

SACRED AND TERRIBLE

AIR **ROBERT
KURVITZ**



Note from Group Ibex:

This fan translation is a work of passion, a group effort first rooted in our own drive to understand the source text.

No profit has or will ever be made from it; it will be taken offline the moment an official English edition is announced. Please support the official release as soon as it becomes available.

This fan translation is a heavily edited version of a machine translation. The printed copy of the novel, which contains the latest version of the source text, was scanned, OCR'd, double-checked and machine translated; that first automated English draft then went through several intensive rewrites, including at all levels by Estonian-speaking members of the team, to ensure meaning, prose and consistency. Any world-specific terms have been made consistent with what we know of Elysium to the best of the translators' abilities and the invaluable fayde.co.uk. In the spirit of the original mass-editing process, all non-Estonian text was read by its respective native speakers, fixing the occasional grammatical jankiness.

We have also included the two extras originally posted on nihilist.fm and zaum.ee, accessed via the Wayback Machine, and the lists of Elysium names that fill the book's inside covers.

All footnotes, including the translations of non-Estonian text, were added by the translators.

Any views within the text are not necessarily representative of the translators' views.

English edit of the cover image by Sunny, used with permission.

**SACRED
AND
TERRIBLE
AIR** **ROBERT
KURVITZ**

PROLOGUE FOR A CYCLE OF NOVELS

SACRED AND TERRIBLE AIR

© Robert Kurvitz

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“My heart will not rest until it rests in you.”
Saint Augustine

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1. CHARLOTTEJÄL

It was a popular vacation area just outside of Vaasa that swallowed the four Lund girls. Along with their little bones and tan-lined skin, an entire era vanished. Six kilometres of winding coastline, a swimming spot popular in the fifties; rows of changing cabins, reeds rustling in the wind. Go there and find the age that conservatives long for. When parents could send children to the beach unsupervised, two reál for ice cream and bus fare in the pockets of their summer pants. Mum and dad would shake their heads in worry, keeping their children hidden from the news from Messina, from Graad, from Gottwald, where every week—it seemed to them—someone’s wee skeleton was found buried inside a stove wall. There, every week, someone’s daughter escaped onto the street after thirty years of captivity in a cellar and cried for help.

But not here.

Here we have a social democracy. And the soft peach blossoms of social democracy, innocuous social programs; these progressive things make a broken human soul feel better. The uncanny technical urge to construct a subterranean secret room—with a ventilation system where the air ducts on the front lawn are disguised as clay miniature windmills—will never reach these outskirts. Those dark, raging fevers of the mind simmer down in the cool mist here; the breath of distant blue glaciers freezes the

sick thoughts that reside in a man's head. Vaasa. A better place to live.

And then, one Tuesday morning, with white clouds in the blue sky, four sisters—Maj (5), Anni-Elin (12), Målin (13) and Charlotte Lund (14)—go to the beach together for a swim. They take with them two *reál* in cash, four sets of swimming clothes, something to eat and drink, and two large picnic blankets in two beach bags. At 9:30 they board the horsecar in Lovisa, a suburb of Vaasa. The tram driver remembers them well. Today, twenty years later, getting to talk about it is the highlight of the day for Roland, who lives in a retirement home: “The oldest bought the tickets for all of them. To Charlottesjäl. Forty cents. Ten cents a ticket. Were they to go even one stop further, it would have been twenty cents a ticket. I can recall it very well. The rural lines start there, with the rates twice as high. But Lord, she was a girl as pretty as a picture! With such good manners as well! The oldest, Char-lot-tel!” the old man rumbles rhythmically. “I didn’t know back then, read it later in the paper. And then I went straight to the police, without delay, every second counted.”

At 10:25 the girls disembark at Charlottesjäl beach. One by one they thank the tram driver, well-raised as they are. The beach is hot this morning, and there are few people around.

Next to encounter the girls is the ice cream shop clerk, Agnetha. At the time, twenty years ago, Agnetha is still in university, and she's working at the ice cream shop as a summer job. Målin and Anni-Elin buy four ice creams: two vanilla, one lime, and one chocolate. The other girls are not visible from the shop. The window blinds are rolled down for protection against the sun; the only uncovered window is next to the counter, with products on display. As it's a workday, the clientele is sparse; young Agnetha knows the girls and their well-established flavour preferences. Peppermint, Målin's favourite, is out of stock that day, which causes some confusion. In addition to the ice cream, peculiarly, the girls buy three meat *piroshkis*¹. This raises the tab to one *reál* and fifty cents. The girls leave the shop, and from the uncovered window next to the counter, Agnetha notices a Man accompanying them. Agnetha is incapable of remembering

¹ *Ölitaigas lihapirukas*, oil-dough meat pies.

anything else about the Man. Age, height, clothing, whether there was more than one Man—or, as Agnetha started feeling later—whether there was even a Man at all.

This is the last time anyone sees the girls.

The four daughters of Ann-Margaret Lund, who had been sworn into office as Education Minister two days prior, and paper industrialist Karl Lund, have vanished. The press starts a years-long love affair with the case. Every minute detail is brought out in the newspaper columns, carrying the Lund girls deep into the cultural memory. The disappearance becomes one of the most prestigious unsolved cases in the Real Belt.

At about 12:40—five hours and twenty minutes before six o'clock, the time when the girls are expected home in Lovisa, and about thirty minutes before the ice cream shop—three boys sit in a living room. The room is gold-striped with sunlight through the slatted blinds, and the boys are classmates with two of the sisters. The tall, freckled one has the telephone receiver pressed to his ear. “Hey, call already,” urges the blond one.

“Well, it wouldn’t be very chic of me to call three hours earlier than agreed.”

The fat Iilmaraan immigrant pulls the tall one by his sleeve: “For real, Tereesz, call. Something is wrong!”

“I know, I know,” says Tereesz, and the steel rotary dial jingles under his finger.

Now the terrible noise of time approaches, the most violent sound in the world. It is not light that spills from the windows into the golden room, but a super deep paleness. All distances there are insurmountable, and between each object there is *horror vacui*.

2. CLASS REUNION

Inayat Khan pours himself some mors². Some of the pink liquid drips from his chin onto his cravat. His suit is ill-fitting, and the buttons are straining. It makes him look like an idiot.

“A fat idiot with a light blue cravat,” he thinks. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Go anyway, you’ll see your friends! Who did you have there? That von Fersen, he was a nice boy, and...”

“He wasn’t my friend, he was a psychoterrorist. I loathed him, nasty upstart!”

“... he’s grown into a very respectable man...”

“... a careerist is what he’s grown into, a disgusting guy, and a racist as well. Oh, I remember what he called me, do you want me to tell you, mom, what he called me?”

“... and Tereesz and Jesper! Listen, Jesper is famous now, too...”

“Camel shit. Mom, he called me camel shit.”

Khan watches the magnetic tape slide against the reader. The plastic discs spin hypnotically in the machine, magnet becomes music, a slow song, and for a moment it seems to him as if those spots of light are creeping up again, on the walls and floor of the assembly hall. Like stars in the sky, or a swarm of jellyfish deep

² A sweet drink, usually made from fruit or berry syrup mixed with water.

underwater. Spots sliding over Målin Lund's white dress, his hand getting sweaty on her waist. What to say? Time stands still, the music fades, and Khan's thick-rimmed diamaterialist³ glasses reflect the dark green eyes of Målin Lund.

*Håll mig här...*⁴

"Ah..." A woman, probably from another class in their year, comes to a stop beside him. She starts to say something, but then pretends to reach for a snack instead. Neither of them came. Khan is alone. The pantsuit-wearing woman is there in her pantsuit. Can't just stand around, you have to manage somehow.

He pulls a magic pen from his pocket. There, under the glass, Sapormat Knezhinisky, the chairman of the praesidium⁵ of the People's Republic of Samara, smiles his hearty black and white smile of history, right into the camera. To his left, leaning against the ship's railing, a rat-faced man in the black leather coat of the secret police. "Look, look, the disappearing commissar!" says Khan, turning the pen. The rat-faced man under the glass vanishes. Only the chairman of the praesidium, Sapormat Knezhinisky himself, stays on deck—alongside Ukhotskiy, a groveller, exceptionally adept at delivering embarrassing criticisms. Where there used to be a commissar, there is now an empty railing. You can also see the part of the bridge that the commissar hid before.

"Very interesting," says the woman in the pantsuit and peers over her shoulder. Khan wipes away a lock of hair stuck to his forehead. In his other hand, he still holds the pen, which he now looks at with a dreamy smile, muttering to himself: "Commissar, no commissar."

The smile flickers for a moment and then disappears from the man's double-chinned face. Khan's big, sad eyes look at the bustle of adults on the hall floor. There, the class of '56 calls each other's names. Handshakes are exchanged, children's pictures are shown inside wallets.

³ Editor Martin Luiga has described diamaterialist glasses as the kind of glasses a dialectical materialist would wear, with dominating lenses and frames, while referencing an early 90s photo of Estonian politician Edgar Savisaar.

⁴ "Hold/Keep me here", Swedish

⁵ A chairman of a praesidium is a state leader. He's referred to as a president in Disco Elysium.

Commissar, no commissar.

A man in his thirties sits on the parquet floor in a spacious room. The parquet is freshly varnished; blond bangs fall on the interior designer's forehead. He sits cross-legged, thin white hands in his lap. When he looks up, the room's interior design is reflected back at him in the floor-to-ceiling windows. In the gloom behind him appear the minimal skeletons of designer furniture, a kitchenette with a stone countertop, and analog system speakers like two mute obelisks. A lone spirit hangs over the room. A beige Perseus Black peacoat hangs on the rack, and in the shoe rack are three thousand real white chamois leather shoes.

His hand is on the dimmer switch, and the light fades. The reflection of the room disappears, and in its place is a sea of ferns outside the floor-to-ceiling window. The dark green expanse dissipates into the darkness under the spruce trees. Usually he listens to music, sitting here, but tonight it's so quiet you can hear the rain pattering on the ferns.

In his twenties, while he was developing the world-famous Illdad minimal design language with his associates, Jesper de la Guardie was also doing a lot of nose candy. In those days, they would bounce between the bathrooms of the Architects Association café and those of the prestigious interior design office, congratulating each other for inventing the future and sipping bottled water: "This project we are doing, it *rules*, through this language of shapes we are defining human visual perception for the next century" and "One day I will write a *book* about this! Tasteless people are cruel people, evil is tasteless. Is it really so unthinkable, then, that simple and clean interior design will make the world a better place?"

Nose candy went out of fashion, but bottled water remained. Jesper takes a sip and stands up, adjusts the tie knot in the V-neck of his sweater, picks up the receiver, and calls himself a taxi.

The concrete cube beneath the spruce trees goes dark as the machine whirs away into the shadowy grove with Jesper in it. A puff of fuel-fumes remains behind in the yard. In the empty house

between the glass walls, the phone rings—a white apparatus sitting on a wooden table top with an extraordinarily beautiful grain.

It is dark.

International Collaboration Police agent Tereesz Machejek steps off the huge scale of the train carriage and onto the floating station. The rain is picking up steadily, making the steel monoliths of the carriages shine. They tower above a platform suspended beneath the sky by a tangle of cables. Steam rises from the magnets underneath the carriages, hot from the current, and drifts like smoke along the asphalt of the platform. Machejek takes his luggage from the concierge and moves with the crowd to the station building.

A coin falls into the metal slot of a payphone. The dial tone sounds, and the ICP agent practices saying “hello” into the receiver in a normal and relaxed manner. The freckles on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose have completely disappeared over time; the line of his mouth is permanently anxious. No one answers. The man takes the guide with the address from his briefcase and decides in favour of the tram.

The dark shape of the floating train station towers over the city. Glowing elevator cars descend from its belly down to Vaasa like dandelion seeds. In one of them, Agent Machejek watches how the only metropolis in the Nordics glows beneath his feet. The elevator window drips with rain. In the background, in the North Sea, a low, flat city disintegrates into an archipelago of light. Telefunken’s slender mast rises alone from the saturnine green mass of the buildings. Motorways meander there, glowing golden, the traffic on them smooth as sleep. Königsmalm is there—the commercial centre—and Saalem is directly below, with the coloured lights of the immigrant district flowing on the asphalt. Horse cars appear from under the riding hall awning, toil up the slopes and disappear clip-clopping under the shiny green chestnut trees. The tracks disperse between the tens and hundreds of parks of Lovisa, leading to the university islands and social housing districts, where the city quietly gives way to coniferous forests. Far away in the garden suburbs, the lights go out, and Machejek feels the vacation areas shivering in the rain, empty beaches and pine

forests. This is where the real Katla begins. Though it is only now the end of September, already a great cold is approaching from the other side of winter's orbit—drawing over her black woodland expanses, her clearings and valleys.

Chestnut leaves blow under the awning of the manège and into the waiting pavilion, where a kitten-voiced girl announces the route numbers and delays over the loudspeaker. The frame of the building echoes them back to her. Leaves stick to the glass of the pavilion and the windows of the horse cars; the air is full of their musty smell.

The ICP agent enters a packed carriage, suitcase in hand. On top of the suitcase, the contours of the isolas of the Reál Belt form a bird of prey taking flight—the coat of arms of the ICP.

“Private investigator,” Khan lies. He's not a private investigator. The private investigator is a fantastic amalgamation. It borrows the obesity and oily hair from his own career as a disappearance memorabilia collector in his parents' basement, and mixes in the career of his more successful classmate, Tereesz Machejek, who works in the Missing Persons Department of the International Collaboration Police. The fantastic amalgamation has served Khan faithfully on many occasions. This is not one of those times.

“Pardon me, I didn't quite catch that?” The woman in the pantsuit is distracted.

“Private investigator. Specifically, I look for missing persons. When the police and the power structures have given up, then friends or family members, mostly family, come to me. And then I... I do my best.” In the background, Sven von Fersen presents their former homeroom teacher with his collection of witty management articles, wearing quite the cosmopolitan face. You would never guess that, in his vocabulary, people with yellowish skin and exotic names were called “camel shit”.

“A-ha...” He turns to Khan. “So you're still searching for them. Even now.”

“Yes, okay, that's how it was in the beginning, true. But I've studied it, too, and... one thing led to another.” The man in the light blue cravat is sweating. He's starting to lose his patience.

“And besides—so what! Look around! Half the conversations here are about this same thing. So tell me again that you don’t care.”

“First of all, half of the conversations here are *not* about *this*. You think they are, but they aren’t. And secondly, of course I’m interested. But I think the whole thing is, well, sad.”

“What’s sad?”

“This topic. The people who keep bringing it back up. People who still write to the newspaper that they saw a woman somewhere who looked like what Målin or Anni would look like now, and so on.”

“Oh, go fuck yourself!” The people in the immediate vicinity of the buffet table fall silent and look in the direction of Khan and von Fersen. The woman in the pantsuit becomes uncomfortable. She looks away. The sweating man in diamaterialist glasses shoves the remaining half of a pretzel into his cheek and sets off towards the coatroom.

The chestnut trees in front of the high school are swaying in the wind. Leaves blow onto the steps of the main entrance, across the sidewalks and puddles. The surface of the water ripples; the wheels of an abruptly stopped machine break the cones of light cast by the streetlights. The taxi door slams shut, and a three-thousand-reál pair of white chamois shoes step into a puddle. The interior designer curses and takes three long steps. Indignant, he gives up on trying to shake off the mud, stuffs the folder under his arm, and walks up the stairs to the main entrance.

It’s warm inside, and it smells like glue. Jesper breezes through the lobby, the worn wooden floor creaking under his shoes. He takes a name tag from the smiling volunteer and puts it in the back pocket of his pants.

“Up on your chest! That’s what they’re for, so that everyone gets recognised.”

“Sure,” says Jesper, and leaves the tag in his pocket.

Yearbook portraits and class pictures are lined up on a display stand. VIII B. There’s a skinny blond boy with a head too big for his shoulders and bangs slicked back behind his ears. To his left is an overweight immigrant child from Iilmaraa with a dreadful cravat. Little Khan gazes past the camera with a nebulous look. The

tall, freckled kojko in the backmost “beanstalk” row had suggested to him that he take off his glasses so he would look less lame.

