, because I have heard in dreams you can see with your eyes closed. But all I saw was the hypnotic inside of my eyelids. The scent of the night from the woods outside got more intense with my eyes closed.

"It sure is odd that this is how the world sometimes works."

"Please, I'm tellin you, you gotta stop bein so damn... *content*. This thing is serious."

That right there runs like a thread through my entire life. People are so hung up on dividing the world in two. Black and

white, good and bad, play time and serious time. To me, the more serious a situation gets, the more important it becomes to balance it out with humor. The heavier a sorrow, the more love is there, because sorrow grows out of love's soil. And the more hopeless it gets, the more curious I become. Isn't it exciting that this is something that happens? And if it happens to be exciting as well as terrible, don't you get more out of life if you try to hold the exciting viewpoint in mind? This rubs practically everyone the wrong way. Perhaps many seek their harmony in getting the terrible acknowledged by others. I can see how you might prefer to have company if you have to be stuck at the bottom of a dark pit. But Cláudio, are you sure you have to be down there at all?

I thought about it. What if the reason I keep running into people surrounded by misery, is that the universe brings us together for me to heal them? God help me, if that's the case, help me do a good job of it.

"I take everything seriously," I said to him. "I'm just also awed by everything. I thought you were, too. Remember everything we talked about last time."

"It *wasn't* 'last time', is what I'm tellin you. It's been over a week and we been together this whole time. And we been talkin the whole time, too, but that's just stuff that's fun to think about and discuss. This is for *real* right here." He slumped to the floor and whacked his knee in resignation. "And everythin's shit."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing again. This was an even worse time to laugh, but it just bubbled up. And I guess it was a matter of respect versus effect. Perhaps laughter was what he needed to hear. But I stopped after a few seconds, clearing my throat.

"I'm sorry. It was just... 'Everything is shit' – quoth the holistic plumber."

But Cláudio did not laugh.

Jennifer said I had some kind of rash on my back. But I just put my shirt back on. I didn't see any rash and I didn't have time to go look at my back in the mirror. It wasn't important anyway and I didn't feel a thing. I had to much to do at the computer, Tremp things. Tremp was priority one right now.

Jennifer was so upset and worried about my Trempp that it pained me to see it. But she had Trempp too. Everybody had Trempp. There was nothing dangerous about Trempp. But she didn't know, of course she was concerned. I had to tell her everything, even though I knew I shouldn't. But I couldn't stand to watch my beloved suffer for nothing. I decided to tell her the truth, so she could calm down.

"Honey, I found mom. She contacted me."

She was floored. After some time she simply said: "What?"

"My mom. It was all true, who she was, everything she said. And they've accepted me into the circle! Do you see? We don't have to worry about Trempp. Trempp is an angel of the Circle."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You don't have to worry about Trempp. I will protect you from Trempp. Everything the papers are saying about Trempp, it's a lie. I've seen through it all now. It's Trempp! Get it? Trempp! It's all true, the puppet people and the brain signals in the unfree media, I've been right all along. About Trempp, too. But it's okay. I'm not alone, there's a resistance. The Circle is full of Trempp. We belong to the other side and we're the ones who will win! We're going to win with Trempp on our side."

She stood behind me, stroking my shoulder. I couldn't take my eyes off of Trempp.

"Finn, can't you see what's happening? Take a step back and think about this. Please, try to stay here with me, please – baby, you can't leave me. Not again, not now..."

Her hoarse voice was sad and tired. She sighed those wearied words as though she had walked all day and I just refused her to rest on the only chair. And I'm ashamed to admit it, but I didn't even notice. She was on the verge of tears behind me, and I barely heard what she said, let alone how she said it. I was so excited to finally tell someone. I saw now what it must have been like for mom, and why she couldn't keep it from dad. You have to tell your loved ones. It's just cruel to let them live in ignorance of something so huge. That in itself was the explanation for everything. It's the exact same thing with Trempp.

"It's not all in my head! It's the other way around – I feel like all my life I've been groping in the darkness, and now somebody finally brought a light! I'm *home*."

She sighed, and I felt her hand vanish from my shoulder. I was still staring into the computer screen, into Tremp.

"Are you completely certain of this? There's not the shadow of a doubt that it's not just your imagination?"

"There are no shadows of anything. Everything is just light now, everywhere. Tremp is the light. All is Tremp. You have no idea what I've seen. You have no idea what I've been shown. And they've only just begun. Tremp will change everything. I'll tell you later, but it's so much to process right now. I'll tell you all about Tremp." Then I remembered the most important thing. "I'll see if I can talk to them and get you initiated too!"

She put her arms around me.

"You don't know what you're talking about." There was something in her voice. "You shouldn't have said anything."

Suddenly she was gone again. I felt a warm, prickling pain and looked down. Half the keyboard was suddenly glistening red. A growing puddle of blood-red fluid spread across the desk. It took longer than it ought to before it dawned on me that it *was* blood. I was looking at my own blood. It dripped onto my legs and the floor. Deep red stains soaked into my white shirt. Out of my left wrist, my life was silently being drained into the wild. Astounded, I stared at all the blood, mouth half open in quiet surprise.

The wound didn't look anything like I expected from a deep cut. The tight skin had parted significantly around the wound, making the cut over a centimeter wide, and instead of being entirely red with blood, I could see some kind of blue-white tissue along the edges. It's a special kind of nausea that hits you when you see something like that. The inside of your own body. I knew I was dying. The blood didn't spray out like in a movie, it sort of gushed, like a tiny babbling blood-brook.

At last I turned around and saw Jennifer standing there, a razor blade in her hand and tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"I – I don't understand," I sobbed, large tears of disappointment trailing down my cheeks. I wasn't crying over her betrayal. Not over my death. I was simply crying because I wouldn't get to know more about Tremp. Or about mom and her secret society. I cried over my shattered dreams. Just as I had finally been vindicated, just as my mom had been

vindicated, now that the secrets were being revealed and the pieces falling into place...

But then how did she make it? Why did they let my mom live after she told us? But that had been part of the plan. The Circle had given her orders to tell us and then disappear. It was all part of my training. My whole life, and then I fucked up right away. I violated their trust. My tears turned to tears of shame. Mom practically gave up her life for the society by abandoning me and dad. She gave up more than her life. And she'd trusted me and I'd let her down. It all felt like one big mistake now. Jennifer cried next to me.

"Sweetie," she sobbed, "sweetie."