Bit by bit, the man’s gaze moves along the rows of VIII B, anxiety rising in his heart. His imagination is already running ahead of him. Somewhere in the middle of this row of girls shines a massive nuclear fission cluster, a distant constellation, a matrimony of matter.

It had been eight years ago when Jesper’s sharp visage had first appeared on the glossy cover of the monthly design magazine. Admittedly, the limelight had to be shared with two other coke-addled visionaries. There they were, the three of them on *shoot*, sitting on their flagship couch. The *softbox* diffused, *Fakkengaff* played, and “pioneers”, “future”, “decorous” and many other such things were written below, all of which he remembers very well. Two hours later, Jesper sat alone in his glowing cube, a scrunchie in the palm of his hand, on a morbidly large stack of class photos and newspaper clippings. One look at the spruce trees swaying in the wind vanquished the temptation to check again to see if the scent had worn off. The scrunchie was sorted into the “domestic waste” section, and the girls’ folder sorted under “packaging”. Jesper stood in the middle of the room and exhaled deeply. Enough of that. It was done with.

But where are they? Why aren’t they here? Why are neither of them there? Disappointed, Jesper disconcertedly takes a step back to the display stand to take care of this matter properly, to review all the pictures, when suddenly a thirty-four-year-old man stops in the middle of the lobby. That man still lives with his mother.

Early spring, twenty years ago.

Little Inayat Khan falls sideways into an ice-coated mud puddle. His reindeer sweater is dirty, and dark red blood drips from his nose. In the midst of numerous discouragements and worried recommendations to stay down, the boy still slowly pulls himself up, briefly slipping down now and again. Finally, he stands eye to eye with Sven von Fersen, only a few metres away. Dirt crusts on little Khan’s face, hands rising into an incorrect fighting stance. His fists shake with anger and humiliation.

“Listen, you know what he said, don’t you?” Von Fersen starts up again.

His nasty little lackey knows what Khan said, but asks anyway: “Tell me what he said, Sven!”

Sven is not stingy with his answers. “He walked Målin home and kissed her. You understand, Khan the cunt⁶ accompanied her home, Khan the cunt kissed her.”

There is a roar of laughter, and the lackey immediately retorts, “Why you gotta tell a sick story like that? You get what you deserve! When you make up something that disgusting, you get what you deserve. You think Målin likes hearing a gross story like that? Huh? Does she?”

Tears of anger run down the cheeks of the boy in the reindeer sweater. Yesterday after school, Khan had let his imagination run wild. It had been a terrible mistake. The sun emerges from behind the clouds and he already sees, a few dozen metres away from the spectators, how Målin Lund’s blond hair shines like a glorious halo. She blushes with shame. Charlotte, the oldest of the sisters, puts her hand on Målin’s shoulders and, in their spring coats, they both turn their backs on him.

“Shouldn’t you have some, I dunno, *camels* on that sweater or something?”

A scream like a curved sword reverberates through the schoolyard. Khan makes a desperate dash towards von Fersen. Although he slips a little on the way, in his mind’s eye he still sees the sharp spear of Ramout Karzai, of Amistad’s heroic epic, drilling toward his enemy’s chest.

The distance is shrinking, a life-threatening collision seems inevitable. But suddenly, out of the periphery of his anger-induced tunnel vision, an unknown actor appears and halts him, the other hand pressed as a stop sign against von Fersen’s puffed-up chest.

With arms outstretched and a blond lock of hair falling in his face, Jesper spits out his gum and emits a barrage of “Damn it,

⁶ In the original text Sven says “Kaan” instead of “Khan”. While Kaan is a mispronunciation of Khan, it is also the Estonian word for “leech.” You also need to palatalise the “n” in kaan. For continuity in English the original Estonian nickname does not work. Another alternate suggestion is “Khant”, pronounced as “cunt”.

Sven, don't fuck around" arguments. Khan tries to free himself from his deskmate's grip, his bruised cheek and bloody nose staining Jesper's shoulder.

This is how they stand. The bell rings and the lunch break is over. As the schoolyard is emptying of children, Jesper wipes the shoulder of his sweater with a napkin. "So, did you kiss Målin, or what?"

"No. But I did walk her home. And it went well. Very well."

"Just not *that* well."

"Yeah."

"That's the same shirt! Khan, tell me that's not the same shirt!"

"Jesper!"

Two adults stand in a coat room and shake hands for the first time in years. There is a smidgeon of warmth in Jesper's wry smile. "I might have acted a bit impolitely when we last saw each other," he begins. "I understand now—it was a mistake."

Khan just laughs it off. His few-days-old beard shakes along with his friendly double chin.

"I left a bad impression." Having said that, Jesper is left wondering what he had planned next. "I have *news*. Something new." He points to the folder and looks at Khan inquisitively. "Or have you, I don't know, become a chef in the meantime?"

"You know me, I'm always *hardcore*."

Without the slightest acknowledgement of the class reunion, Khan grabs his jacket from the coatroom, and they head for the door.

"Look, look, the disappearing commissar!"

"That's not too shabby."

"I made Tereesz one too. That's a particularly special version. It's the same picture, but guess what happens when you turn it a little further?"

"What?"

"Ukhotomsky disappears too! And a pigeon. It's halfway behind Ukhotomsky."

"Otherwise there would be half a pigeon left hanging in the air."

"Precisely."

Raindrops drip from Agent Machejek's umbrella. A puff of smoke lingers in the umbrella's canopy and then disappears into the wind. Holding an "Astra" between his teeth, he folds the map and puts it in his briefcase. Two men run through the silvery curtain of rain, straight towards him across the lawn of the high school. The kojko in the grey herringbone coat takes a step back. He makes room under the umbrella. It's immense—ICP standard issue.

"Did you apologise?"

"He apologised," Khan answers for Jesper.

"Is it... *cool* there?" Machejek nods towards the school.

Khan shakes his head. "Let's go to the city instead," Jesper specifies. "There's a place. A new place."

Three men step under a large umbrella and out of focus. A volley of distant sleigh bells approaches, ringing like the silver curtains drawing closed behind the friends' backs...

Eight years ago.

... the needles dance at twelve decibels under their little lamps until the Stereo 8 format tape clicks against the magnetic reader. The beat is unbearably smooth, more modern than nose candy. Or you never know, it's hard to say. The beat is local, originating in the world-famous recording studios of Vaasa. It was made by a semi-mythical person, Fakkengaff, who, although an Oranjese immigrant, a disc jockey and a music producer, functions rather more like a group of people or a machine in the sky. The nose candy, on the other hand, came through an uncharted strip of pale on a pirate cruiser. It was made by the machete-wielding slave dreaming of a revolution, and by the overseer guarding the fields with a carbine. Fakkengaff made the beat so that girls would start dancing and boys would enjoy watching. The slave with the machete made the nose candy so that *La Puta Madre* would not put his family in front of a firing squad. For six months, the nose candy ripened on the high mountain plateau of Irmala, under the rays of the golden sun. The sun was prevented from falling out of the turquoise sky by the world eagle and its thousand-kilometre wingspan. The part where the beat seems to go under water for half a minute and then again—as unbelievable as it may be!—returns

even cooler, was whispered into Fakkengaff's ear by the very soul of debauchery. She had the white wings of an angel, but the breath against the disc jockey's ear had been hot with passion, smelling of cinnamon and primal evil.

My god, how pleasant is this numbness in my nose. My god, how good is that part where the beat emerges from underwater. So sad. Even cooler than before. How cool am I?! I'm there on the cover, I'm so cool there on the cover. I am a pillar of light, vertical, and I'm surrounded by a dark room. And that's it, there's nothing more, do you understand?

The guests sitting on Jesper's white divan-cube and behind the multi-functional desk-module share impressions of the world's fair. Glasses are clinked together too, in a display of champagne socialism. Jesper dances alone like a rare albino rooster. From the water bottle in his right hand, pearly drops fly onto the windows.

Like a time that has already been and gone, the streets of Vaasa slip by out the side window of the taxi. A large black horse snorts, steam rising from its nostrils. Something sweet seeps into the battered heart of the ICP agent. The rain stops and the young people in the dark slowly close their umbrellas. Metro entrances, familiar place names. A girl on a bicycle turns into a side street, where yellow illuminated signs are steaming in the damp. Traffic is reflected in the windows of houses and closed shops, until the motorway rises above the footpaths. The passing city flashes through the cracks in the stone traffic barrier, and a small boy waves to Machejek from the window of a passing motor carriage.

On the Königsmalm bridge, the passing streetlights turn into a dotted line. The grey silhouette of a prestigious residential area towers above the water. Tereesz's home was there when he lived in Vaasa as a child. Ahead, through the windshield of the motor carriage, the island district begins. Twenty years ago it still had a shady reputation; as Jesper now explains, careful development and some breakthrough galleries have made Östermalm the next "trend district".

"Bourgeois-bohemia, you mean?"

The taximeter is ticking, the cabin is warm and dark. Jesper doesn't even acknowledge Tereesz's wit.

“Hey, spit it out.” Khan turns the mixed topic conversation of urban development and class reunion in an unexpected direction.

“I need a projector. There is also a tape. I’ll tell you more at ‘Kino’.”

“Then show me the hair tie.”

“Yeah, it’s getting morbid, Jesper. Show us the hair tie, show us the *scrunchie*,” Tereesz joins in the begging.

“Ah, come on, don’t start. I don’t carry it with me, I threw it away. It was a very strange time in general...”

A sly smile appears on Khan’s face. “Jesper, don’t be stingy!”

“Yeah, don’t be stingy, show it to the class.”

Jesper looks out the side window. “No.”

A quiet moment passes. The murmur of wheels on the road, the clicking of the turn signal. Khan and Tereesz look at each other with a grin, and Jesper looks out of the window with feigned indifference. Only after a while does he feel the responsibility of resuming the story weigh on his shoulders.

“So what did you tell Fersen? A detective story?”

“The hair tie, Jesper, the hair tie! Show it!”

Resigned, the interior designer puts his hand into the bosom of his Perseus Black peacoat and pulls out a ring box.

Only recently everything had felt good, and now it’s so sad. Talking about funk!aesthetics and futurism with the photographer wife of a young real estate developer under the window, he’d had a feeling that this was how it would be all the time now, that it would never go back to *normal* again. But right now, the kitten’s voice from the monolithic speakers says ten thousand times in a row that she’s in love, in love, in love... Outside the window, the morning grey permeates the darkness above the ferns, cold and dank. It doesn’t feel like before at all—like it applies to Jesper. Just to some singer in a studio somewhere. Should probably top up. Just did and it didn’t get better at all. Don’t know, should probably do some anyway.

A minute later, a twenty-six-year-old version of Jesper de la Guardie, who has just entered the Major League, stands in the milky grey light in the middle of the room. His coffee-coloured

dress shirt is unbuttoned; his nostrils are red and his lips are pursed angrily.

“Hey. The party is over. Go home.”

No one can hear him, Fakkengaff is too loud. With the Stereo 8 format magnetic tape player’s STOP button under his finger, a pillar of light stands in the middle of the sudden silence. Heads turn.

“Party’s over. Go back home, you scum.”

Jesper’s mouth, sunken into a monstrosly disdainful arch, and his glassy eyes, accompany the embarrassing exit, the search for clothes and handbags. A fellow visionary pats him on the back, and in return receives the sort of bottomless, abyssal look that ruins interpersonal relationships for eternity.

The young real estate developer’s photographer wife lags a little behind the group in front of the house, and then turns back under the concrete roof of the cube. “My anklet!” she lies.

Long strap-shoed legs with a silver chain around the ankle frame this next sombre scene. Jesper is sitting among the garbage sorting bags scattered in the kitchen corner. Amidst apple cores, empty water bottles, and paper bags for handmade pasta, he looks into the kind face of the real estate developer’s wife. The seaspray-fogged September beach behind his eyes communicates that Jesper is not interested. Your sympathy—no, thank you. Reeds rustle in the wind, the silhouettes of changing cabins stand in a line under the bleak white sky. Four girls run over the sand and vanish into thin air.

In his right hand, the interior designer is holding a light pink scrunchie.

Khan looks up at Jesper, the ring box under his nose. His eyebrows are furrowed worriedly. A jolt goes through the cabin as the machine stops. The taxi driver pokes his head from the driver’s compartment into the salon, but then quickly turns away, seeing the expressions on the faces of the group.

“The scent is gone,” says Khan.

“I know.”

“There’s something very wrong with that.”

“I know.”

3. NON-ENTITY

The Romangorod Conference defines ten different types of missing persons. The ninth of them, ‘non-entity’, is a gross violation of the International Declaration of Human Rights. Such a person has not only been eliminated by some violent state body, but the documentation of their former existence has also been made to disappear. This special case of political fading, cursing of the memory, has been inflicted on a number of historical figures with varying degrees of success. In the case of the country of Mesque, for example, a loss of as much as ten percent of the historical scale of its entire culture can be statistically established. We will not dwell on the successful examples—it would be impossible to talk about a day that did not exist. But we all leave behind small traces, and the censor is only human.

Thus, it may happen that the obliterated citizen becomes, thanks to their non-entity, a significantly more recognised historical figure than their colleague who was simply shot in the head behind a waste disposal facility. What other prominent narrative would have saved the Samaran Communist Party cut-throat Julius Kuznitsky from the obscurity of history if not that funny photo? As recording technology has developed, even more complex processes have been added to the craft of filing the emperor’s head off of coins. For a well-oiled degenerate-bureaucratic worker state, it’s not exactly difficult to do a little spring cleaning of its punch cards.

But in the case of photographs, and also some particularly curious examples in the age of film material, the cleaning takes on a certain shade of technical finesse—one that we can admire in the above-mentioned disappearance of Commissar Julius Kuznitsky, who, under the retoucher's magic wand, vanished from onboard the steamer "Mazov" on that sweltering Sunday morning.

Julius was a nasty person, an uneducated peasant. His young eyes did not see the world revolution—the commissar's meteoric rise began later, in Samara. Not having the slightest clue of Mazov's ideals, he was careless in giving his victims titles with a politically accusatory connotation. This ultimately proved fatal for him. One day, apparently, the chairman of the praesidium Knezhnitsky just couldn't stand this embarrassment. "Tell me, Kusnja, how can it be that comrade Zdorov is a counter-revolutionary, when the revolution already happened over fifty years ago? And why are comrade Bronski's Mazovian-Knezhnitskyan beliefs 'irreversibly narrow-minded'? I'm Knezhnitsky, Sapormat Knezhnitsky, that's **my**⁷ name!"

In certain circles, these two photos—the original and the retouched side by side—have become a pop cultural phenomenon. The rat-faced smile that Kuznitsky conjured on his face that day adds spiritual value to the curiosity. Well, look at him! Who wouldn't want to wipe this nasty weasel from history?

An even worse fate befell the third figure in this photo. Aram Ukhotsky,⁸ Mazov's faithful revolutionary friend from the Eleven Day Government, an eminently talented agronomist, geneticist, and one of the three breeders of the Ulan yellow potato variety. A rare apolitical figure, whose unassuming behaviour and irreplaceable contribution to the table of the world's working class saved him from a total of three rounds of cleaning. That is, until Ukhotsky's scientific impartiality offended someone's feelings at the XXI plenum of geneticists. It turns out that modern genetics

⁷ All bold text is not bold but rather spaced out l i k e t h i s in the original. Changed for accessibility (and, in the case of shorter words in English like this one, for clarity).

⁸ In following with Disco Elysium's romanisation of Sapormat Knežinski as Sapormat Knezhnitsky, Russian names were likewise romanised. All original spellings are listed at the end in the inside cover lists.

is simply not compatible with Knezhiniskyan *tabula rasa* philosophy, where, in a state of revolutionary spirit, even gooseberry seeds can be convinced to become figs.