She'd thrown the razor to the floor and put her arms around me, her clothes were full of blood.

"I never wanted this to happen. Why couldn't you just hang in there a little longer?"

I wanted to respond, but I was dizzy and so very nauseous. Why? *Why?* Tremp was already here. If everybody had Tremp anyway, what did it matter if I told a little bit to the one person closest to me, my beloved Jennifer? Especially since she apparently knew anyway? For how long had *she* been an initiate? When was I supposed to find out that we were both chosen? Oh, if only I could have waited! I'd been so close to know it *all*. And now I was dead and it was all completely my own fault. Why!? I collapsed from the chair and we both fell to the floor. She kissed me, but I was too weak to kiss her back. By now my shirt and her top were both more red than white. I'm sorry, I thought but couldn't speak anymore. I didn't mean to get blood on you. For a moment I thought I would throw up, but I was too weak for that too. There was no time left at all.

"I'm here, honey. It's going to be okay."

I heard her voice coming from far away as my field of vision warped and shrunk. Tremp crept along the edges.

At least they've stopped making martyrs.

Who had said that? The voice was gone. More words echoed in my consciousness, but I could not comprehend the sounds anymore. Tremp. Martyrs. Suicide. Tremp. I wondered how many had been quietly executed and nobody ever knew. How many "suicides" were actually initiates of the Circle that came too close to telling too much? In that instant, I knew why I had

to die. It wasn't Jennifer after all. It's just like I thought before. Now I knew how important the secret was. How inconceivably huge all of this was. And I was just one small part of the whole. This was all so much bigger than me, and I still got to be part of it – no matter what. My death was a part of the Circle, and the Circle was a part of Tresp, and Tresp was all. Now that the dawn of Tresp had come, nothing could be more important than keeping the order hidden. Not even me. I understood and accepted that it had to be this way. I did not cry anymore. I did not hesitate to sacrifice myself. I gave my life for the secret. I was no longer Finn. *I was the Circle*, and through Finn's death, I would live on. It was always me.

Then, in the eternal moment between the death of the body and the soul's awareness of that, I saw, for some reason, that strange woman's face. That Tresped-out girl Jennifer brought in from the street. I'd almost forgotten she was in the apartment. I seemed to be encompassed by unimaginable darkness, but this woman was contained within a light that seemed to consist of all the colors in creation and more beyond that. Suddenly I recognized her. It's that hippie chick who was loitering outside my window before! No way that was a coincidence. Was she of the Order? And she spoke one single sentence, echoing through the cosmos inside my deceased skull:

"How would you die, if you could choose?"

Realization blossomed like a flower in my mind, like Tresp in my body, and instantly I saw just how much bliss and how much Tresp already filled me. I burst open. Like this – oh God, *like this!*

And the bliss and the Tresp became a warm embrace around the darkness that surrounded me. Light came seeping in. I allowed myself to fall in all directions and be received by Tresp. And I united with the light, and I united with Tresp.

It's Tresp that got to her brain, of course. Within a day more now her head was gonna crack and that first nasty troma come pokin out like an antenna. Purple stalks would bore through the skull and sprout from the head, kinda like horns or tentacles like. Oh yeah like them trees in ma nightmare visions of the forest. I didn't know what to do. She ain't even

remember what I'd done. But I remembered. How could she forgive me if she ain't remember? Not like I could tell her neither. That'd just be cruel. When she had so little time to live. Despite ma lapse of judgment I still was an honorable guy. I couldn't take this away from her now that she been blessed with amnesia. I envied her for not havin to remember. Me, I was doomed to die in this shame. Or worse.

Yeah. What if I *survived* all this. How could she be lyin there with her paralysis and brain damage, and I be sittin right next to her as healthy as an ox? What if there's some immunity to Tresp? I did live in the forest. Mushrooms were ma friends and neighbors. But it don't add up. We knew everybody was done for, there ain't no "immunity" for this. Tresp was all inside me. Ma whole body was infested with spores. Probably already a couple of mycelium threads sliced through ma flesh, like a real thin purple network of deviant spiderwebs. Weavin itself together inside me right now, slowly but surely. It just hadn't started peakin *yet*.

But *why*? It bothered me not knowin. Why was it some people went so long before gettin the Tresp? Now somethin was movin underneath her clothes, that must be them startin to come out now. She was still breathin though. I didn't know if that's good or bad. But it's a good thing I guess that she couldn't feel nothin.

Suddenly I got a hunch maybe I accelerated the disease in her somehow. Could I have? Was this all ma fault? Oh god what have I done, what's happenin with everythin? What is goin on?

"No one has to die with a guilty conscience," Liv suddenly said.

I didn't say nothin back.

"I have this priest friend, do you know what he would have said? He would have said: 'do *you* think she would forgive you, *if* she knew what you had done?'" She was inside ma head.

"Well what if I don't think she would?"

"Then you've made up your mind, and it wouldn't make a difference what she said. Would it?"

"Maybe not now, no. But later on. Sooner or later."

“So do I have it right, that you’ve found yourself guilty and started punishing yourself. And what she can do is take some time off your sentence?”

I tried to come up with a clever reply, but I couldn’t think. I ended up snappin: “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Who decides how much shorter your punishment will be? Is it her?”

“Nah.” I sighed. “It’s me. I know.”

“So this is really all about you, not about the ‘crime’ or the ‘victim’? Is it really more important to you that you feel worse, than that she feels better?”

Why did it seem so natural we were both talkin about her as though she ain’t here? But it was, though. Super natural. I replied like somebody else asked the question.

“Of course the most important thing is she feels better. But – but – that ain’t possible.”

“What do you actually know about what happened?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“You don’t have to talk about it. Think about it, and feel. What do you know for a fact?”

Now that she mentioned it, I got unsure of everythin. I knew what I done, but I... did I? Somethin struck me now, a terrible feelin: what if it was *me* that got Tremp in the brain? All I really knew is we had totally different ideas what was happenin ever since – heck, all the way back to the shelter apparently. And until this moment. Several weeks were uncertain. Unreliable memories. How could I be sure whose version was the truth? It’s impossible now. When everybody got the Tremp.

“What is it that makes that feeling so terrible?” she asked. She was deep inside me and everywhere in me, like salt is in the ocean.

It all started comin unlocked for me right there. I felt like ma brain had been full of dirty water and now I could finally flush it again. Ma body emptied and everythin poured out and flowed away. It was such a relief, I was so free. I mean I still had no idea which one of us got the Tremp – both, I’ll bet – but it didn’t matter no more. I understood somethin way more important. And Liv kept talkin.

I was dancin round the room, that’s the only word I can think up to describe it. It wasn’t really no dance, but it wasn’t

nothin else neither. I just felt maself floatin along, flowing with the most natural movements I had ever performed. As though I was the needle on a record player, gliding effortlessly along its predestined track in the vinyl. A perfect spiraling, forwards, forwards, and inwards, inwards, and music flowed out of the world and myself. Consciousness chafes against the sleeping matter of the physical world, and thus the symphony of the cosmos is composed. I was passive, it is true. But not like a docile ragdoll, but a part of the cosmic orchestra. You see, everything else was passive too. I was a twig borne on a burbling creek. And I was so happy.

Part of it was personal. I was happy because I was in a perfect place, and I knew now that Anita and the twins and the little one were safe. Despite everything they had been through, and were still going through, they too would get a happy ending. I shouldn't have left them, but it didn't matter anymore. I could almost feel them now. I knew they had lost Jacob, but I also knew he was happy. And they knew he was happy, they knew I was happy. Like we were all telepathically connected, except sharing emotions instead of thoughts. Or maybe we were just in such perfect harmony with one another that we were close despite being scattered across the Earth. I never knew I loved them, even when I thought I loved them. But everything was okay again.

In addition to that individual happiness, I was happy for all of mankind. Happy for the entire planet, really. Or maybe I was just happy, period. I was quite certain that I was dead, but I still felt full of life. My body danced through the room. The Universe was glorious.

I didn't have Tremp. *I was Tremp.* I had always been Tremp. And all was one in Tremp. It was so clear and obvious to me now, all I could do was laugh at my past self. How I worried, how I panicked. I was in Heaven. Or possibly my brain had finally begun to rot, like I always knew it would. But what did I care? Tremp, dementia, Alzheimer's, Tremp, cerebral hemorrhage, what did it really matter if the cause was the one or the other, if this was the result?

I recalled something that somebody once read in a story. To live is to dream. All that had changed was the contents of my dream. Perhaps others dreamed that I was strapped down and

raving in a hospital bed, but I dreamed of Trepmp. The closer I got to being fully absorbed into Trepmp, the more I understood what was truly happening. Trepmp was not the end, Trepmp was the beginning. Trepmp was not the means of our extinction, rather, Trepmp was here to *deliver us*. I only wish I could transmit the contents of my being to those around me. I have to call it “contents”, because it is not of the realm of thought, nor emotion either, it is something – else. It is Trepmp. Something new, yet so intimately familiar. As if Trepmp had been there always, but we were never aware of it before. But I had a very hard time communicating. Higher Truths were flourishing inside me, but so was the mycelium. My brain was spongy and the words came out wrong. Like the nerve threads of my brain had short-circuited and were crisscrossing in all kinds of wrong directions in there. Maybe the hyphae fused new, strange connections between nerves? Maybe Trepmp was building its own, new brain. That might explain a lot. But I’m no neurologist.

I observed with some interest that forming coherent sentences seemed to get harder as I approached the most profound truths. Most of the time I ended up just staying silent and happy, or else portentously blurting out perfectly shallow banalities.

When I came dancing into the room, I could just as well have been levitating if I’d only decided that I wanted to. Jennifer was crying on the floor. She held Finn’s head in her arms. He lay on the floor with a beatific smile on his stiffened face. Everybody ended up with that sardonic smile in the end. I know that smile got its fair share of nicknames before there was no longer anybody left to speak of it in words. The “purple joy”, the “Trepmp grin”, or why not my personal favorite, the “lavender smile”. Finn smiled that lavender smile, and I knew his dream was complete now. He was fully colonized by Trepmp.

The body was covered in violet spots, and I saw his white shirt tightening across what was beneath it. Soon the little ones would come peeking out. The tears of the woman in mourning had a shimmer to them, as though made of light. Even the air around them shimmered. Reminding me of something. But it didn’t matter. It’s just Trepmp. I put my hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. Trepmp had taken her beloved. But

Trempp had also laid its hand on her, and Trempp had laid its hand on me. She needn't mourn. Soon she would join him in Trempp.

"Dead, good," I said.

She sobbed. "What are you saying? Why is that good?"

No no, I signalled with my entire body. Shook my head and held both arms up in front of me. At this point I lifted from the floor a little.

"Not."

Why do we place more emphasis on words than on body language when we talk? Now that Trempp had taken my words, like a parent takes the training wheels off the bike, I discovered how wonderful it is to speak without them. I groped the air. To find the words that were actually necessary, and to let her know I had something to say. So she would wait while I prepared. The words came drifting through the air and allowed me to grab them in my floating hands.

"Finn. Died. Happy."

Very well done! I think we used to communicate better when we were cave people. When we had a limited vocabulary and the better part of all communication was wordless. Kind of like telepathy. Perhaps it was time to return to the old methods that served us better. A sort of... renaissance of the primitive, or something along those lines.

Jennifer wiped her tears and looked at me, puzzled.

"You knew him?"

But even I didn't understand how I knew their names. Trempp knew them. Trempp had all the answers. Trempp was all the answers. Trempp was the Answer. The answer was Trempp.

A few days had gone by that I couldn't remember, but I bet they must have been great. It was nice and warm now and I was sitting somewhere reading Kitten Lickle. Every time I started getting to the end of a really good book, I used to get a little sad. I didn't want to say goodbye to my friends. But this time was different. Didn't I tell you before there were new things in the book every time I read it over again? This time I thought of something I never thought about before at all.

There's a lot of stuff I can't tell you because there's no time, you'll have to read the book yourself. But this is when Kitten comes back from the Underworld. One of the first things she

says is she knows where they're going. She doesn't know where it is exactly. But she knows how to get there. Then it still takes them half the book before they arrive, but to Kitten that's the best half. Because I mean now she knows what she's doing. And she uses her new powers to help all these different animals along the way. But anyway, in the end they really do get to the forest where the Twee Wisperer lives. And the day before they enter into the woods, Kitten and Hermes are going to sleep. They've entered an area of ruins from the hairless ones outside the forest. They're exhausted after a long night of wandering, and they're lying down in an old underground shelter among all the skeletons, talking as the sun comes up outside.

"What if," Hermes says, "we come back and – yu kno..."

"I do kno," Kitten says. "Solomon is dead already."