With horror, Ukhotomsky found himself likening himself to a small plasticine snake when speaking before the praesidium. Having never written criticism about himself before, the poor scholar overextended himself so blatantly that even in the then-lush self-deprecating atmosphere, it was difficult for those present to listen to his words. Since this memorable performance, Ukhotomsky's name has been attached to the epithet of bootlicking. The historical character having been completely compromised, the merciful Chairman Knezhinisky decided to spare the memory of his older and once more worthy comrade: by The Ninth Process he was sent behind the waste disposal facility, and later, all traces of Ukhotomsky's existence were eliminated. But the history falsification failed. The retouchers absentmindedly left one remarkable photo with Ukhotomsky in it untouched, the same photo from which commissar Julius Kuznitsky entered oblivion earlier.

Technically, however, the most impressive story is Ignus Nilsen's fall from the canon—a Mazovian school teacher turned prophet. Likewise a significant figure in the history of the communist movement, he became a disembodied spirit under the hands of Vaasa's censors. The character of Mazov's apocalyptic shriek suddenly became somewhat burdensome for the image of the social-democratic north. That's how they engineered the disappearance of Nilsen with Graad, which had recently repelled the revolution. To the dismay of the censors, dozens of hours of film footage of Mazov had been captured during the technically progressive Eleven Day Government, where the revolutionary icon was almost always accompanied by his best friend and comrade in arms, Nilsen. Destruction of all material would have raised suspicion. That's how it came to be that a ghostly grey cytoplasm is permanently floating in Mazov's right hand. It took decades for historians to solve this blood-curdling mystery.

Even today, many believe that the cytoplasm is Communism itself.

4. VIDKUN HIRD

Twelve millimetre film buzzes in the projector. On the couch next to the white fabric screen, Khan sits next to Machejek, staring in disbelief at his square coffee cup on a square saucer. He picks up the spoon to stir in the sugar and carefully approaches the cup. In café “Kino” everything is made of glass or white. The chair where Jesper sits and fiddles with the projector is white, the soundproof walls of the booth are made of glass. The sign on which the white fabric screen falls is made of glass; the sofa where Khan and Machejek feel uncomfortable is white. There is a stuffed albino tiger in a glass case in the middle of the café. Just make sure you don’t break anything—it will cost you dearly.

“Let me guess,” the agent twists the “Astra” between his fingers until it’s as soft as he likes, “your design?”

“One of my students’. This place is like a movie screen, a white sheet, we have been *projected here*, you know? What is it like to be? It’s not at all, cinema screen, do you understand?”

“Yes, I do. It’s uncomfortable.”

“The boy is a bit jittery, sure, but he’s talented. He needed this sort of high visibility project. And this is the only place where you can quickly get behind a projector. So I’d try, you know, to be open-minded,” Jesper, together with the tiger, looks towards Khan. The tiger’s glass eyes are an even brighter blue than the interior designer’s.

“Hey man, I’m open-minded!”

Machejek takes a pencil and a notebook from his jacket pocket.

“Well then,” begins Jesper, “a relative of one of my co-workers works as an operator. Makes docs. Last fall, he told me about his new project. With Gessle. Do you know Konrad Gessle?”

“He mainly does criminal stuff, doesn’t he?”

“Not exclusively. Gösta, that’s the name of my operator, tells me how he’s afraid to do it and asks me if he should. He has a child at home too now, and so on. The point is that the film is about—and this is where I got interested—Vidkun Hird.”

“Oh my god!”

“Enough about Vidkun Hird!”

“Wait, wait! I agree, it’s a well-worn topic, he was in Arda then, he couldn’t possibly be in Vaasa, and so on. But I still thought I’d keep an eye on it, you know? And then, two weeks ago, Gösta comes to talk to me. Tells me they’re on the verge of a breakthrough there. They’ve been sitting down with Vidkun Hird in Kronstadt for the past six months...”

“Unbelievable!”

“... and they allegedly have a strategy there: they impress Hird. Vidkun likes Gessle, Gessle is Nordic, white as snow, well-read and a good debater. So. Hird wants to impress the interviewer and starts chatting. Bragging. Gessle gives the impression that these rapists with a wild imagination have been seen before, that Vidkun Hird is just a small player.”

“Yes-yes...”

“For the first three months, Vidkun just hints, arouses interest, references unverifiable dates, talks about going to the beach. Gessle doesn’t even notice, he discusses philosophy with Vidkun, about overcoming good and evil, I have it all written down here.” Jesper pats the folder on the cube-shaped glass table. “Then one day, Vidkun has had enough.”

The man flicks the switch and the small bulb at the heart of the projector lights up. “I have to warn you now,” he looks in Khan’s direction. “Those of us whose profession does not include ditches and missing children could take some of Vidkun’s words to heart.”

Tereesz piles a sixth spoonful of sugar into his black coffee

and pauses for a moment. After a noticeable beat of silence, he sticks his needle-sharp HB pencil into the pencil sharpener and pretends to be busy with it, an awkward smile on his face.

“Dude, when will you ever understand? Ditches and missing children—that’s your topic too.”

“Okay, Khan,” sighs Jesper, “ditches and lost children. It is my topic.”

“To ditches and lost children?” Tereesz cheerfully raises his sugar-filled coffee cup in the air and waits.

“*Skål!*”⁹ exclaims Khan.

“*Skål,*” Jesper states and fishes the lime slice out of his glass of water. He chews on it, his brow thoughtfully furrowed at the sour taste.

“The tape, Jesper?”

“Ugh...”

Superhuman; rapist; child rapist; former member of “Hjelmdall”, the fascist party of NFD—Vidkun Hird appears on the white screen. With one hand cuffed to the chair and the other resting genteelly on his cheek, it’s clear the philosopher of the future is aware of the presence of the camera. Mindful of it, he raises his northern bulldog-cheeked chin to a certain noble angle; there he casts glances up and down from the recesses of his eye sockets. Hair carefully combed to the side according to the thirty-year-old fashion, and one leg resting across the other knee. Vidkun could be said to be a vain man. Refusing to go down in history in his colour-coded prison overalls, he converses with Konrad Gessle in his Blackshirt uniform. That had been just one of his many conditions.

“Some people are born posthumously,” he exclaims in the ancient Ardan dialect. Archaic idiom, he injects an abundance of rural charm into modernly refined sentiment. The six-digit clock on the table shows that the third hour of the August 12th interview is in progress.

“Did you know, Vidkun, that I have done a master’s thesis on elder Ardan? I can smuggle you literature about it.”

“Oh, that would be very nice of you, Konrad, you know how I

⁹ “Cheers!” Swedish.

feel about the selection of the library here.” They both chuckle to signal understanding.

“Ardan is the natural language of our tribe,” continues Vidkun in a declarative tone. “This vocabulary was adapted and developed by ancient mammoth hunters who settled in the slopes of Katla millenia ago. Ardan has certain significant advantages in the basic matters of love of wisdom, advantages that continental languages lack. Ardan is our nature, the modern Vaasan—a metropolitan bastard. Regressed to continental, imbued with Graad. This diluted language is incapable of expressing truth. All the sentences in this dysgenic compote ultimately express the same thing: international gibberish. The next hundred years will see our tribe return to its original language. This will give birth to a new era in terms of love of wisdom!”

“You have already talked about it quite a lot. I also read your notes on this topic. This is all very interesting, but don’t you think that your own historical character is sabotaging the finer aspects of your teaching?”

“What?” Hird’s eyes suddenly light up. The deep furrows on his cheeks widen and his mouth snarls in disdain.

Konrad pretends not to notice Vidkun’s temper and continues: “While I see the logic in your observations, don’t you think it’s difficult for people to accept the scientific validity of a theory when it comes from the mouth of a convicted child rapist?”

“Mating is a completely different practice for our tribe than the social porn propaganda of the modern century, with its romance and whatever else it is feeding us with. You know that, Konrad. One day, when their impotent morals have led the continental nations to extinction, you will then realise what I am telling you.”

“Come on, let’s look at it with the eyes of an ordinary citizen for a moment...”

“An ordinary citizen lets his daughter go to school with kipts and kojkos, ever since she was a child, in a racial cauldron. An ordinary citizen lets his child be raped by ruberoids there. You understand that this is how it is when four girls are sent to such a school.”

Konrad does notice what slipped from the philosopher’s lips, but ignores it. “The ordinary citizen is the one you consider to be

your reader in the future. The ordinary citizen chooses whether your vision will come to be or not. You are talking about nationality! And do you really think they won't notice? That the author is a fascist..."

"Nationalist."

"A fascist and methodical rapist, with a life sentence in Kronstadt for at least four murders, and the book is a mixture of historical philosophy, eugenics and rape!"

"It's about history. About history, Konrad. You are a smart man, but your pansy education shows. You still think that history is done through master's theses and such..."

"Well, what is it done through then?" The experienced interviewer doesn't lose his cool. "Rape?"

Vidkun snatches a page from Gessle's notepad. A guard in a dark blue uniform jumps into frame after the sudden movement and hits the tribesman on the wrist with his rubber baton. Hird yelps in pain, the paper flies into the air. Three-time Oscar Zorn Award nominee, world-famous documentarian Konrad Gessle raises his hand in the direction of the prison guard. He lowers the baton, but remains alert next to the man stroking his wrist.

"Pen," Vidkun looks angrily in Gessle's direction.

Clenching the writing stick in his fist, the prisoner casts triumphant glances towards the guard. "You! If you'd be so kind, hand me my page too." The rubber baton has already risen menacingly into the air when Gessle tears a new sheet from the notepad and places it on the steel table in front of Hird.

"See now? Cross-breeding." Vidkun's carefully combed hair has become tangled in the struggle, and a single light brown strand hangs in front of his eyes. Keeping the page from sliding with his elbow, Hird tries to put the pen on the paper; it feels sharp and dangerous in his hand. The man suddenly gets angry. "Please release my other hand. I can't do it like this."

At Gessle's pleading look, the guard takes the key ring from his belt. Now Hird directly addresses the viewer: "Thousands of years ago, our ancestors came here, to the land on the edge of the world. They came here on dog sleds, through the insurmountable pale. Only the strongest-willed specimens retained their sanity during this heroic transition. Weak-spirited, continental specimens

were left behind, at the mercy of the pale. Our disciplined ancestors simply separated them from the herd. Those who lost their minds. Thus, only the Haakons and Gudruns, with a purified, steadfast soul and unbreakable will, stepped onto the grey soil of Katla. In half a century, these primogens hunted all the mammoths of Katla to death. They flourished.” Vidkun Hird triumphantly stretches his freed hands and begins to draw tiny dots on the sheet of paper.

“This is elementary eugenic law, Konrad, elementary. The more challenging the environment, the further the human develops from steppe-mural form. Here in the dark, snowy expanse... Man is not meant to live here. Simply to survive, a superhuman tendency must arise.”

Gessle lifts his shoulders in anticipation, but he doesn’t interrupt and nods in understanding.

“The superhuman tendency is not limited by moral anachronisms. Superhuman tendency is weighed lust. Everything is possible for him, nothing is forbidden. Through blood, in the dark of night, from one winter to another, it passes from generation to generation. You too, Konrad, have a superhuman tendency in you.”

Konrad nods. An unhealthy redness spreads on Vidkun Hird’s face. The redness is somewhere between a fever and an allergic rash. “All of us, including you, are obliged to amplify this primordial being in yourself. Like the jaws of a predator that grow tougher as they chew meat. The duty... the duty you have to the litter. That they, too, should have big jaws, the kind that can hold a lot of meat.”

Vidkun admires the artwork, with a proud smile that in no way wants to match his face. The camera can’t yet see exactly what’s happening on the page, but Gessle reclines closer to the picture.

“A rare creature. The middle one of them. A unique treasure.”

The projector buzzes. Jesper takes a wrapped copy of Vidkun’s paper from the folder and places it on the coffee table. Something strange is carefully mapped on the page, an elegant constellation of dozens of dots. Khan’s mouth drops open in horror. ICP agent Tereesz Machejek, coldly composed, makes a note in his notebook.

“You can’t imagine, Konrad, how hard I fucked her. You can’t imagine...” Vidkun Hird manages to say before Jesper hastily turns

the projector off.

June, twenty years ago.

The pine forest on the cliff by the beach is dim and cool. The sun is scorching above the tops of the pines, but only a few spots of light reach down here, where the sand is woven into the maze of roots, like the golden floor of the sea. For a moment, there is complete silence under the trees. From a hundred metres away, you can hear the heather crunching under the sneakers of the approaching boys, until the sea breeze rustles the pine needle ceiling again. The trunks of the trees sway slightly, a maze of dark orange columns, sides streaked golden from the sun. The sweet smell of tree sap floats beneath the forest. The dusty aftertaste of chamomile, a sweet and bitter bouquet in little Tereesz's nostrils. A match is lit; the thick puffs of smoke rising from the "Astra" he stole from his father sweep away all other scents, framed cleanly in a single beam of light. Tereesz is enjoying himself, his windbreaker under his head. He practises making smoke rings in the glow of light. Just a few kilometres from here, in the settlement, is his father's diplomatic villa. That house, so close to the popular summer beach, had suddenly made Tereesz a popular boy three weeks ago, at the beginning of summer vacation. Just as the others' footsteps become clearly audible from behind the hill, Tereesz blows a small ring through the big billowing smoke jellyfish.

"Oh! I did it..." he exclaims, demolishing his masterpiece.

"What?" asks Jesper, who has reached the hill, in shorts and a sailor's shirt. "What did you manage to do?"

"The smoke ring went through the second one."

"You smoke now?!" Jesper is shocked.

"Want some? 'Astra'. It's the strongest."

"Give me one, Tereesz, I'd take one!" The bellowing Khan reaches Jesper's side. A pair of binoculars hangs from his neck on a leather strap.

"There," Tereesz throws the package towards Khan, who fumbles with it. With his tongue sticking out from the effort, he secures the package without dropping it and examines it through his glasses. "Cool," is Khan's professional assessment of the box. The white stars slide along the sky-blue cardboard.

“Pointless,” says Jesper out of the corner of his mouth and steps ahead of Tereesz to explore the land on top of another hill.

“That shirt of yours is pointless.” Tereesz lazily lifts himself up on his elbows and offers Khan a light from a matchbox.

Jesper narrows his eyes and raises his hand to his face like a captain, examining the forest floor in front of him. “Pointless, hm? Anni didn’t think so. You know, she *complimented* me on it. On the last day.”

“You think?”

Jesper turns to Khan. The boy smokes like a beginner.

“Listen, Khan, do you remember, in the wardrobe, Anni said this is a beautiful shirt?”

“She said so. Tereesz, she really said that.”

“Fersen jumped in like a bug and told Anni for me that she has a beautiful dress. And something about her hair too. It was very funny.”

“You can never miss an opportunity to be polite,” Khan says with a smile, and coughs out some smoke.

“Let’s go.”

The three boys move up towards the bank in the glimmering patches of light under the trees. Khan throws away the smoke with an unsuccessful flick and begins twirling his binoculars on their strap. His backpack shakes as he accelerates down the descent. Running down the slopes, most of the boys jump over the heather bushes; only Jesper, worrying about his white trousers, strolls with dignity, hands in his pockets as if on an evening walk. The rumbling of the sea grows in the trees the closer they get to their usual spot on the cliff.

There are signs posted on the log fence marking the danger of collapse, depicting a man falling down a precipitous slope. Across the footpath, climbing into the bushes right below the sign, Khan explains to Tereesz, “Look, they call it the North Sea, but it’s actually an ocean. Theoretically it crosses the pale and turns into your Igress Sea. Up until Graad. This makes the North Sea interisolar. It’s a question of classification.”

Together as a trio, they try to keep the conversation as academic as possible for the third week in a row, in order to impress everyone with the character of their business when they

come back in the fall. Jesper, lagging behind as he moves cautiously through the bushes, continues in the same spirit. “We didn’t have such a word as ocean in Katla, for us everything was a sea.”