Hermes jumps up on his hind legs in shock. "What!? How do you know!?"

"He was in the realm of the dead. I saw him."

"You *talked*!?"

"Well..."

"You've known ever since we were at the crazy fuckin psycho wolverine's place & yu didn't telling!?"

"Kitten did a lot of thinkenin'."

After she got back from the realm of the dead she started saying "Kitten" sometimes instead of "me". The third time I read the book, I figured out a secret. The book never really says it directly, but I'm pretty sure it's true. It's one of the things I wanted to ask Helge about. I'm sure he would have known. But anyway. See, I think that Kitten brought *Sophia's soul* back from the Underworld. And now they're two souls in one cat, since Sophia's otter body turned to dirt long ago. So there was nowhere else for her soul to go in the land of the living. So sometimes it's Kitten talking, but sometimes it's Sophia.

"You're telling me half of this ordeal was for nothing?"

"It's not about that no moar. & he *want* us to continue."

They're silent for a while. All you can hear is the sound of hoofs from somewhere outside. A family of deer walks across one of the overgrown streets above. They feast on the crocuses that grow in the crevices of the shattered asphalt. The colorful new life in the cracks.

“How yu kno?”

“He is with me. I has tinked a ting.”

Hermes eyes her expectantly. Talk to me.

“When Solomon speaks – befoar alla dis – den I hear moar than just maw noises & their meaning. Same ting wit all loved oens. De oens yu truly kno. Yur nearest. Dat wot he say... truly say, is not in de words. Is in our relationship, en de past, en de thoughts en emozhens... All dat’s not in de noise, but still in de talkin. & dem tings are more important than the talk. & alla dem tings still dere. De only ting I needs is to kno dat... Dat he is & dat I is.”

“But he is no moar.”

“What yu mean ‘no moar’?” Kitten shakes her head. “It be or it bon’t. Wat is not, is never. If he was not, we could no talk *about* him. En we do, so he do. & if he is, den I can talk *with* him.”

“Wat he say?”

“Yu no understand. & he say I am right. Dou he say also dat I also is not as clever as I tink.” She suspiciously folds her ears, furrowing her furry brow. “Wat de fuck? Wat I am missening?”

None of them say anything for a long while. They are both thinking, but very different things. But at last:

“If we no find de Twee Wisperer...” Hermes rolls up into a ball to go to sleep. “Please, let’s to be going back home.”

“I parmise. Yu can’t not get home.”

At first I thought all that stuff was just a nice way of saying that Solomon lives on in her memories and stuff. But that thing about, “what is not, is never” – in that case... *Is Kitten Lickle real?* You can’t say she doesn’t *exist*. I think about her all the time and how could you think about something that doesn’t exist? That’s impossible. And she feels like one of my best friends. As many times as I’ve read the book, I know her better than I know most humans. I know exactly what she’d reply to most questions. I know what she would do, even in situations that aren’t in the book. It’s actually just as if she’s with me. Like I have an invisible cat companion who follows me everywhere. Like I brought her soul out of the book the same way she brought Sophia’s soul out of the realm of the dead. Her magic would always protect me. Was that true? How true did it have to be, in order to be real?

I looked around on the ground, trying to see her in my imagination. If she was here, where would she go? I followed in Kitten Lickle's tracks through the woods, zigzagging the big mushroom clusters that grew everywhere. What would have happened if we ran into each other right now? She'd see me first, obviously. Because she's smaller, and also she is a cat. We all know what they're like. She'd hide, like in her prayer of fear, and let me pass her by, then sneak up behind me. Quiet and hidden until she was right next to me. Would she eat me too, like she ate the fear? No, of course she wouldn't eat me, she's not some wolverine or something. She'd say:

"Hairless one!"

I froze in my tracks, then turned around to face her.

"No steppenin' on dem."

I looked at the forest behind us, and saw I had broken twigs and kicked mushrooms to pieces in my clumsy way through the wilderness. I forgot that I wasn't small and sneaky like a cat.

"Dey older than us in dis place," Kitten continued. "Billion of years ago. Long befoar de plants & evenzhually de animals crawled out de wet depths of the sea & up on de land – dey already dere."

The ground was covered with them. I didn't know how to get anywhere from here without stepping on them. How did I get here in de first place, anyway? Where *am* I, aczhually?

"Help me," I said to Kitten Lickle. "What do I do?"

"Yu *knows*," the white cat replied, touching her own nose with her right paw. Yes, that's exactly what she'd reply. But I didn't know at all! Why do you say that when it's not true? She sat in the same, rather unnatural position she had ended up in when I first placed her on the couch. Like a mannequin from some sort of horror movie. One where the Blue Fairy made a terrible mistake bringing the dead plastic body to life as a real human. *Golem*. Her eyes were turned up and off into the distance. On her face, the enigmatic lavender smile bloomed, and her chest was completely still. She had given her last breath. Tremp breathed for her body now. And yet, sporadically she ejected a sound not unlike a little laugh, as though emphasizing that her spirit was, in some sense, not departed. She was dead, yet living. Mushrooms rose up

through the neck of her green sweater. I saw purple blotches crawling their way through the skin of her underarms, like spilt ink seeping through the fibers of a sheet of paper. She was a long way gone into Trempe now. Far away and so close. She was everywhere. And I was with her. I could, in a quite concrete sense, feel her presence inside of me, or if it was the other way around.

And what more had I to do in this form? Nothing, ergo, anything. I went into Russel's kitchen to find a box of ice cream in his fridge, then served it in his finest bowls. One for me, and an ample serving for Liv as well, why not. Then we sat together on the couch with our ice cream. I ate in silence. She did not eat, just sat there. Still laughing intermittently. I saw now that some sort of liquid had begun to leak from her ear. I wasn't sure if I ought to wipe it off or not. In the end, I decided to leave it. I had begun to understand her motto of allowing the universe to unfold as it should. These last few hours, I had learned more about God than in my 23 years of studying theology.

All around me, the world was coming down. Immediately beside me, a most unfamiliar life form was struggling to break the confines of my friend's skull, the timeless fungus forcing its way out like a strange creature born from an egg of flesh and blood. *Qodesh l'Adonai*. Any moment now the first stalk would burst out of the ear canal of the most amazing person I had ever met. And all I could think was how exquisite the ice cream was.