A vast aquamarine body of water spreads out in front of the boys from the high cliff edge. Clouds are breaking in the pale blue sky, the bright shining sun is reflected as a streak down on the water. The ocean waves lazily and majestically wash a long strip of sand there. Charlottesjäl. The wind disappears for a moment and a wave of heat hits the boys in the face. Insects emerge from the foliage of blooming cinnamon rose bushes. The beach under the cliff curves long towards the sea, all the way to the Havsänglar hotel at the top of the peninsula. There are small human spots on the sand with red and white striped parasols.

The boys take a seat on the patch of grass between the cinnamon rose bushes, where the crumbly sandstone cliff quickly disappears from sight. Many times Tereesz has theorised how one could basically jump down along this soft rock slope—he would land on the sand embankment that levels off three metres out, and from there he would slide on his heels. Jesper worries about how his clothes would hold up in such a case; Khan just stands out for his cowardice.

Even now, Tereesz sits closest to the edge, while Jesper knocks the binoculars out of Khan’s hand. Spots of the sun are reflected on the curved eyelets of the unit. In the dark, cool heart of the glass, the image of people on the beach below, of summer Nordics with their towels and parasols, amplifies. The image sharpens in turn to be acceptable for Khan: the left +7, and the right +4. Khan bought the binoculars with his own money, in Vaasa, from a hunter’s shop.

Once Jesper has also given up scanning the beach, it’s Tereesz’s turn. With the rubber nose pads pressed into his eye sockets and cheeks, more and more freckled from the sun, tight from squinting, he has to say, “I guess not yet. It’s only ten o’clock. They will come.”

While Khan and Tereesz compare the smoke brands—the Vaasan trash is too light, the Graad stuff stronger still, Khan nods excitedly and praises everything—Jesper aims the binoculars at the beach like a sniper scope. This time relentlessly. The crosshair

lands on the white parasol, but does not find the red flowers it is looking for. Vertical lines move over young families, collapsing sandcastles and brown-bodied sun orbiters, stop at two blonde girls, but then slide on—it's not them. Must have drifted too far. Jesper focuses closer. Somewhere from two hundred metres away, a familiar premonition, a distant constellation, a vastness of matter emerges in the dimness of his heart. He waves his hand to let the boys know that something is going on. Khan and Tereesz shield their eyes from the sun with their hands and look down at the beach.

Refining the focus of the Zeul lenses once again, the pale pink veil sharpens into a belly in Jesper's eyes. Breathing shakes the eyespecs from the girl's navel above the solar plexus, where the curved line of the chest converges into a ring holding together the top of a two-piece bathing suit. White ribbons cut the skin on her shoulders, and the prepubescent breasts under the tricot fabric rise when the girl breathes. The wheel clicks twice at the point where the viewing tubes converge, and in the expanded field of vision, on a beige beach towel, the girl turns onto her stomach. Her ash blonde head of hair and familiar round cheeks flash under a pair of sunglasses. Lazily, Anni-Elin Lund raises herself on her elbows and buries her face in a girl's magazine. Above her small butt, a curiously fine constellation of birthmarks begins, running up her back to her wing bone.

Cooled horror seeps through the seals of the windows into the "Kino" café, where three minds are trying to maintain the surface tension of their coping for the twentieth year. Khan shrugs his shoulders. "Who knows about that? Who knows? I haven't read a single line of it all this time. It's not recorded anywhere!"

Tereesz puts his pencil on the table. "Such a thing is called a control fact. It is intentionally left out of a person's identification record. Even from the official documentation. I have these three folders in my head and there is not one line about it. He knows that. Look at him!"

Jesper's face remains clear. For him, this is all a stage that has already been passed. "That's why this Gösta came to me. The officials simply shrugged. Perhaps he heard somewhere at work

that I knew the girls. They were all quite confused there. Hird also does not explain further. And by the way, I don't believe that shit. He had some boys there because of some principle, but Hird prefers big-breasted Gudruns."

"It doesn't fit the profile, it's not possible timewise," Khan perks up. "He was six hundred kilometers away five hours earlier and bought a crankshaft and a gasket for his fucking raping machine... I don't know, some kind of gasket lobe." After the construction noise of the infamous rape machine, Vidkun Hird's neighbor finally called the police and that was the beginning of the end for him. Inayat Khan, on the other hand, looks at the ICP agent with seriousness in his eyes.

"Tereesz. You have to open the folder now. Continue research. Somehow he must know it, and it's the only serious lead right now besides those crappy letters. You have to."

"You cannot imagine how bad things are now. This is the worst time to dig out any old stuff. There is no more support from Mundi, half of everything is in a state of war. Nobody knows if, for example, Oranjenrijk still exists. They'll let me go if I start this shit..."

"No but, Tereesz, you could still do something about it." Jesper, slightly irritated, is not interested in the impending world war. "You do *this*, it's your job. Do it!"

"Now wait, wait you two! Of course I will. I had that feeling right from the start when you invited me to your class reunion thing. Do you really think I thought you were nostalgic? I myself have this folder open all the time, you know that this folder never closes. You just have to hope that the locals will take it easy. They hate the Co-op anyway. Very rarely does anyone bother to check whether any interrogation papers have been signed there."

Khan smiles slyly. "Interrogation papers? So you're still planning on going there, to Kronstadt?"

"Tomorrow."

"It's good to know that you're still cool, Tereesz."

Jesper smiles too, slightly uncomfortable with his flushed cheeks and pressing tone. "Hardcore! That's fine then."

Tereesz agrees. "This is a very good thing. Twenty years. There should be no hope left after all that time."

“But is there hope then?” Jesper intelligently tilts his head, which is still a little too big for his shoulders.

“Yes. Very good, Jesper. You have been very good.”

“Bill!” The interior designer, who has been out of active work for the past two years, snaps his fingers at the waitress and points his index finger at the table. Nights have not come easily to him. But today everything is different. Tonight, Jesper can treat himself to small sweets. Silly little treats. There’s a night outside the window of the cube, in the dark, where everything is possible. It is also possible that somewhere in the hidden corners of this world, under the permafrost of Lake Vostok or in the Erg desert where Ramout Karzai disappeared without a trace, deep from the lungs of Graad... somewhere they can still be found. As they were then. As little ones. And thereby also become small again. Above the clouds, at the foot of the Corpus Mundi, you only have to lift the veil of raindrops just a little and you will touch them... How good you were for not giving up! Everyone else kept forgetting about us, the night sky was dotted with cold stars, the dark blue dome of the sky swirled above our heads, but we knew you were still looking for us.

5. ZA/UM

Anni-Elin Lund takes off her sunglasses and is blinded by a flash of light. The green-yellow-blue colour splash in the girl's irises scatters across her pupils; her smoky eye shadow sparkles in the light. Her deft head turns like a kitten's. The solar reflection jumps from her girl's magazine to the sand, from the sand to the parasol, as the girl follows it with her eyes.

"What's going on?" Tereesz asks, dangling his feet over the edge of the cliff.

"I don't know. Målin is also there now. She's standing up..."

"I can also see that she's standing, from over here," Khan interrupts impatiently.

"She's standing, and I've got to admit, she doesn't look too bad in that red swimsuit. Two-piece, as is their custom, and oh! She's still... fuck!" The arch of Målin's mouth in the binocular's eyepieces turns to a grin, an evil flash of teeth. Her hand rises from shadowing her eyes to a demonstrative wave above the head. The image disappears as Jesper hides the treacherous lenses under his stomach.

"Down, get on the ground!"

Khan hears blood rushing in his ears and feels a vein throbbing under his arm, his body pressed halfway into a prickly rose bush.

Tereesz, who in his haste simply flopped on his back, is looking up into the pale end-of-June sky. High above him, a lone

white-tailed sea eagle glides on the breeze. It seems as if the bird is just hanging in the air.

“Khan, look, an eagle!”

“What fucking eagle- Ow!” The rose bush suddenly reminds Khan of its presence.

“Don’t twitch, you’re shaking the bush,” Jesper grumbles, lying between them with the binoculars underneath him.

“Well, if they already saw us, it doesn’t matter much if I shake the bush or not. Listen, you gotta check and see what they’re doing!”

“See for yourself.” Jesper slides the binoculars over to Khan.

The bush shakes again as Khan, in his baggy summer shirt, drags himself out. He gets up on his elbows and carefully crawls towards the cliff edge, binoculars in hand. With them raised to his face, he tries to remain invisible by hiding behind a tuft of grass. Quickly, the binoculars shift to focus on a parasol with red flowers on the beach below, stopping on the beach towel. There, to Khan’s astonishment, little Maj is sitting by herself and looking somewhere ahead. A drop of sweat falls on Khan’s glasses. Sensing something bad, he scans closer and closer to the foot of the cliff until, barely a hundred metres away, small theatre binoculars appear, looking directly back into his lenses. Slender Charlotte, the eldest of the sisters, stands there, her other hand on her hip. Her shoulder-length dirty blonde hair flutters in the breeze. This beautiful and terrible creature from the ninth grade is about as far from Khan’s immigrant-grasp as a seat in parliament. And now she stands so close that even as she holds out the theatre binoculars to Målin, her gaze still bores directly into Khan’s distraught eyes. Into his eyes, which he now hides rather than enhance them with his binoculars.

“My god, they also have some kind of small binoculars with them,” Khan informs the emergency meeting.

“That’s what they pointed in this direction yesterday, I knew I should have said something...”

“What, Tereesz?” Jesper suddenly gets angry, “They know then, and you just let us walk right into their trap!”

“Well, sorry, I forgot. I thought that maybe they were looking at that eagle. You know, he also has his nest right here near the rock...”

“Shove that eagle up your ass.” Of course, Khan starts to laugh out loud at this, and Jesper continues. “Now we have nothing left to do but get up from here and wave back and that’s all. I don’t know what we’re going to say about this fucking binocular situation. I really don’t know.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Tereesz stands up determinedly, and Khan grabs at his pants. But soon enough, the three skinny-legged girls giggling on the beach see a skinny blonde-haired guy awkwardly get up next to Tereesz, and then, after a moment, a slightly overweight chap from Iilmaraa joins them.

“Hello girls!” Tereesz shouts. Målin gasps and covers her mouth as the tall, slim figure jumps down from the cliff, four stories high.

The next morning, twenty years later.

The wrinkles of fatigue in the corners of the man’s eyes curve around his cheekbones. His cheekbones create two sharp peaks under his eyes, just like a bird of prey. Furrows on both sides of his cheeks—wait, worry. ICP office blinds have long been drawn over his hazel¹⁰ eyes, and no one has the heart to look in, to peer behind them. This ICP agent also has a freshly shaven chin that juts forward a little, and a long grey neck, skin worn from smoking, against a white dress shirt. A thin black tie hangs from the collar. The rain had stopped overnight, but it’s still cold and windy. With his left hand, he pulls his coat collar closed; with his right, he smokes.

In the bow of a small border guard ship, a young Vaasan officer stands next to Tereesz with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. “What’s in Kronstadt?” he asks.

“Unfortunately, I can’t answer that question,” Tereesz mutters mechanically, his eyes fixed on the autumn morning horizon. A flock of seagulls rise from the reeds at the docks and screech across

¹⁰ Lit. “arbitrary-” or “random-coloured eyes,” namely a very common and unremarkable greenish or hazel colour.

the cold water as the boat's engine revs to a start. A splash of fuel oil forms a chemical rainbow in the tin-like water.

"Coffee?" The young man tries to pick up the conversation again.

"No, thanks."

Tereesz feels a drop of water on his face. Refreshing. The sun is not yet visible in the low grey sky this morning; only specks of airships circle above the city, and the steel silhouette of the great Graad cruiser hangs like a spectre in the bay beyond. *Järnspöken*, they say, iron ghosts. No one likes these ominous ships here. Ghosts out of place. On guard, but for what? Who has declared war on whom? No one. Nor will Graad win any hearts here with its steel umbrella, and Tereesz—who in the eyes of an ordinary northerner looks, talks, and smokes like a Graad man—would not get far here with his talk about motherland Zsiemsk, the hundred-year occupation and the Yugo-Graad massacre. Yes... and also Frantiček the Brave.

Of course he wanted to be like Frantiček the Brave. He still wants to. All kojkos want to be like Frantiček the Brave. Take positions, rise up, once again raise the flags of the time of Zygismunt the Great. *Daring, the joy of life like the rattle of a speeding troika!*¹¹

What happened?

A lone border guard ship makes its long streak across the North Sea. The boat sways quite violently in the waves, and soon Tereesz has to throw away his cigarette so as not to slip on the deck. The poor smoking conditions make shivering outside pointless, so he goes inside to sit hunched on the cabin bench. Moreover, he tries not to look to the other side of the city, down the meandering coastline to where Charlottesjäl remains. God, how he would like to go! Once he came four thousand kilometres from Graad on a magnet train through the pale, didn't call either Khan or Jesper, went straight to Charlottesjäl and hung around like an idiot. Then he went back home. Another week through the pale. They had still been quarrelling over the restaurant thing with Jesper, and

¹¹ This references lyrics from "... Nad läksid õös" by Vennaskond. Original text: "*Uljus, elurõõm kui sööstva troika kuljus!*" English translation originally by Martin Luiga on WordPress.

it seemed pointless to just hang out with Khan. This had been his winter solstice vacation two years ago. Such was his *holiday*. The department's psychiatrist banned him from travelling for a year. Apparently, it is dangerous to go through the pale so often.

Tourniquet between his teeth, Machejek inserts a syringe made of glass and metal into a clearly drawn out vein on his wrist.

But he would still like to see how the cattails bend in the wind. It is so beautiful to watch the ocean wash up on the beach, quietly and peacefully. Somewhere in the colourless distance is the silhouette of the cliff. And cold water. Raindrops. It's beautiful to look at.

Tereesz's veiny hands gently caress the black suitcase in his lap.

"*Haadramutkarsai!*¹²" shouts little Inayat Khan from the edge of the cliff, and jumps. The sun is shining. There is a tickling in the pit of his stomach, as if there are still a hundred metres to go, but the fall only lasts a moment. The sand meets him suddenly. After a few rushing seconds he digs his heels into the sand and the sliding slows down. Little Khan feels a root sting his butt and stones scratching his back, his shirt is untucked from his trousers. His glasses bounce off his face, and the jubilant freckled Tereesz rushes to catch them below. The girls run towards his battered body.

"You're crazy!" Anni exclaims from afar. So he has reason to rejoice as well.

But not little Jesper. He's up there by himself now, looking back and forth between the steep drop, his white pants, and his sailor shirt.

"No." He smacks his lips with amused stubbornness, packs the backpack left behind by Khan and takes a longer route through the forest. He walks at the fastest possible pace, which is a not-yet-undignified trot. From the footpath covered in pine branches, the boy turns onto the suspension bridge between two tall trees and then goes down the stairs on the other side to the boardwalk. The journey down to the beach seems to take forever. He is already fearfully thinking about the nonsense that stupid

¹² "Get off your lazy butt!" Punjabi.

Khan is probably spouting. How is he supposed to play along now without coordination?

Only after half an hour does Jesper reach the beach, and throws up his arms helplessly next to the girls' empty beach towel.

"Sorry. Did you happen to see where those boys who jumped down from there went?" He points in the direction of the towering cliff in the background. This old man was asked to look after the girls' things. Jesper decides that wherever they are, they can't be gone for long. Having baked in the hot sun for a moment, he sits down on the flowery beach towel. After debating with himself whether he should take off his shirt—it's getting really hot—he still decides in favour of taste and lies down on his back on the towel looking as *cool* as possible. The coolness lies in that indifferent pose where his arms are crossed under his head. Jesper is more interested in these clouds right now. He's deep in thought right now. He thinks.

And then a tiny, atomic unit of perfume seeps into his nose. May bells, breath, human skin explode before his eyes. Jesper turns his head, and over the beige of the beach towel, it shines: the fragrant and strange world of girls' things. There are white and pale pink-bowed summer dresses folded together so terribly neatly, little belts and useless trinkets, Anni's fine bracelet, and basket weave beach bags holding just the kind of food girls like. Jesper doesn't remember anything about the food that girls like, but it's certain that there's not much of it. Girls don't like to eat. That much Jesper knows.