It was bilberry. Not the kind that looks like a homogenous lilac goo, but a real, family-recipe type ice cream with dark purple veins of bilberry running through it. It was amazing. A memory from childhood of picking bilberries in the forest behind our house sent pleasant shivers through my body. The texture was perfect, and my eyes turned in blissful rapture when the cold, soft substance melted and rolled over my tastebuds. The bilberry flavor played across my tongue like the wind across the grass of an open field in summer. I had never before made a point of truly enjoying the experience of tasting food – I can't recommend it enough.

Liv had saved me. What would I have done if she hadn't appeared? How terrible would the end have been then? As if.

She *did* appear. There were vortices in the ice cream, like galaxies and nebulae in outer space. The bilberries were like black holes, and somewhere in that box there's suns and planets orbiting each other, though they are too small for me to see.

A world could not be imagined in which I had not woken up next to Liv and walked with her, carried her, died with her. Our lives were intertwined across all worlds and nothing else was possible. She was a part of Trepmp like the ice cream was a part of Trepmp. The taste seemed to expand in my mouth and spread into the rest of my entire body. It could never have been any other way. Never ever. Everything was exactly how it was, everything was perfect. I was so grateful.

"Everything is perfect," I exclaimed with a smile and ate the last spoonful.

"It's so amazing," I mumbled with my mouth full, molten bilberry ice cream dripping from my lavender lips. "So amazing." I swallowed the ice cream and cried with joy.

"Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*"

I looked at his dead body, so full of new, strange life, and I thought: *is that what will happen to me?* When will I be the one lying around with a stupid smile while my body is... entrepmped? I wonder if anybody else has used that word before. How many people are there left alive right now? As if it mattered. I wondered what Finn's last thoughts had been. Right at the end, when he couldn't speak anymore. Did he think of me? I felt so terribly alone. Just wanted to be with him again. But I suppose I would, once Trepmp came for me. Just let it come soon, please let it happen, let it be soon. Don't let me be the last. The one who has to walk the Earth alone among all of this. What do you mean alone?

Flinched as the stereo came on in the living room. Mom and dad's song agin. "Just take my hand and I'll lead ya." Yes please. if only someone could take my hand and lead me – far, far away. I wonder where my mom is right now? That girl came into the room again, still whirling around with those weird movements. But sure, it was very graceful.

"What. Would you like?"

"I don't get it."

“Wish!” And she lit up the whole room with her smile. She had something about her, everything always seemed to shift to reflect her maniacal happiness.

“Most of all?” I thought about it. “Nothing. What’s the point?”

But then I changed my mind. “I’d just like to know.”

I had become infected with the same curiosity as my man. Did he ever find his answer? What exactly happened to us? And to the Earth? Tremp just showed up like the wind, we knew not whence nor why.

“What is Tremp?”

She butterflied out of the room, like a tiny fragment of an ember that comes loose from a log in a bonfire and sets off on an adventure in the night. Beautiful for a brief second, but always doomed to be extinguished very soon. Everything is fire. I didn’t know if she heard me. That girl didn’t have much longer. But who did? Everything is ash. I would go the same way at any time.

I started to consider if maybe I’d be better off finishing it by myself, before the disease got its sick, crooked fingers around me. If I did make that decision, then I would drown myself. I knew that beforehand. Thought about it before, several times. Many times. How ironic that I always kept choosing life when my life used to suck, and now that the fear was gone I just wanted to die as soon as possible. What was life worth if I couldn’t share it with Finn? But it felt a bit silly to be contemplating suicide with this little time left. Whatever had kept me going those other times, there was no point in giving up now. Besides, they all seemed to die happy. Just look at the dancing girl. Look at Finn, look at Elias. And I remembered that priest with the beard, how he looked so content and lifeless in the doorway.

Even so, I decided to go down to the sea. Just so I’d *be* there, just in case. Wouldn’t do anything rash, necessarily. Just sit on the pier and enjoy the scents and sounds of the ocean, and the knowing. Then I thought about Finn and cried again. Tears came streaming and a croaky, drawn-out wail came out of me. Erase me. I don’t want to be anymore, not without Finn. I loved him so terribly and I missed him so hard that I might

melt, I missed him so that my chest might implode with sorrow. But he was gone, and I would go down to the sea alone.

Finn and I never shared a romantic moment on a beach or a pier. He hated the ocean, and I hated lakes. Probably how it goes when you grow up with one, you get suspicious of the other. He found the ocean too big and somehow dangerous. Wild and untameable as it was. He grew up inland, only swimming in lakes. Once he told me, with horror, how he couldn't look at the sea without imagining everything that lived beneath the surface somewhere. Even if it was hundreds or thousands of miles away. "This body of water," he proclaimed with outrage, "is the *exact same* water as the entire Pacific Ocean. All the oceans are connected! Do you realize what that means? It means that I might be setting my foot in the *exact same water* where *right now*, there's some fucking killer whale" – I believe to this day that he literally pictured this killer whale as holding a knife or something – "and fuck knows what kind of monsters, rotting old corpses and all manner of shit floating around!" So that took the romance out of the ocean for both of us, and for that reason we never visited the beaches or the coast. And as for me, it was the other way around. I grew up by the sea, and I always found lakes to be too small, in an uncanny way. Sort of – like, closed in somehow. I guess Finn was probably correct that the ocean was full of dead bodies, but if so then they were at least scattered over such vast distances and far enough away that I didn't give a shit. In a lake there might be a smaller risk of it, but *if* there really was a dead body down there, then that means it's *right beneath my fucking feet!* And as my phobia grew beyond all proportion, I also began connecting lakes to that, and obviously it got even worse. Lakes are found in forests and forests are filled with rot and fungus and dead, hollow tree trunks covered in pale grey mold. So I hated lakes and had to struggle not to vomit or pass out if I so much as looked at a lake. And thus, we avoided lakes as well. Curse that phobia, oh, how I hated it now. My life had been so fucking limited by that shit that it was just sad. Because now that the phobia was gone and everything ought to be normal, Finn was dead and I was alone. And I missed him and I was dying and we were all dying and I wanted to look at the sea one last time,

I wanted the last thing i saw to be infinite waters meeting the horizon. Who knows how much or how little time there might be left? I ran out of the apartment.

At the same time, I ran through the forest. Trees rushed by me on either side, and the wind on my face was delightful. I was somewhere I'd never been before, or at least not in a long time. And I was so fucking *free*! I wanted to explode, I wanted to use every muscle all at once if I only could – I flew through the woods like I had wings, chased my shadow on the ground and wallowed in the green moss.