In foolish fascination, he raises his hand to a little bottle sticking out of a small handbag. The fragrance oil bottle is in the shape of a pomegranate. Golden liquid flows behind the crimson glass facets, and Jesper looks on, spellbound. The world disappears. Still holding the bottle in his hand, he doesn't even understand why, but his hand secretly slips a small hair tie into the breast pocket of his sailor shirt. He throws himself on his back again and looks at the sun through the glass of the bottle. A timeless moment is suspended in the raspberry-red world of the pomegranate, until suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Charlotte's long legs tower over him. Little Maj looks directly into his eyes from Tereesz's shoulders. "What is he doing with your bottle, Anni?"

Fiery synapses in Jesper's head begin to make connections as soon as the spell is broken, and he doesn't let his surprise appear on his face.

"*Revacholiere*," he pronounces lusciously, and then finishes like an old pro. "*Granate*, number three, very good choice. Strong notes, natural, the juniper berry gives a kind of airy matte finish... No, very good choice, what can I say! Yours, Anni?"

Jesper sits up, quiet and undisturbed. Khan and Tereesz look excitedly in the direction of the girls, especially Anni, who is licking her lime ice cream with a smile.

"Mine, yes," she says, a little cheekily at first, and then becomes more polite. "Your mother works at a perfumery, doesn't she?"

"It's more like she imports rather than produces. Recently. But she's got papers and everything. You know, I've been to the Revachol perfume factory to see how *Granate* is distilled."

"You've been to Revachol?!" Even Charlotte is impressed. At school, she is something of a goddess, a grade above them, with her expensive clothes and high school boys. And now the goddess's eyes widen in surprise. Jesper's ears start burning.

"Once, yes. My mother's coworkers invited her there for an excursion."

Tereesz, who in the meantime has held the flag oh-so-high, thinks that now that the greatest danger has passed, Jesper should be brought back down to earth. "That'd be why you smell like a flower!"

Little Maj on Tereesz's shoulders laughs at everything the boy says. He got lucky in that respect. Tereesz never would have thought that he was a child magnet, but now this and the adventurous jump have already kept him afloat for three quarters of an hour. Khan is completely useless. He catches every third pass from Tereesz, but then he can't do anything with it and just makes noises.

Anni sits down on the towel next to the blushing Jesper. "I think Jesper smells good. Not at all like socks or that changing room."

"That place of yours is really awful," says Målin mildly.

“Honestly, it’s all von Fersen,” Khan now gets his first point across. “F... Fersen has these PE socks. It’s not normal the way they smell.”

Tereesz breathes a sigh of relief. The queue for ice cream was already quite drawn-out. Neither Khan nor Tereesz are chatty guys in an emergency, and Tereesz’s plan was to bury any talk of the binoculars under perfectly picked eloquent words until Jesper’s arrival. Luckily, Maj came to the rescue by begging to sit on his shoulders and chatted non-stop so everyone started laughing.

Now Tereesz feels that it is time to get it out of the way. He lifts Maj off of his shoulders and blinks meaningfully in Jesper’s direction, mentioning as if in passing, “You took all the stuff with you? The smokes? The binoculars?”

Anni-Elin doesn’t go for the “smokes” hook: “What were you doing with those binoculars over there? We already saw yesterday that something was flashing all the time. Like a small mirror. It was exciting!”

“Ah, just birdwatching, you know, there’s a pair of white-tailed sea eagles nesting there...” Tereesz can barely get started when even Målin flashes a wicked grin. “*Birdwatching.*”

Anni laughs next to Jesper, and Charlotte, the wicked goddess, is even sharper. “Isn’t this ‘birdwatching’ popular among gentlemen these days?”

Jesper blushes, but somewhere in the freckled abyss of Machejek, Frantiček the Brave raises his bold head. It’s time! And already he is rushing out of Tereesz’s mouth, all caution thrown to the wind, towards the brightest, most unlikely of prizes. As we *kojkos* do: it’s all or nothing.

“*Golqbeczko moja*¹³,” the whole of Tereesz Machejek turns into a single charming burst of laughter, “well, I guess we saw even rarer birds.”

More often than not, all or nothing means nothing to us dirty *kojkos*. But not that day. On that hot sunny day, twenty years ago. Char-lot-ta! Her shoulders move forward, collarbones come forward. Beneath her arched eyebrows, a smile, the light of a distant star, gleams for a microsecond in her cold green eyes. For Tereesz.

¹³ “My little dove.” Polish.

It says: "A chance!"

Tereesz is so happy! Everything is going so well! The shadows grow, hours pass, the white sand turns yellow, then orange and streaked with shadow. The girls put the beach towels on their shoulders, little Maj yawns and falls asleep under the blanket. The wind dies down, all becomes quiet. A kingdom. Horse-drawn trams line up at the stop in the background. The echoing screeches of those tracks, distant music from someone's yard. The beach empties and the sky becomes a blue-violet gradient. There, Tereesz tells the girls about his father's diplomatic summer house, his summer plans, about the next day. The changing room shadows grow into ghosts and creep like clock hands on the beach. Bands of clouds rise above the smooth water, their bellies curdled purple, the horizon tinged with cyan, magenta, cooled down deep orange. Målin tries on Khan's glasses, Khan can't see anything behind Målin's big black sunglasses. Only the girls' figures, their head-spinning figures, flutter like an upside-down candle flame.

"Bring some apple cider!" shouts Anni-Elin from the door of the last tram. Four pale horses neigh, the cabin glows yellow in the twilight and little Maj, in a white dress with angel wings, sleeps in Målin's arms. A kind fairy godmother's star-shaped wand falls from her hand onto the sandy floor of the cabin.

The three boys stand at the stop and make gasping faces at each other as the tram rolls down the slope.

Warm, sour breath makes the white hotel linen flutter against the Linoleum Salesman's mouth.

Linoleum Salesman. Linoleum Salesman. Linoleum Salesman. With his left hand at his nape, he pulls the double loop of linen into a knot around his neck. The knot is intricate and extremely well tied. The eighth floor balcony door is still ajar, and cool air is seeping into the suite of the Havsänglar hotel. From the balcony there is a magnificent view down to the late evening beach. On the reed floor of the balcony lies a camouflage-patterned telescope, detached from the base, with a reflective shutter. Scout model. Behind the telescope is a modified photocamera. On the balcony, and only on the balcony, not in the adjoining room or the hallway, because that's not the way the Linoleum Salesman likes things...

So it's only on this balcony here that he hears the intense wheezing of evil.

Twenty years later, in the evening.

Vidkun Hird stares, distressed, at the droopy ICP agent standing in front of the barred window of the interrogation room. Despicable. Hird wears his grey prison jumpsuit. "Vidkun Hird" is written on the reflective strip, along with his number and a letter abbreviation. The ICP agent takes off his jacket and drops it carelessly in front of the window. Shirt with sweat stains under the armpits. The agent's movements are uncoordinated. On his chest is a freshly printed badge with a guest identification code. The fan hums.

"Look, you're **inebriated!**" Vidkun looks over his shoulder at the officer standing guard at the door. "The smell of booze is overwhelming... Please take me away from here, I'm not in the mood." Vidkun smiles and listens to fragments of Machejek's conversation with the officer.

"Five minutes... ten minutes... a child's life is at stake..."

The door closes behind the guard, and a suspiciously constructed key flashes in Tereesz's hand for a moment.

"Ma-chee-jek", Vidkun pronounces. "A kojko through and through! Like a Gavrill mongrel, some kind of second-rate lower life form." Hird's hands and feet are both in cuffs this time, the massive irons pinning his hands awkwardly behind his back. But despite this, he lounges almost nobly.

"You lied. Who did you get the drawing from?" Tereesz's eyes are cloudy; he blinks angrily.

"Listen, have you heard of that eugenics study that praises the humble mind of the kojko?"

"Who did you get the drawing from, **pig?**"

"The scholar, you know, recommends in there that your people should be crossed with kipts. To become super workers."

"Shut up!" Tereesz pulls the steel curtains on the windows of the interrogation room. Sudden. The shiny blinds fall with a crash, and immediately there's the sound of the officer's keys jingling nervously through the keyhole.

“Idiot, you want to go to prison, don’t you? We follow *the declaration* here. We don’t have some kind of Graadian anarchy.”

In the windowless room, in pure iron grey light, Tereesz Machejek stands and opens his suitcase on the table. Inside the lining fits exactly one iron box, with ‘ZA/UM’ written on it in white letters.

Hird’s sunken eyes come out of the depths of their caves in horror. There is a banging coming from behind the door.

“You don’t have a permit for this! You must have a permit! Show me your permit!”

“What did you say? I can’t hear you, some **pig** keeps squealing.” Tereesz hits Hird in the face with the iron box. A thick stream of blood flows onto the chest of the prison jumpsuit.

Hird whimpers; at the base of his nose, in the middle of the red jelly, a small bit of white bone protrudes. He faints. The officer’s muffled threats sound from behind the door, but Tereesz’s diamond key rattles in the keyhole.

“I am International Collaboration Police Agent Tereesz Machejek, Mirova, Graad, I have the legal right to conduct interrogations, and if you keep fucking with that door...” The knocking stops for a moment and the ZA/UM clicks open. Everything goes quickly; proficiently, one might say. From the foam padding of the box, Tereesz pulls out a yellowed tube with cannulas hanging from the end. He fastens a hideous, accordion-like device around his wrist with a belt and tightens a rubber tourniquet around Vidkun Hird’s shackled arm. With a slight twist, he screws the hose onto the apparatus and then plunges the needle into Vidkun’s vein. A tiny red spurt of Hird’s superhuman tendency flows directly into the cannula.

Running footsteps can be heard from behind the steel-curtained window, heavy boots on the prison floor. Reinforcements. The lid of the device snaps open on Machejek’s wrist. A row of ampoules appears, full of yellow liquid like the yellowed teeth of a smoker under the upper lip, in a mouth stretched out like a smile. There’s a quiet hiss as the first ampoule clicks into place. The bellows on the lid shudders for a moment and then the apparatus on Machejek’s wrist begins to breathe softly like

a pet. The piss-yellow liquid is pumped into Vidkun Hird's wrist. The man snaps his eyes open and starts to gasp in panic.

"You know what this is? It's a waste, you swine!" Tereesz hisses between his teeth, right in front of Vidkun's swollen face.

A little blood and saliva splashes from the man's mouth onto Machejek's face, as he rolls his eyes in fear and cries: "I lied. You're right. I... I've never seen them, my cellmate..."

"I don't care what you think."

"I don't think anything, I'm telling you, I had a cellmate, several years ago, Deerek..."

"I don't care what you think. I want your truth." Tereesz's eyes are bulging and terrifying. He yanks the tourniquet from Vidkun's arm, and its veins, swollen from the mesquine solution and lysergic acid, visibly begin to open.

Suddenly, Vidkun clenches his teeth so hard that it seems as if they'd break at any moment. "You can't get anything from me. Now you can't get anything from me," he squeezes madly. "I am so strong!"

A battering ram sounds from behind the door.

"I really like that you think so. It's best if you think so." Tereesz gasps and screws the second cannula to the device. It's for him. With his eyes fixed on his wrist, he jabs the needle into his vein.

The first ampoule is empty; the next one Tereesz shares with Vidkun, agitated and stuttering. "It's a meat grinder. You can't imagine how I'm going to fuck you with it right now." The urine-yellow liquid breaks through Vidkun's blood-brain barrier, and a huge pressure builds up in the top of his head, inside his skull, like an air bubble. With the man's face clenched in his hands, Tereesz starts to scream. His voice pops into Hird's head like white noise, pure screaming violence.

"I'm making you into a cretin, ya feelin' it?"

Vidkun's pressurised skull yields to the force of the agent's hands, snapping open like a flower blossom. It seems as if something is born from there. Vidkun's handcuffs rattle helplessly; he tries to grab hold of the living coagulation that is coming out of his head. Still, pieces of his brain fall through his fingers to the floor. He can't, it's too slippery, there's too much.

“I can see into your cunt head, you’re open in front of me, I’m going to open you up,” Tereesz gasps, and watches as the whole of Vidkun Hird gapes in front of him. The man writhes under the agent’s sharp fingers and tries his best to speak, to tell him what he’s looking for, to say it in human language, but his mouth won’t produce it anymore. And during all the time that Tereesz wades in his head like a tiger in water—in all that time, Vidkun only sees one image from the Tereesz-mirror. There, on the cool surface where Vidkun escapes from the devastating butcher’s work in his own head, Charlotte Lund’s dark green eyes gaze at him. In the depths of her pupils shimmers the chance Tereesz was given. It is so beautiful and so profoundly sad that when Tereesz collapses, screaming, behind the interrogation table, Vidkun begins to cry.

The coast of Vaasa sparkles before him, and beneath his feet the night waves break on the bow of the border guard ship. A yellowish dome of light pollution glows above the city in the background. It seems indescribably joyous, all those white and yellow city lights fitting in the palm of Tereesz’s hand. And even though it’s cold outside, he’s not wearing his coat. His jacket is wide open, and Vidkun Hird’s blood is splattered on his white dress shirt. The ICP agent has his hands comfortably handcuffed; the young officer helps him stay upright up on the deck.

“What kind of racket were you causing there?” the officer asks.

“*If I wrote you a symphony,*” sounds from the rattling transistor radio inside.

“Listen, thank you very much for letting me out here, it’s a beautiful evening!”

“Okay...” The officer begins to laugh softly.

“If you don’t mind, could you turn up the song?”

“What?”

“I promise, I won’t jump overboard, turn it up!”

“I’m more worried that you’ll fall overboard, but alright.” The officer steps into the ship’s cabin and onto the deck. A massive beat is heard over the noise of the waves and the sound of the engine, and a man’s falsetto says, “*If I wrote you a symphony, to show you how much you mean to me...*” Tereesz’s foot begins to tap. With the

kind of relief he only feels after using “ZA/UM”, he sighs to the officer, “You know, I just solved the disappearance of the Lund children.”

“The what?”

“You don’t know, then? But it’s very famous!”

“When was that?”

“Ah, a long time ago, you weren’t even born then. But it doesn’t matter, I feel so good inside right now. I think I might’ve solved it!” Tereesz laughs. This laugh is gloomy, but sincere, very sincere, and the night over the North Sea laughs back at him.

6. FRANTIČEK THE BRAVE

Sometimes the disappearance that gets solved is the saddest of them all. In the pre-hydroelectric era, when the Peremannaya Veera¹⁴ was simply the Veera River, operetta star Nadia Harnankur threw herself into its streams. She was at the peak of her popularity. That could've been the end of it—one autumn evening after an intoxicating performance, Nadia just disappeared, her heavenly soprano voice still echoing in the halls of the opera house. Was the old man who saw her walking to the bridge in an evening dress lying? Or maybe the fan who claimed to have met her in Revachol a year later? Perhaps there was some truth in the book, written by a paranoid master of pulp novels, in which Nadia is actually a spy for the Mesque, a nihilist, and the destroyer of the world. Who could know?

But one thing is for sure. No one wanted the remains of Nadia's evening dress to appear out of the muddy sediment of the lake. There was no need for the colony of river mussels in the eye caves, the gold-toothed smile of demise, the stunned expressions on the faces of the hydroelectric station's construction brigade.

Failure. Failure shapes the world. History is the story of failure; progress is the succession of failures. Development! says the futurist. Loss, states the rebel. Hangover! cries the moralist

¹⁴ Russian, Peremennaya is “alternate” as in alternating current, or “variable”.

from the back row. Failure: the rebel gets angry. Time is pale, he says. The failure of the Creator—an introduction to an era. Kras Mazov shoots himself in the head, and Abadanaiz, together with Dobрева, takes poison on the Ozonne Islands. Beneath the palms the wind blew the flesh from their bones into sand. Who could've known? All the good people in the world came together. Teachers, writers, migrant workers squatting in the trenches... young soldiers abandoned their battalions. What beautiful songs they sing! It seems to them that brave children are the favourites of history, as they wave white flags with a crown of silver horns.

And then, they lose.

Coups are suppressed. On les Immensités Bleues, anarchists are piled up in mass graves. The communists, defeated on the Graad isola, retreat to the backwater degenerated-bureaucratic workers' state of Samara. The disappearance of the revolutionary lovers resolves thirty-five years later, when the embracing skeletons of Abadanaiz and Dobрева are found on the beach of one of the nameless Ozonne islands on a Saturday night outing by Eugene, the eight-year-old offspring of the great banker Riche LePomme. In shorts and holding a butterfly net, he stands and looks intently at the bones of the past as they cling to each other. Faded and smooth. Where does one begin and the other end? Time has shuffled them like a deck of cards. Afterwards, Riche will erect a hotel there, along with a now world-famous spa.

But the biggest of the failures isn't how Mazov's world-revolution became a bloodbath and then a loss, nor how the bones of lover-rebels are now being displayed in the waiting room for aromatherapy. Its internal unrest subdued, Graad became a world power, a giant state; its cities proliferated, and from orbit the light of this tumour shines like a entwined, sparkling thread. Entire nations are vanishing from the world map. Countries in which Mazov once had many supporters. Countries like Zsiemsk. Countries whose peoples have been called *kojkos* as a derogatory umbrella term, and that for so long that eventually they even started calling themselves that way.

Tereesz Machejek is seven years old. His exemplary-kojko father, a diplomat and Moralism bootlicker, has not yet taken him to school in Vaasa. The city-slash-zone-of-ecological-catastrophe, the

post-megalopolis and pre-necropolis of human settlement, the penultimate stage of development—the Polyfabricate—stretches along the border of Zsiemsk and the Yugo-Graad. The monstrosity absorbs the historical centres of Zsiemsk—the royal old town of Ferdydurke, the pine-tree parks of Lenka. Summer begins, and in the dingy cellars one name is whispered. Children shout it in the courtyards of houses. The leaves of the trees rustle with tension on the quiet streets; it's merely an echo of the name that rings in the ears of the Graad militiaman.

“Frantiček the Brave...”

He is the bravest of the *kojkos*. Movie star, revolutionaire. Not long ago, at the end of spring, civil unrest had been brutally suppressed, and he has not been heard from for two months since. It is said that he roams the distant taiga, on the Yikutan reserve, and is acquiring special abilities from the shamans of the vanquished natives. Fantastic things! He has the cheekbones and longing gaze of a steppe eagle, a gentle smile, as if the sun was rising above the taiga. This smile he saves only for those rare occasions when his serious, serious eyebrows aren't furrowed from worry... His heroic face appears in forbidden films in a knitwear factory, where the women are bold, where the white screen is stitched together from tank tops and underpants. No, Frantiček the Brave is in Samara! He is in negotiations. He will come with the troops of the People's Republic! Don't be naïve, Frantiček is roaming far and wide in Katla, in winter's orbit, staying in the hut of Ignus Nilsen. They will never find him! Ssh! Frantiček the Brave would never hide! Only yesterday he was seen in the queue for meat, he now has a false beard and a butcher's apron, and he called himself Vozam Sark, read it backwards!

But months pass. There is no news, and soon autumn will come. Industrial haze like a mourner's veil drapes on top of gold and red leaves. In October, a completely different story begins to circulate in Zsiemsk, in quiet and timid tones. Frantiček the Brave was shot behind a waste disposal facility.

7. THE WORLD IS GOING WRONG, TIME IS OUT OF JOINT

In his bed under the basement window, Inayat Khan has been tossing and turning for an hour already. It's getting dark outside, and the pale light of the streetlight seeps into the room. It's chock-full of junk, as if frozen in place, dust particles shining in the blue-grey beam of light from the window. On the tables, under draped cloths, rest the muted forms of disappearance memorabilia. There are dark squares of picture frames on the walls; the shadow of the display board falls on the floor and dissipates. In the place of honour in the middle of the basement, a glass display case shines gently and invitingly. Small bric-a-brac sits and waits on many, many shelves. Wake up already, dear collector! How much longer will you be lounging around? We know—you're not sleeping.

Khan's fingers fumble over the bed's headboard. He jostles things around and searches for the button on the tape recorder, not really making much of an effort to find it. It seems suddenly that it would be more pleasant to curl up under the covers instead. Pedestrians' shoes click on the damp pavement outside, coming home from work, and Khan makes a desperate effort to catch a few more Z's. Bah, at least try a little! say Khan's exciting toys. Let us hear your fun wake-up song! The atrophied heart muscle in Khan's

chest starts to hurt from the lack of effort, and nothing will come of trying to keep sleeping. His hand reaches for the headboard again, a finger moving along the ivory keys of the tape recorder. Under the drop cloths, breath is held in anticipation. And then there is a click, and before the soft arpeggios of the guitar, before the soft timbre of the old-fashioned electric organ, the tape crackles for a few bars.

♪ *It's been a long, long,
long time
How could I ever have lost you...*¹⁵

A loud, pounding drum break and a bass come in from the left channel.

♪ *... when I loved you?*

In his pyjama pants, Khan sits up to the sound of rolling drums. Pushing aside the snake-skin-like sheets, he slips his feet into his Little Muhh pointed-toe cotton slippers. His jowls with their unkempt beard shake in one last yawn, until he widens his big almond-shaped eyes and puts on his glasses. He ruffles his hair and begins to lazily sing along. He has a beautiful voice.

♪ *It took a long, long,
long time
Now I'm so happy I found you*

His hairy belly slightly hanging over his pyjama pants, he plays the next break on his personal air drums...

♪ *How I love you*

... and presses the switch with his foot. Old light bulbs click on and off in sync with the drum break. The filament buzzes for a moment and then goes out. The dodecahedron, autographed by the unknown missing dodecaphonic composer Comte de

¹⁵ Lyrics from "Long Long Long" by the Beatles. The song is in English in the original text.

Perouse-Mittrecie, sinks from golden light back into darkness. When the bulb lights up again, the title on the spine of a book emerges from the haze—“*Los Desaparecidos*”¹⁶.

♪ *So many tears,
I was searching
so many tears
I was waiting*

The place is energetic; singing loudly and shamelessly, Khan moves through the basement with the air of a performer. A row of ceiling lamps brings the carefully arranged stuff on the tables into view. Wooden filing drawers rise in alphabetical order; there is a portrait of Nadia Harnankur in an oval medallion on the wall; then, a map of the Erg desert with Ramout Karzai’s supposed route to the dunes where he asked God for an audience, with pins marking where he could have found the mysterious end to this journey. Khan pulls the coverings from the tables as he passes, and mystery after mystery unfolds before him. Seraise dragons carved on gold and green ships, a row of twelve miniatures barely the size of a palm. Rows of oars in a dark blue artificial sea with white crested waves; the papyrus-yellow sails of the small ships are proudly lowered. Men in reed armour stand on board, pennants fluttering on their spears. This is Gon-Tzu’s thousand-man expedition. At the order of the Emperor of Safre, they sailed east from the coast of Samara, more than three thousand years ago. They are looking for peaches of immortality for the emperor—and they are bound never to return. After two and a half millennia, signs of their settlement are found in the east, on the Anise Islands. All things considered, the Gon-Tzu expedition could never have returned. The emperor was cruel and ill-tempered, an absolute ruler, and there are no such things as peaches that make you immortal.

All these beloved objects—trinkets, things left behind—somehow they touch Khan. And how it stings! How odd... he’s never quite figured out what it is. But even so that smile tugs at his lips, like a big fat cat being scratched behind the ear.

¹⁶ “The Missing People”, Spanish. In real life it often refers to the practice of people who were “disappeared” by military regimes.

On the stand above the desk, in the pale light of the green table lamp, everything is about the girls. Newspaper clippings, a mess of notes, and, in the middle, copies of “Målin’s letters”. In a rare case, the handwriting analysis reveals a 95% overlap. The letters arrived to the girls’ parents a year and a half after their last day in Charlottesjäl. “Everything is fine. We are with the Man,” says someone who says she is Målin. “We love you.”

Khan puts a coffee pot on the portable stove, and the song’s outro reverts to being soft and smooth like the beginning. This is his favourite part, in the whole world. He could listen to it forever. He shakes his head with a bitter smile and puts his hands over his heart.

♪ *Now I can see you,
Feel you
How did I ever misplace you?*

The screeching of wheels can be heard outside as a car stops in front of the house. Rain starts to patter softly on the basement window. The tape recorder makes a *click* and the song ends. There is a calendar on the door where no one has bothered to turn the page for two months. It’s still August, and under the twenty-eighth is written “International Day of Missing Persons”. It is precisely in their honour, on the twenty-eighth of August. This is *the* day.

“Ini, your friend Jesper is here, brush your teeth first!” Khan’s mother calls from upstairs in the kitchen.

Khan pulls a frayed bathrobe on over his pyjama pants and trudges up the basement stairs.

“*Harnankur*” stands in a glass display case in the middle of the room.

Two years ago.

Crystal goblets ring. It’s the usual Saturday night hustle and bustle at the Telefunken Tower restaurant. Beyond the panoramic windows lies Vaasa. A smooth ghost. Darkness, snow and lights.

The prices here are expensive, but not expensive in a *tasteless* kind of way. It wouldn’t work if they were, the clientele has too much social aptitude for that. The food is five stars, but the

company? Even higher class! Look, there is the president of the Communications Board with his wife. And the CEO of Freibank having dinner with the charming singer Pernilla Lundqvist and a Vespertine businessman. The charming singer eats a salad with olives, the CEO suggests that the Vespertine business partner get the crab. It's exquisite here, you have to try it! And him over there, next to that bearded professor, isn't that Konrad Gessle, four-time Oscar Zorn nominee? A very intelligent man... Freibank's CEO wears P. Black, of course. Distinguished... And look! There's a thirty-year-old *loser*! The loser lives in his mother's basement. The loser wears the same light blue ruffled shirt he graduated secondary school in.

"We hate you, loser!"

"Who let him in?"

"It's so sad to see, he must be on a *date*. So pathetic! This woman hasn't said anything to him for ten minutes... Listen, what a silence! I'd hang myself."

"Maybe if I gave him some money? Just a little bit, like ten réal, maybe it would be easier for him?"

"Disgusting loser, don't give him anything, I *hate* him."

"He'll definitely not get the bill paid! Certainly can't—hysterical laughter—this wine alone is like forty réal, hah-hah-ha!"

"I hate you, loser. Die, I hate you so *terribly*!"

Khan sweats again and tries to cover his ears with his hands... Shaking his head, blinking his eyes, whatever it takes to end this storm of humiliations, until suddenly—silence! A brunette woman with sharp features is fingering a wine glass across from him. The boredom is palpable. The woman glances at the panoramic windows, then to the criminally elegant dark brown table under her arms. Then suddenly, a flash of thought!

"It is a very beautiful place. They have a new design here, I guess. I remember... The last time I was here, everything was completely different."

Clarity comes into Khan's eyes. "Y-yes! My friend did it! He likes this kind of stuff, minimal, clean. I don't really understand how it was, exactly, but I think he like... invented it. He's quite famous."

“De la Guardie?”

“Jesper. Yes.”

“You know him? He is so talented.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Jesper and I have been friends for a long time. Even before he became famous. To be completely honest...” Khan smiles nervously, “... I probably wouldn’t have gotten any reservations here either. If, well...”

“Ah! I thought so.”

“Thought what?” Khan asks, but the brunette woman doesn’t answer. It’s quiet again. Khan looks across the floor at the guests, who for a moment do not seem to be talking behind his back in contempt. In the distance, at Konrad Gessle’s table, he sees a woman introducing a skinny man with blond bangs to the documentarian. The waiter also notices his fine-mannered presence and rushes to serve the gentleman “the usual”. Ice water with a lime wedge. In a dark grey suit cut to the waist, with a lime wedge between his teeth, the gentleman looks very young and somehow elegantly sleep-deprived. The chic with which a plain T-shirt shows under his jacket is enviable. He can afford it. The shirt features a famous dance artist’s iconic album cover.

“Jesper!” Khan shouts across the tables in an inappropriate voice. His date gets a little startled and then looks questioningly in the direction of Gessle and Jesper’s table.

“There he is,” Khan says happily, as if relieved, to the brunette across the table. He stands up so his friend can see him better.

“Jesper, come on!”

Like this, with sweat stains in the armpits of his ruffled shirt, he stands in the middle of Telefunken’s panoramic restaurant and watches as Jesper furrows his eyebrows in annoyance, then shrugs in Konrad Gessle’s direction. He pretends not to know him.

“Ow!”

It’s a hot Saturday afternoon, eighteen years ago, and a rose thorn has scratched Anni’s thigh just below her short skirt. The girl angrily steps out of the bushes and Doctor Jesper rushes to her side.

“What happened? Let me take a look!” Anni lifts her skirt a tad and then gives up. “Ah, it’s nothing, stupid bushes... Oh!” She

cuts off halfway through the word, the shape of her mouth rounded on the sound. “So pretty!”

“Pretty,” little Jesper agrees; he can still see Anni’s leg in his mind’s eye, the pleated edge of her tennis skirt rising up. Khan pushes the bushes aside, and Charlotte and Målin step onto the cliff’s edge, mouths agape.

“Really, I can understand why you come here all the time. The wind is so cool...” The breeze sweeps Charlotte’s dark blonde hair in front of her eyes. She squints, carelessly pushes aside the lock of hair and says, “Mmm...”

The wind tears white petals off into the air. It seems as if little Maj, in her winged dress, is floating above the rustling bushes. She draws shapes in the air with her fairy godmother wand and feels like the most important person in the world. She sits on Tereesz’s shoulders; he wades through the thorns, not minding them one bit, and sets Maj down on the grass, smiling mischievously past all the scratches. The salty gust of wind subsides, and the syrupy scent of flowers fills the air. Insects buzz. The seven of them can barely fit on the grass in the boys’ secret hideout; that’s how it was planned.

At any rate, Jesper is very satisfied. The boys couldn’t sleep all night. Chuckling, making plans for the next day, conspiring. You could say that the mood was high. Tereesz was against coming to the cliff because of the long journey and the thorns. Jesper, along with Khan, thought that it was still the best place. And it was! The girls are impressed by the view; Khan introduces the classification, pale penetration power, and capacity of the antique Graad cruiser glimmering on the horizon. It seems like Målin hasn’t started yawning yet. And the best thing—even though it’s windy, the weather is still warm enough that Anni wants to sunbathe.

Målin unwraps the beach towel and ends up next to Khan with the chatty Maj. Khan is straining his memory, but unfortunately he can’t find any other interesting things to say about antique airships. Let Tereesz and Jesper field the conversation. He lies on his back and closes his eyes.

The orange flicker of the sun, the sound of water, and the rustling of percussion instruments cool quietly, and in Khan’s popular-science dream, a cosmic autumn orbits above him. And the vibration, as always. It’s getting cold. A faceless, bottomless

epiphery¹⁷ sprawls behind the backs of the giants. Forgotten high in the sky, these ancient communications satellites calibrate their rusty bellies toward the curvature of the earth. Catapult-like joints swing into position, boulders screech like a flock of storks at the edge of the stratosphere, communications units rattle into the ether. A cluster of compound-eyed measuring devices looks down, to where the southern coast of the Katla isola blooms in a brief burst of summer. This piece of land, like a beautiful dream, snoozes amongst the chilled cradle of vortical motorways and the pale's thousand-kilometre arcs. The past, approaching, all-consuming. The pale is all around. But the dark green forests and the white strip of beach, the sparkling North Sea mirroring the sun, the Vaasa Archipelago and little Charlottesjäl still endure. And the less matter remains, the smaller a space you squeeze it into, the more strangely it sparkles.

The seven of them lie atop the cliff in a semicircle on a green cloth, with the waves breaking below. The sky above is a fluffy *vy från ett luftslott*¹⁸, its cloud cities reflected in the curvature of Khan's glasses. He opens his eyes.

Charlotte Lund, made wholly of scented stuff, pulls her summer dress over her head in one snappy movement. Her curves and smooth tanned skin are visible. Tereesz can feel the slenderness of her joints; it bothers him. It's hot.