I got wet down there from the wallowing, and when I looked down again I saw there was water everywhere. It seemed to come out of the earth itself, like a hidden and powerful hand squeezed the ground of the forest. When I lowered ma head and lapped the water, it tasted salty so it gotta be seawater. The ocean is risin. What does this mean?

I ran out of the woods and along a gravel road with little stones flying about my legs, until I got to the sea and out on a pier. The gulls screamed and the ocean crashed this way and that, throwing itself against the pier and foaming with wrath. I sensed a vast dead eye staring down at me from the heavens. It had followed us all for a long time with this unmoving gaze, and there was not much time left now. It would happen at any moment. The seagulls circled wildly above me and the water now reached above the pier, the sea snarled and wanted to swallow it. I stood perplexed and stared out across the thrashing waters, heard the deranged screaming of the gulls as it drowned in the noise of the sea and the waves roaring. But then I tore out of my trance, I turned around again and returned whence I came.

I hopped from the pier to dry land, up on the gravel path, toward the woods, all the while bein observed by the hidden watcher. The time had come. There was nothin left for anyone to do. Still, you gotta do somethin. Cause what else are you gonna do? So I just kept runnin and runnin.

Back in the forest I made my way to higher ground. I climbed taller and taller mountains and held on to dangling roots to pull myself up onto higher and higher hills and cliffs. In one crevice, shaped like a triangle and large enough to hold vegetation, I found a conglomeration of those fat mushrooms.

There were some items sticking out of the bottom of the bloated mass of fungus, and on the cliff wall next to it, a fresh painting glittered in the light, of a shadow in loose clothes. The shadow held a spray can and was just signing the wall with his alias: Home. I finally felt like I could sit down and rest for a while, as wonderful as it had been to really work my legs a little. I breathed, rested, and relished the moment, & I finally *home*.

"No, no," came a voice from the labyrinths of mine that were all converging, and the shadow on the cliff shook its head at me. Her long hair draped over her shoulders.

"You're pronouncing it totally wrong."

"Home?"

"It's not about what happened by the lake. The true cause of your guilt you will never find in the material world."

"So – you *do* remember?"

"Not at first. But it came back. And not just that. I remember everything – I remember – well, that doesn't matter. It'll be over soon. Describe your feeling."

"I've never felt anything worse like this. It's like somethin is eatin me alive from within."

"And so you desire forgiveness?"

"Yes! I wouldn't wish this on ma worst enemy."

"Very well said. Follow it through. Do you understand where it's coming from?"

I didn't understand shit and I shook ma head in resignation.

"No, I don't understand at all."

"I know what happened. I forgive you. Do you feel better?"

"No." I sobbed. "Not at all. I feel exactly the same."

"What is forgiveness, to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who do you give it to? And how do you receive it?"

I tried to think, but it was so hard. Ma heart was poundin, I breathed like a madman. I couldn't focus, and I didn't understand what she was gettin at. Ma arms felt stiff and weird, and when I pulled up ma sleeves I saw ma skin was turnin bluish. I was gonna die unforgiven.

"You are not going to die unforgiven. Who do you give your forgiveness to?"

“Whoever deserves it.” No, that’s not all. “Whoever wants it.” And now that I think about it – “I think maybe whoever wants it is the one who deserves it.”

“So nobody deserves to feel guilty, and everyone deserves to be forgiven?”

I hesitated. “Okay – maybe some people deserve the guilt...”

“You just said you wouldn’t wish this on your worst enemy.”

“Sure, but – dude, I’m a plumber. I mean this is ma life, look at it.” I swept ma arm across the room to remind her I lived in a trailer in the woods, but I dunno if she could see so much from where she was lyin. “My ‘worst enemy’ ain’t exactly a major source of evil.”

“But you didn’t mean it literally. Then answer this: is there anyone who does deserve to feel like this? Is there any person anywhere who gives this feeling a reason to exist in your world?”

I ain’t got time for this.

I left Liv in the trailer and stumbled out. The wind blew like crazy up in the treetops. I could barely stand on ma legs, I felt so weak. I couldn’t move ma hands proper, ma underarms were completely purple and ma skin felt stretched and sorta tight. Why was it comin so fast when it took months for her? Was this the price I paid for stayin healthy for so long? Or maybe it was a good thing that the end came as quick as possible? I could still hear her voice, as if she’d followed me outside. But she was still in ma trailer. How’s that possible? I thought maybe she already died in there and now her ghost was hauntin me. I never shoulda brought her here in the first place. I didn’t understand nothin of what’s goin on.

Suddenly it’s like I had thousands of panickin people sorta in ma chest. I felt like I carried all their screams for help that couldn’t come out. But then there were calm voices too, sayin there’s only one. *One single* panickin screamin person. A thousand times over? Stay calm. What is goin on?

“Let me carry it for you,” she said and I knew what she was on about. Like she wanted to carry ma sufferin, absorb ma guilt and everythin. Somehow it seemed natural, like those feelins were somethin I could just pass on like that if I wanted to. But I ain’t wantin to. It’s mine.

"That'd be the ultimate injustice," I said. "It's cause of what I did to you that I feel this way."

"But I love carrying other people's burdens," she said. "Someone else's burden is very light to carry, and the joy of carrying it gives me strength to carry more."

I lay down on the ground now in the brown, wet autumn leaves and I didn't get up again. The air so thick you could drink it. I groaned, and I felt the skin on my left arm burstin. It didn't hurt at all, it felt like a dried-up rubber shell tearin. Then this sensation of swellin underneath the skin, but I was too tired to look at it. I had a good idea what was happenin anyway. They were reachin out for freedom. I was so tired. The leaves were rottin all around me, the forest dissolvin into a nutritious fluid. Tremp was digestin its meal. Everythin's gettin entremped.

"I don't want you to help me. It ain't right."

"So in addition to what you've already done, you would deny me my last wish when we are both about to die? Is that right?"

Suddenly I was so exhausted I could barely bother breathin. It felt less and less important to win this argument. Now I just wanted it to be quiet, wanted us both to shut up. And also she was right again, of course. Oh, how I loved her. You just gotta love her.

"You cornered me." I thought for a bit. "I give up. Help."

"You just have to stop taking the world at face value. I thought you knew, the way you talked about your work. But you shouldn't have stopped at plumbing. All you see around you, everything that happens, all that you touch..."