Anni is ashamed of her birthmarks and lies on her back with sunglasses as a headband. Jesper dares not say anything about it, although he would very much like to see them. And Målin, modest, just unties the bow on her dress to feel the wind blowing in from under the skirt. The fabric of the dress flutters like a sail.

"Cider!" Tereesz, who has stripped to the waist, announces in a stately manner. And indeed, out of the gloom of his backpack, a cellar cooler comes into view, a container that was seized last night in an unprecedentedly complex operation. Three-litre. Drops of water shimmer on the glass, the hermetic cap hisses open and a small vapour of carbon dioxide rises from the mouth of the bottle. The apple cider fizzes and foams from the bubbles.

¹⁷ Epifeerium in the original, a made-up word. Probably a riff on "periphery" but instead of peri- (around, surrounding) it uses epi- ("on top of", above, over).

¹⁸ "View from an air castle", Swedish.

The girls' mouths are on fire; only little Maj looks confused and drinks her lemonade with pieces of lemon. Tereesz carefully places the cold bottle against Charlotte's hot cheek. His father finds out the next weekend that the cider is missing, when he wants to offer it to gallery owners and curators of the cultural cooperation at a garden lunch. But Tereesz doesn't care. Look how beautiful she is, Charlotte, and how happy. And besides, his father is an academic capitulator, an exemplary kojko and a Moralist bootlicker. Frantiček the Brave wouldn't think much of him.

"Why are you being so quiet?" Målin asks quietly so the others don't hear, and turns to lie on her side facing Khan.

Anni perks up. "It's strange that *you* should say that. Socky!"

"Oh, shut up." Målin laughs a soft, warm laugh, that Khan can feel brushing against his ear. "Talk about something... you always have such awesome presentations. In history and science classes..." In his heart, Khan jumps up from behind his school desk and punches the air triumphantly.

"Yeah! That story about peaches was really cute!"

"Anni, don't interrupt..." Målin frowns. "Wait, what peaches?"

"Tell that one, Khan, it's super cool. That Iilmaraa, with the fleet and emperor..."

Now Khan finally opens his mouth. "Wrong *isola*, dude. *Samara*."

"Well sorry, I didn't mean it, like, you know, in a racist way."

"Very funny, Jesper. Anyway..." Now Khan also turns towards Målin, just a little. Carefully, as to not make any contact. "You were sick that time, I remember." Khan remembers very well, he wanted to postpone the presentation so that the performance would not be wasted, but the teacher didn't understand the subtleties of the situation. "In Samara—more precisely in Safre—peaches have an important place in mythology. If the Anise Islands have cherries, Safre has peaches. They grow wild there, you can pick peaches in the forest. Cultivated apricots, peaches and nectarines, they all come from Samara. Even now, a lot of fruit is brought to us from the SRV through the pale." Målin nods studiously.

“So. Once upon a time, when Katla was not even inhabited, the Emperor of Safre sent his most famous explorer, Gon-Tzu, to bring back peaches of immortality...”

Twenty years later.

The city of Vaasa glows blue. Königsmalm streets during rush hour, the glow of lanterns with dideridada¹⁹ detailing. The dark grey dome of the sky and the crowd in colourless Nordic clothes passing below it, like a migration of ghosts from a Suruese fairy tale. Tereesz’s head is spinning; it’s been so long since he last had a smoke. His head is dull and throbbing, nicotine presses on his eyes, sounds are distant, muffled. He sits down on the steps in front of the police station, coat sleeves tucked under his bum. A slight drizzle of rain dampens his sleep-swollen face.

Five minutes ago, his clothes had been thrown in his face and he was released. The last shreds of the dream still linger, echoing in the back of his head. The monster slips along the rippling waterline, just below waking, a throbbing headache. “Danger,” he usually responds, he is made of violence, but sometimes he says he is a Man. He parts the rose bushes and watches them on the cliff top. He is always there, he wants to tear them apart, but he waits patiently. In the pine forest where he had blown smoke rings, Tereesz sees him sneaking from tree trunk to tree trunk. He crouches on the edge of Khan’s binoculars; down on the beach, little Maj in his lap; Maj falls asleep, and the doors of the horse tram close. He is engulfed, bottomless, nothing stands under him and everything could collapse inside him at any moment. His days are numbered. The rest of his life is coming soon. Wrong and terrible. Then, when they go into the water at the girls’ secret beach in the dizzying darkness of their last night, he comes to their beach towels and sniffs their things. The Man gnaws on a meat piroshki and looks at her from behind the sunshades. Tereesz is Agnetha, the cashier at the ice cream shop, and from the corner of his eye, he sees a new face on the Man every time he passes by the window. He wears Vidkun Hird like a costume, or a grown-up Khan whom Tereesz now fears for some reason, or sometimes he’s Tereesz’s

¹⁹ Revachol’s arabesque architectural style.

father. Tereesz will be embarrassed for the rest of the day when he sees his friends, but he can't help it.

Slowly, timidly, he makes his way through the crowd, afraid to bump into someone, to anger someone. People in dark clothes flow along the street, traffic lights glow at a large intersection and motor carriages stop, puffs of smoke rise from mufflers, engines thump. At the intersection of the pedestrian crossing, he goes along with the swaying mass, and above him, panels of light shine in the dimness, a giant lingerie model smiles high up on the wall of the department store. The rows of payphones glow. When Tereesz steps into a booth, it really starts to rain outside. The booth's windows drip, and somewhere in Vidkun Hird's memories—or in his own jail dream, Tereesz isn't sure—a monster crouches over the girls and puts their torn bodies back together into chimaeras.

"You know..." The slushy snow creaks under the wheel of the taxi, the granite pavement crunches. Khan looks out the window. "One thing... that I didn't mention earlier... about myself." The car stops in front of his home in Saalem. The brunette woman holds her handbag in her lap, the man opens the door on his side. "It doesn't usually come up. It just doesn't. But you should know this about me. That in fact..." He steps out, leans back into the cabin: "... I am the world's leading expert in the field of disappearances."

Khan slams the taxi door shut behind him, takes three steps across the pavement onto the outside staircase, slips the key into the slot, and steps into the hallway of the wooden house. The starting-crack of the engine can be heard coming from outside, the machine kicks off. It is dim and warm inside. Potatoes are boiling in the kitchen. "Mom, it went terribly!" Khan picks up the phone receiver; the apparatus hangs on the wall, with numbers pinned nearby on the wallpaper with knopkas²⁰. "Absolutely terrible, don't even ask!" His yellow fingers jump on the keys, a series of sixteen digits. An interisolar connection, at the expense of the respondent.

"Mr. Ambartsumjan, I was given your number from an auction."

"Mr. Ambartsumjan is not available at the moment," comes the voice of the male secretary, quietly, from a distance.

²⁰ Thumbtacks.

“No, you don’t understand, I’m calling about ‘Harnankur’. I need to get the manual for my airship. This is very important... I’m sorry, can you hear me?” The phone hisses, the call is fading into the pale. The noise of time.

Two years later.

“Heard anything about Tereesz?” Jesper asks as soon as he enters Khan’s hallway. The sweet smell of poverty fills his nose. What is this? Some kind of cinnamon? Expired bread?

“No, I don’t know anything. I was just about to ask you. This kind of stuff, I have to say, it worries me.” Khan leads Jesper straight to the basement, his bathrobe flapping about. “Clothes,” he says, pointing to the rack above the stairs.

Jesper is uncomfortable. The same weird smell as in the past. He can’t bear it. He would rather live on the streets, would rather burn all this trash than settle for such a stench. Above all, he fears that Khan’s poor old mother will pop up from somewhere at any moment. But Khan had insisted, adamant: let’s do it at his place, he doesn’t feel like going downtown, let’s do it at his place or not at all. Jesper hadn’t felt that he could argue the point, given his past transgressions. With a heavy heart, he takes the last step to the basement. But then, on seeing the spectacle spread before him, the little boy in him wins the day.

“Oh!”

“Yep. Not too shabby, you would say.”

“*I would say!*” Jesper’s big head spins at the end of his neck. “Oh!” he shouts, “Gon-Tzu!” He taps the man standing in the bow of the first vessel of Safre’s fleet with his index finger. A miniscule Gon-Tzu, barely the size of a fingertip and with long drooping whiskers like a Samaran dragon, holds a pennant bearing the Emperor’s coat of arms. In the little man’s other hand is a compass the size of a pinhead, a miracle device that he is said to have invented himself.

“It all came together a year ago. You remember, last time I only had the ships ready, not even painted yet.” Khan stands proudly in the middle of the room.

“Wait, wait! What is *that*?” Jesper points to the gleaming display case behind him.

"This... this is my crown jewel! This is the apple of my eye! Jesper, this is the 'Harnankur'!"

"An original?!" Jesper reverently steps towards the display case.

"Of course not, don't be naïve. That would cost more than *you*," laughs Khan with the superiority of a professional. "This is a copy. One of two."

The fragile silhouette of "Harnankur" stretches behind the glass of the display case. Jesper strokes the case, taller even than him, and looks for the light switch.

"Look, there under the edge, under the base, a big switch."

When Jesper switches on the lights, it's not the display case that turns on, but instead ten floors' worth of bright lights on the antique airship. The model hangs in the middle of the display case on invisible strings, like a swan made of silver and lacquered wood. On the first-class bridge, behind the crystal glass walls, small chandeliers shimmer through the four-storey hall. The tiny people motionlessly descend the spiral stairs. She looks so light! Crushable. The silver arches straighten like sails on the ship's hull and converge at the bow, into the coat of arms of the Empress of Shest, a nickel swan.

"It's bewildering, y'know, to imagine they thought something like this could pass through the pale. Look! Here are the decks." Khan is overjoyed that he can finally show it to someone. "Decks! These little baskets here, open air decks! Silly stuff. Hanging out in the pale. With your gal. Honestly, I could stare at it all day!"

"I can empathise. Well, it can't be, come on! Well, it's not too shabby..." Jesper walks around the display case and shares his discoveries with Khan who sits in an armchair next to the model, as if he hadn't stared at it every day for the last two years.

"Sit there, there's a particularly good view over there." He points to the chair; Jesper is too excited to sit. "Wait, the propellers, do they..."

"Now go back to that switch, won't you, and push it forward a little more," says Khan with a cheeky, cheeky smile. Jesper puts his hands on his head and his mouth falls open. The swan's large silver propellers, sharp as knives—three per side under the belly of the ship for manoeuvring, pointing towards the ground at different

angles, plus two even bigger ones at the stern—begin to rotate quietly at first, and then with an increasingly loud hum. The individual blades disappear, leaving only shimmering, hazy discs. The propellers are so large and so dynamically directed that Jesper gets the impression that the ship will take off from the display case any moment now and fly away, disappearing from space and history.

On the hull of the ship, in the Graadian alphabet, in a beautiful italic font: “*Harnankur*”.

Jesper unscrews the cap on his water bottle and Khan makes himself a coffee. They are sitting by the display case, in armchairs. Looking at the ship, the interior designer again has that same foolish hope that Khan sometimes manages to infect him with. Still in his bathrobe and pyjama pants, the lazy cat sips his hot coffee and Jesper stares at him in surprise. “It’s seven o’clock, don’t tell me you were *asleep*?”

“Slightly depressing, I know.”

“That it is.” Jesper laughs a black laugh and stops for a long moment to stare at “Harnankur”. “I don’t understand, why wouldn’t he call? Tereesz, I mean. Straight away, yesterday. This is my second sleepless night in a row. It’s starting to piss me off.”

“I’m not tossing and turning or anything. I’m like this, nocturnal, all the time. A bit of an artist type.” Khan smiles. “Maybe he learned something from Hird and jumped right in.”

“Then you don’t believe that, well, Hird himself...”

“... did something? Tsk! Hardly. Fantasy! You can’t even imagine how much these fellows can lie. I did ten! I did a hundred thousand, I did more than Ernő Pasternak! They’re all about numbers and fame. But this drawing was...”

“One to one! I know!”

“That. Something should still come from that.”

“Something, yes.” Jesper stands up and takes his messenger bag from the rack. “But I don’t think that Tereesz is fishing anywhere. As far as I understand, we kind of have, you know, an agreement. That when it comes to the girls, we’ll do it together.”

“Yes...” Khan agrees, but from the corner of his eye, he is still peering at “Harnankur” with mysterious absent-mindedness. Until a soft black package lands in his lap.

“Look! A... er... female friend gave it to me. She must have thought I had gained weight. Or something. Should be a good fit for you.” Khan pulls out a brand new Perseus Black dress shirt from a package labelled “PB”.

“Hey, thanks, man!” He is sincerely grateful.

“You can throw the ruffled rubbish away now.”

Tereesz’s potato-coloured kojko hair is wet from the rain and almost looks black.

“Excuse me, you wouldn’t happen to have change for ten réal?” He crouches behind the kiosk counter in his long coat.

A teenage girl chews gum indifferently. “No, no I don’t.”

“Very well, I would like the cheapest thing you have—a box of matches, for example—and please give me back coins.”

“Sorry, sir, we don’t sell matches.” There is nothing more obnoxious than a whining teenage girl. The girl stretches the toothpaste-blue gum between her mouth and fingers.

“What the hell, a pack of Astra, then?”

“What?”

“Astra.”

“What’s that?”

“... A lollipop, give me that lollipop over there, now!”

A raspberry-flavoured lollipop with a caramel swirl clacks against Machejek’s molars. He deposits the coins into the jingling payphone. There is a sweet smell of rain in the booth; it’s beautiful to watch how water streams down the glass. Tereesz likes it in the booth. The lollipop is good too. Good thing there were no matches. With the hearing tube tucked between his shoulder and his ear, he turns the payphone²¹ dial. His head has cleared substantially. The caramel is sweet and the raspberry is tart, the way a raspberry is. For fuck’s sake, that Jesper is never at home! On the table, under the apparatus, a notebook with the International Collaboration Police emblem is open at phone numbers. Tereesz’s rain-wet fingers leave stains there.

²¹ The original made-up word “taksomaat” is something between “taksofon” (payphone) and “automaat” (machine, robot, something automatic, maybe even a vending machine).

“K, K, Kabroleva, Khan.” The wheel rattles again and behind the glass, in the grey glow of Vaasa, dozens and dozens of people come out of the door of the department store and dozens more enter. The Freibank sea eagle glides above the bank on a lit sign, which glows golden and steams in the rain.

“Hello, I’m looking for Inayat Khan.”

“You’re Tereesz, or...?” Khan’s mother’s worried voice rattles through the earpiece.

“Yes, ma’am, is Inayat home?”

“Listen, Tereesz; you always listen to me, don’t you. Don’t torture yourself with this again. You know, the other day I saw the girls’ mother...”

“Yes, of course, listen madam...”

“And we ended up talking a little...”

Yeah-yeah, in one ear and out the other. Khan’s mother’s story is a mood killer. “Ma’am! Please tell Inayat that I’m calling, it’s urgent. I’m sorry.”

“Mother! Who is there?” comes Khan’s call from afar. “Tereesz, or?”

“No, this is Pernilla Lundqvist, one of your many admirers,” says the older woman, with nobody-is-listening-to-me sarcasm. Running steps are heard on the basement stairs and cars whiz by. Water splashes against the phone booth door.

“Tereesz!”

“Hello, Khan! Listen, where is Jesper? We’re in a hurry.”

“Here,” Jesper’s voice sounds out from afar. “It’s me. Jesper.” There’s nothing better when suffering from a ZA/UM hangover than the lively voices of your friends.

“Listen, hurry over to the city, to Lovisa. The old people’s home ‘Skymning’. Look it up somewhere, I don’t know, in the phone book. Visiting hours end at eight o’clock.”

“Okay, ‘Skymning’. What’s there?”

“Deerek Trentmøller. And you know, I think... The Kexholm Circle.”

“Tereesz, the Kexholm Circle is an old wives’ tale!”

“It would be better if it were.”

“Why do you think it isn’t?” Jesper tries to fit himself behind the phone. “Khan, ask him why he thinks it isn’t”.

“Why do you think it isn’t?”

“Listen, we’ll continue talking when we’re there, alright?”