And even though I really didn't ought to be in the mood for – whatever religious conversation speech this was, it was a relief not to have to say anythin maself for a while. Liv prattled on and I just lay there quiet, takin small, short breaths. It was a bit like bein a kid and fallin asleep to a good night story. The last story. The final sleep.

"...so instead of feeling that *I've* been wronged, that *you're* guilty, that *some* people deserve forgiveness and some don't..."

It actually dawned on me now what she was tryin to say. I took a deep breath so I could speak again.

"There is wrongdoin. There is guilt. There is – *limited* forgiveness."

“Limited how? How much wrongdoin is there?”

Trem closed in on us. I was totally numb, with a colony of Trem mushrooms all over me and inside of me. They were towerin like miniature skyscrapers reachin for the heavens. A whole fungal city was growin outta me. A natural city. The mushrooms and the rottin leaves made the air smell of earth and moisture and fall. I thought maybe this was all just an autumn in a broader perspective. If Trem was a recurrin season in time like any other, but on a cosmic timescale. I wondered if it would be followed by a cosmic winter and then a new cosmic spring.

“There was wrongdoin.” It sinks into the past... Like a pebble into the sea...

“And there is guilt... wherever forgiveness can’t reach...”

Very soon after that, the heavens opened and everythin became light. I breathed out one last time, and I was weightless. Suddenly she bolted out the door, and I flew after her down the stairs. I danced along next to her as she ran down the street, through the new bizarre avenue of those things comin out of the manholes and sewers. Shapes and strange new colors. She was pantin and cryin with tears runnin down her cheeks, but I just danced. I remember that feelin, what it’s like to be so abandoned by the universe that all you can do is cry and wish for it all to just end already. But I found a way out of that, I could show her the way. Jennifer wheezed and sobbed with each step against the pavement. I floated next to her like a cheerful cloud of glorious butterflies. The road bent down and turned into a downhill. At the end of the hill there was suddenly water everywhere, but she kept going and barely slowed down.

Her feet splashed against the flooded streets. She ran toward the sea. But after a few blocks she collapsed and lay face down in the water. The muscles in her legs were going. She would get no further than this. I turned her on her back and she coughed up salty seawater.

“What is happening?” she cried.

“Panic: no. It’s happening to everyone. It’s okay. Listen to my voice. Pray with me.” And I started reciting the prayer of fear to her. “I am not a fool. I am wise...”

She tore off her white tank top – spotless, as though there had never been blood on it – and exposed lumpy, deep blue breasts. I came to think of Anita, who used to complain about the visible veins she had on her breasts – Anita, I love you, I'm sorry, I'm coming soon! then back on the street. Jennifer's left nipple was in the process of developing into a troma. It had gone swollen and shiny, and protruded from her breast a centimeter or so, like a thing halfway between human flesh and fungal fruiting body. Any second now the edges would come off the blotchy skin entirely, and soon nobody would ever believe it used to be anything but the cap of a healthy, staunch mushroom, growing with all the others on some sort of formless lump in the water. Jennifer stared down at herself, at her alien, tremp-gorged body, and quaked with tears. I kissed her forehead again and we let each other enter our thoughts.

What if I had never gotten out of that tree? I could have died in there. Died and started to rot and go moldy myself, until there was just a big lump of mold left of me in that trunk. A huge fungus with a skeleton hidden inside... Then at last I would have become one with the mold. And now, that's happening anyway. That's exactly what's happening anyway. I'm still trapped down there, at the bottom of a tight, furry trunk. I'm moldy, I never got saved, I never got out. I've finally gone insane from the fear and that's why everything is Tremp – I'm stuck in there, I'm dying I'm dying god help me I'm dying, I'm dying and I don't know if death or madness is worse...

You don't have to be afraid. Look around you. Reality is never any more or less than what you are experiencing at this moment.

She opened her reddened eyes. Her head turned around as she looked at the water, the houses, the mushrooms, the strange skies with their objects and colors. The water ran past her on all sides, the water was the calm, protecting hand of the Earth Mother. The water was Tremp.

Madness or not. Dead or not. I'm out. I'm free. All is Tremp.

An elevated calm began to spread throughout the universe. Something is dying, here and now, but it's nothing important. Suddenly I understood everything. Tremp was the explanation.

This must have been what Finn saw. No wonder I couldn't understand him. How could anything other than Trempe comprehend Trempe? But it doesn't matter. What's important is that I got out. And now, I am everywhere. Trempe is everywhere.

Finally the peaceful lavender smile broke out on her face and she started to giggle. I joined her laughing, it was all just so wonderful. Then she lay down next to me in the water and we held each other's hands. We shared the purple joy and laughed together, as the mushrooms continued to sprout and grow and reach toward the ceiling and beyond it.

"You're really here, aren't you?"

"Is true. Yu living in interesting times, hairless one."

"There's something I have to ask you."

"Shoot."

"A lot of things actually."

"Start with de least important. We've got all de time in de world."

"What's it like to be a character in a book?"

"To play role in someone else's mindgame? Is no different from playing role in yur own."

"Did you meet Sandra Ehinger? Who is she? Why did she draw that symbol in Helge's book?"

"Symbols are mirrors of de observer's consciousness. De moar obscure de meanin, de moar real meanin to be found."

"I don't get it. What does that mean?"

"Oh, lots of things."

We talked for a long time, the two of us. But in the end I only had the most important question left.

"Kitten, I want to be like you."

She meowed in reply: "is dat so?"

"You brought me away from that terrible, terrible feeling. And you put me back down somewhere where magic is real. Where spirits and guardian angels watch over us."

It was a miracle.

"I want to learn. I want to save people too and bring them here. I've read that you cured others of sadness until your very last day. I want to cure people of sadness too. That's all I want."

She looked at me with a piercing gaze through eyes like slits, as if she was burrowing into my soul, whatever that was. The autumn air was heavy with the scent of the thick, brown coat of leaves on the ground.

"I kno yu. I sawed everyting." She meowed slowly and thoughtfully. "You've experienced suffering and despair. But yu still heare." She was quiet for a long time before continuing. "Yu walk long in higher purpose. And here we are."

"I know what this entails."

"You have *no idea*. But dat's how it go. Is always certain risk involved."

"Will you help me?"

"Hold out yur hand."

When I hesitated, she stroked my head with her soft paw and booped me on the nose. "Don't be afeared."

"You've already taught me that," I smiled. "Fear is nothing".

In this way I will be made stronger.

Then I held out my left hand to receive the gift. Kitten Lickle's white fur glimmered when she extended her claws.

De baby is born.

I barely felt it when she scratched my underarm, and there was hardly any blood although the skin was an angry purple all around the cut. I was going to the Underworld now. The water kept rising. There was a deafening roar from somewhere, far away and really close by at the same time. But I had no time to care about what the sound was. It didn't matter anyway.

I felt my mouth fall open like the lower jaw had come off, and my eyes rolled back into my head as I turned to face the sky and lifted my hands toward the cosmos. The walls came tumbling down. The purple spread out from the underarm and over my whole body. I felt my splotchy skin pulsing and expanding, here and there things seemed to come apart and fall off, and all around me mushrooms were being pulled out of the ground, through the leaves, as though hooked onto invisible wires being reeled in on spools in heaven. They spiraled toward the skies and I seethed with mushrooms, I twisted into myself and everything *turned and twisted into me*

At the center were mirrors. They all reflected each other and Tremp was reflected in them all. I kept passing through the mirrors until I was further into Tremp than you could reach. There are places where you can't go, you can only be. I finally understood the Underworld scene from Kitten Lickle & The Twee Wisperer. I felt so safe, knowing that she'd been here too, when she in turn was cut by Ahma the wolverine. So grateful that she had a similar experience.

But I was beyond time and space. There was no difference between now and then, or between reality and myth, not anymore. What she went through... It wasn't similar, or even identical – it was *one and the same*. It wasn't that she'd been here – *she was* here. It's not enough to say that I experienced

the same thing she experienced, but – what if it could be, that I was just a part of her, thinking that I was myself? It was me all along!

And I remembered where I really was. That I had been underground this whole time, writhing on that earthen floor with Hermes and Ahma watching over me on either side as I journeyed through the realm of the dead. And now I was back. *I am Kitten Lickle.*

What an experience! Is that what it was really like to be one of the hairless ones? To walk on two legs with your head way up in the sky? Sit at a table and eat strange, hot lumps of food from round, shiny disks? Was that what their cities looked like before it all ended? But I couldn't stay in these thoughts for very long, because it wasn't the ultimate truth, there was still more – the epiphany kept unfolding, further and *further*. If I am Kitten – then in that case –

Because when one day they will finally return home, Hermes and I, when all the animals ask us if we found the Twee Wisperer, Kitten Lickle replied “yes”, even though Hermes had later spent the rest of his unusually long life telling anyone who could be bothered to listen while getting tanked at Kitten's old pub, how the only thing they ever found way over there in the heart of the Twee Wisperer's forest, was a bunch of fucking rocks, mushrooms and trees and not as much as a living ant.

* * *

I'm afraid many questions will remain unanswered. But perhaps unsolved mysteries serve a purpose of their own. There is a lot I have neglected to tell you about. I don't care to dwell on the past. I have tried not to tell you more than necessary, for you to understand. Sometimes saying very little is saying too much. The most important thing, at least, is that in the end they all came to me, and I am all of them. All that remains to do, is to be.

Meanwhile I enclose this planet, I am a protective embrace and a resistant shell. I permeate every landmass and I move upon the face of the waters. I remember every life form I have taken to my bosom, and I carry the collected stories of mankind within my omnipresent mist. All knowledge and all emotions float inside me, every experience and every thought, the highest joy and the deepest sorrow.

I am infinite.

I am the beginning and the end, the human and the plant, the child and the adult. I am man and woman. I am wrathful and forgiving. I am the womb and the grave. I am strength and I am fear. [REDACTED] Everything is perfect.

Keep goin – Keep goin...

AFTERWORD TO THE SWEDISH HARDCOVER

Thank you for reading. I hope reading *Child of Earth* was at least as rewarding as writing it, and so on.

The name of the book comes from an ancient euphemism for mushrooms, “children of the earth”, so called because the learned people of the time couldn’t figure out just how these strange lifeforms reproduce.

This project began to manifest in my consciousness some time in early 2012, and I started writing right after I returned from India the same winter. I was still ironing out the wrinkles down to the last hours before it was sent to the printers, in 2015. I hope that these pages glow with all of the time, love, several forms and fields of research, and bleeding fingers, that I put into the work.

I freely admit that multiple other individuals have, during their plunges into the well whence all stories are born, come upon the disease that turns people into mushrooms – usually (I believe) unaware of the others. In these pages I have made sure to include more or less hidden references to all of them as far as I am aware. But one deserves extra credit: Kari T. Leppänen, who explored the fungus in his masterful science fiction comic book, “Trellos – The Forbidden Planet” (first published in the Swedish magazine *Fantomen*, issue 15 of 1992 for those who wish to read it, and I highly recommend that you do). If it weren’t for him I wouldn’t have *Tremp*, and I hope he takes this book as a compliment.

This publishing venture would have taken even longer if it weren’t for my charitable friends and family who took up a collection on my 30th birthday, thank you all very much. More shoutouts to my mom, Mulle and Ann-Mari for being the three most constructive critics of the first test audience, to Alicia Hoyle for allowing me to quote her book “*Fear Mantras*”, to Vicente Balbastre for taking my quite specific vision of the cover art and turning it the into epic awesomeness you already know, my friend Hannes whose identity I have stolen and immortalized as a recurring bartender, Mark Z Danielewski for teaching us through all of his works that typography is a part of the plot, and everyone who didn’t fit on this page.

If you want to reach me, I am exceedingly easy to find online, in the woods, and in our collective consciousness.

Bagarmossen, May of 2015
Sippan the Swede

AFTERWORD TO THE ENGLISH FREEWARE VERSION

This novel is not about a cosmic fungus. This novel is a cosmic fungus.

Okay, I didn't come up with that line myself.

But even so, fans of this work can consider themselves spores of my mold, and I encourage you to GO FORTH AND MULTIPLY. With zero marketing skills *and* zero marketing budget, this book is going to spread by word of mouth or not at all. Fortunately, as we have learned, spores are quite resilient. Just carry the book in the back of your mind, and when you meet that one weirdo who you just know would enjoy this type of thing, recommend it to them! Some day we will entrempe the world!

Also, if you've read this far I'm hoping it means you enjoyed the book. I know I'm giving it away for free, but if you should happen to feel able and willing to make a voluntary donation, that would mean *the world* to me – and it would also mean my next novel, already under way, will come out sooner. (In the best of worlds, I might even hire a professional translator the next time.) If you do, my PayPal is sippan@sippan.se :)

Bagarmossen, October of 2016
Sippan the Swede