“Okay, we’ll take a taxi. Jesper, do you have taxi money?”

“I do.”

“Okay, we’ll take a taxi!”

What follows is again only the mass and weight of time, the space between places, a taxi ride: pedestrians in dark clothes, grey skies and puffs of smoke on the motorway. Tereesz Machejek. Autumn days like a smooth queue of traffic.

Yes, Khan’s mother saw the girls’ mother in the doctor’s waiting room. What of it that these are her four daughters? Who is she anyway? “Losing all your children in one day. Can you imagine what that must be like?” But tell me, what has this woman done *to find* them? What does it matter that she has ‘found her peace’? Khan’s mother’s voice rattled through the earpiece: “If the girls’ mother can come to terms, can’t you...” No. Look, we are *mnemotourists*. We love the girls—yes, I dare say it—we love them more. Even this present moment, the evening city gliding past the taxi window, where the world is going wrong and time is out of joint, is a crime. This needs to be righted. To be solved. No peace. No truce with the furies!

And listen! Traffic whizzing past the side window, distant trumpet blasts, long notes shifting out of place. Expectation. An hour, two hours, three hours, this evening, tomorrow morning, next week, winter, spring, a year, the next year, ten, twenty years. Out of time, as if from a cloudy sky, there are crackles. The summer rain wants to be freed! Guys, a little *memory tour*? Why are you faffing around and pouting there, you’re a great mnemonic tourist, aren’t you?! Some explore the pale between the isolas, entroponauts, they are called; and some discover new lands, they are explorers; but you! Mnemotourists! When sadness creeps up again, leave behind the burnt shells of your present and dwell in the days of wonder once more!

There is a stuffy pre-rain heaviness in the air. Sand martins swoop over the water, catching insects. Jesper watches them appraisingly.

At first, only a single heavy drop falls. Nobody notices. It's still so hot, the sun shines like a white pebble between the clouds. And the archaeologists of Safre are setting off to the Anise Islands to look for traces of the Gon-Tzu expedition. But Jesper knows what's coming. Such raindrops always spy on Katla from the summer clouds. And Jesper also knows what time to turn on the radio in the morning. "Today's weather," said the reporter. It's all part of the plan.

Khan shuffles closer to Målin as he talks. He can already feel how the edge of her puffy skirt tickles his calf. The others listen to Khan's story, but Jesper is taking the beach umbrellas out of the bush. He unbuttons the girls', and just as a rumble of thunder rolls through the sunlit cloud cover, he opens the large beach umbrella on the cliff. Anni, in front of her crossed legs, raises her head and laughs. A curtain of rain, sparkling in the sun, drums over the beach and the cliff. At Jesper's signal, two more umbrellas open: Khan opens his without interrupting the story, and Tereesz's covers both Charlotte, who is listening on the palm of her hand, and the ostentatious little Maj. Maj has braided the boy's grown-out hair into small spiky pigtails. The manoeuvre is executed brilliantly. The knights just smirk at the girls' laughter.

"So warm! Touch it!" Anni puts her hand out from under the shade, into the rain's piano strokes. The curve of her spine arches in front of Jesper. The boy mutters something and stares in fascination at the galaxy of birthmarks on Anni's delicate kitten-like back. His hand would like to reach out, count the stars. The dusty smell of rain seeps deep into his nostrils. How long is the exposure time of a memory?

"Oh!" Anni stretches out her neck and shakes her head in the rain. "You all are completely different when you are not at school."

"Ahah," Målin nods in agreement, "prepared!"

"Kind of like, *parents*, wouldn't you say?" Tereesz raises a questioning eyebrow at Charlotte.

"Listen, I've only seen you once in the lunch line," giggles the girl and chews her straw, sticking out of a glass of sparkling apple cider. "I really can't tell."

"Well, Tereesz was still a boy then," Jesper teases, "But now... he's a man."

Målin laughs. There is so little space under the third shade that she has to pull herself into a ball. A golden crown of hair slumps onto Khan's knees; rain patters on the beach umbrella. The girl tilts her head back and looks at Khan, in a long and strange manner, her dark green eyes shimmering. Khan swallows. Målin is the only one of the girls who doesn't want cider.

"How does the story end?" Even her voice comes from a strange place. "Why didn't they come back?"

"Well, that's the question," Khan coughs. "Why didn't they come then?"

Målin suddenly begins to giggle, her teeth showing evilly with the joy of discovery. "They didn't want to give their peaches of immortality to the stupid emperor!"

"Dummy," Khan accidentally blurts out, "There are no peaches of immortality!"

Charlotte sits up. "But maybe there are, how do you know? You think that it was just like that, that Gon-Tzu and those thousand sailors didn't dare to come back because the emperor will kill him? But if I were Gon-Tzu," Charlotte looks at little Maj and draws herself dragon's whiskers with her fingers, "and I found peaches of immortality—I wouldn't tell anyone! I would share them secretly, only with my best friends. And then we would sneak around the world together for a thousand years. And let's see what miracles people come up with!"

"Would you also give me immortal peaches, Lotta?" Little Maj looks up at her oldest sister.

"Of course. When you got older, I would give you some."

"Why do I have to get old?"

"So that you wouldn't be a young girl forever, not such a little brrrrat," Charlotte chirps.

"She can't be..." Tereesz shakes his head and looks at how terrible Charlotte's hair sweeps her shoulder like a brush, chin proudly raised, "... can't be *that* terrific." Khan and Jesper, horrified by Tereesz's sudden change in strategy, are speechless. Charlotte exhales, her ribcage slowly shrinking. Cheek capillaries explode.

Tereesz just looks at her. "What about me? May I also have peaches that make me immortal?"

“We’ll find out.” The girl smiles and collects herself. “But first *you* should bring me something.”

“You just say what.”

Khan sees Målin secretly exchanging glances with the girls out of the corner of his eye. Something is happening.

Anni pulls her tennis skirt up her tanned legs. “Next time is our turn, isn’t it? And our spot. Don’t think we don’t have our own secret place.” Her eyes flash at Jesper. “What are you doing on Saturday?”

The boys do nothing on Saturday. “Nothing, absolutely nothing, let me check in my notebook—nothing!”

“We’re arranged for a week in the countryside. On the flower beds.” Anni’s back arches, she lifts herself up on her wing bones and slips the hem of her skirt over her butt. “But could we meet on the beach on Saturday night?”

“Sure thing. No, sure thing. A hundred percent,” the boys chant in unison.

A purse jingles in Charlotte’s hand. Once again, the girls’ eyes are reflected between the boys like trigonometry. The rain subsides, individual drops still shining. The bright sun comes out from behind the clouds, and the goddess from the ninth grade stretches in its rays, puts her hands on little Maj’s ears and then looks at the boys with squinting eyes. “This is half. Bring cherry speed.”

“What?” says Jesper, mouth agape.

“*Cher-ee-speed*,” Anni articulates, the tip of her red tongue forming the “d” in the word on the roof of her mouth.

“It’s sorta like amphetamine.” Charlotte says, as if it’s self-explanatory. The curves of her chest rise and fall as she breathes while speaking. “Only that it’s sorta... special. It’s *very* good. And we want to do it together with you.”

Silence.

Rain-soaked rose bushes steam in the sun.

The sea eagle hangs motionless in the sky.

“Maj will definitely stay at home, won’t she...” Funny pigtails still stick up all over Tereesz’s head. Khan and Jesper see him putting the Astra in his mouth next to Charlotte.

“Of course, dumbass!”

“Davai²² then,” he says, “let’s do it!”

Målin smiles, boundless joy shining from her eyes at Khan. In a matter-of-fact way, as befits a teacher’s daughter, she begins to give instructions. “Inside the wallet is Zigi’s number. Call him then, won’t you? He’ll have some.”

²²“Let’s go!” Call to action. Russian.

8. LINOLEUM SALESMAN

The Linoleum Salesman goes from town to town. He went to Norrköping, by the big frozen river, to sell linoleum—small wooden churches and narrow streets. The Linoleum Salesman admired the wooden architecture, the frozen silence of the north. By nine o'clock in the evening, the streets were empty and a gust of wind breathed within the city. Coats flapped in the wind, and snow, thick snow, settled on the roofs of the houses. It snowed in the heart of the Linoleum Salesman. Orange rows of streetlights. The kind of images that flashed in his head that night. In the rented room, under the blanket. The stories, the patience. In the garden of his business partner's house next door, the Linoleum Salesman admired two brothers: faces like cherubs, mouths plump and cheeks red from the frost. In Arda, at the summits of the mountains, where the fjords cut through—red-soil-coloured houses sit at the foot of a snowy giant. At night, when their windowpanes twinkled in the dark like tiny eyes, and the black teeth of the mountains grinned at the sky, still that smile was nothing compared to the smile of the Linoleum Salesman.

He practised. Made himself have a double chin like a caterpillar, raised his upper lip. In the mirror of the hotel room, the man turned pale. How about walking in like this? To the basement with its low ceiling and concrete walls. What would it be like to see such a thing? Look now, beauty, now you look at me.

Then, when the linoleum factory was closed down, times became hard. But the Linoleum Salesman got back on his feet. He made new contacts, got to know importers. A new linoleum factory was opened. And wherever he was, whatever he looked at, he always wanted to see more. He sold linoleum, but he thought of himself as a photographer. The world had collected for him hidden landscapes, incinerators of beauty, which no other person could see.

Like a child with a kaleidoscope, he broke the shapes apart. To a Graad oblast²³, above winter's orbit, the Linoleum Salesman went to sell linoleum. The magnet train stormed across the northern plateau. Outside the windows, where it was dark and the northern lights shone above the clearing; the restaurant carriage's crapper; a black mountain tunnel swallowing the train. When the Linoleum Salesman came out, his hands were full of broken, glittery glass. Where did the delightful flower mandala go? He invites, in hiding; he attracts attention, but then he disappoints, the faceless structure, the lecher. The Linoleum Salesman lost his temper. His greedy nervous system roared. Yelinka. In that polar settlement, the man rubbed snow on his face, but the snow only melted from the heat of his nerves.

He is resting now, trying to take care of himself. He works, selling linoleum to hardware stores, interior design offices and distributors. Brown linoleum. Linoleum with flowers. He comes down from the north, to Vaasa. While selling linoleum in Kexholm—Lovisa's elite suburban quarter—he sees something new. Something he thought he would never see. He sees other Linoleum Salesmen. Except that they are not linoleum salesmen. On a mattress in the park for gays, he talks to a Ticket Controller about Vaasa, about the feeling of security, about schools, about "laissez-faire" education²⁴. The alder bush is rustling. And the others; they, too, have new thoughts, knowledge. They tell each other their stories. Garden Equipment Renter, Podiatrist...

²³ An administrative division or region in Russia and the former Soviet Union, and in some constituent republics of the former Soviet Union.

²⁴ "Vabakasvatus" in the original text—sometimes used as derogatory term for children whose parents didn't take much part in their education or didn't have any oversight of them at home.

“Briefing.” Tereesz looks at the silver watch that his colleagues from the Missing Persons Unit gave him for his tenth anniversary. “Five minutes.” He, Khan, and Jesper walk through the park of the old people’s home, coats flapping.

“Okay, okay, ‘briefing’, can we go a bit slower?” Khan lags behind the rest. “I’m out of breath.”

Jesper scurries. “Listen, you have a serious problem with your heart. I think we all agree—you should see a doctor.”

“I agree,” Tereesz agrees. In the twilight, the white window frames of the houses glow behind picket fences. Leaf litter springs under Jesper’s suede shoes. He looks at the splatter of mud on the toe of his shoe and gives up. There is a sweet smell of decay. He is nervous about waiting.

“Your local authority could be more accommodating,” continues Agent Machejek. “Their Collaboration initiative and international disposition left much to be desired.”

Khan tries to keep up. “Did you get the interrogation?”

“I got it, I got it.”

“Yesterday?”

“No, this morning. They were stalling. Nothing to be done about it. I was on the phone all day yesterday, I don’t know, doing acrobatics. A hundred calls. I’m sorry.” Tereesz is a brilliant liar. Jesper doesn’t hesitate for a moment: “Whatever, listen, what did Hird say?”

“I didn’t even see them.”

Jesper notices Khan’s sigh of relief, and his eyebrows furrow in suspicion. He’s quite disappointed, to be honest. All that preparation, in vain. Ah, the funeral party could go ahead and get started.

“Wait, wait, that’s not all.” Tereesz raises a black-leather-gloved finger and smiles. “Hird was so kind as to give me a name. Deerek Trentmöller. That’s where he heard it from.”

Khan suddenly stops and glares at Tereesz. “He just *gave* you that name and told you everything honestly? He *spoke*.” Jesper doesn’t understand why Khan doubts his friend’s interrogation abilities: “Well, you beat him up, didn’t you? Graad style.” He

looks approvingly at Tereesz and walks on. “So. Deerek who? Trentmøller?”

“Exactly. I followed up on it. Everything checks out. They shared a cell eighteen years ago—the last year of Deerek’s sentence. He was paroled. There’s one more catch with this, remind me to come back to it later. Anyway. Together, they one-upped each other with their stories, and then, one day, Hird laid down a *particularly* juicy one. Deerek must have felt indebted. So, he’s trying to do one better. Says he knows a guy... wait for it! From the Kexholm Ring!”

“Come on! Bullshit!” Khan isn’t impressed. Tereesz doesn’t let it bother him. “This guy is from that ring—let’s assume for a moment that there is a ring, alright—and he’s like... a leader. A seriously bad person. And dangerous. A few years after the girls’ disappearance, the leader comes to Deerek and talks about how he and his friends kidnapped the girls. They’re lovers, by the way, the leader and Deerek.”

“Nice.”

“And Deerek can’t tell anyone, otherwise they’ll kill him. So, Deerek continues to talk to Hird. And you can’t imagine what kinds of things...”

Khan and Jesper pace along in silence. Neither asks. Jesper only shakes his head a little.

“Anyway, it’s things that are exciting in the... er... format of Hird and Deerek’s conversation. I also researched this Deerek a bit, as far as I could find in the Kronstadt papers. A paederast. Fiddled his sister’s children, family mainly. Nothing serious. The woman finally gave him up. Locked up, Deerek is a darling. He tells the soul shepherd how he still regrets it and how ‘there’s something in him, this something that pushes him’,” Tereesz shakes his hands sceptically while saying this and then continues on the fly, “and all the other diabolical stuff that goes along with it.”

The back of the retirement home is hunched under the trees. The edges of the wooden patio are bleached pale, stone steps lead to the back door. Red walls authentic to the building’s age, fragile wooden architecture. Just the kind of house from Vaasa’s past that would remind its residents of their youth. Chestnut trees shed their last leaves on the roof of Skymning.

“Now, of course, Deerek is seventy years old. Or seventy-five, do the math yourself. And do you know why he was released early?”

Khan and Jesper do not know why the homosexual lover of the leader of the Kexholm pedophile ring, convicted child molester Deerek Trentmøller, was released from prison early.

“He became senile.”

“What? At sixty?” Jesper understands the complications that can arise from this.

“Approximately, yes.”

“Completely senile?”

“Don’t know. It didn’t say *how* senile he became. Anyway, the situation worsened. Fast. We’ll see.”

Khan follows the others up the stairs of the retirement home. The three of them stop in front of the arched wooden door. Tereesz rings the bell.

“The drawing...” Khan pants, hands on his knees. “Where did Hird get the drawing of Anni?”

“It’s their relic there. It passes from hand to hand. If we find the man it came from, we’ll have our funeral party. I promise you that. We can finally start *living*.” Tereesz rings again, this time more angrily. “Only Hird overshot in the end. The leader of Kexholm...” At Khan’s look, Tereesz corrects himself. “The leader of the supposed Kexholm group made it for Deerek, and Deerek showed it to Hird. It seems to me that Hird was just a little curious. To, you know, see what would happen.”

Tereesz smiles wickedly.

Vaasa dozes in the blissful peace of the fifties. Winter ends. Icicles, dripping from the eaves, melt holes in the ice on the sidewalk. The days are getting longer, and somewhere far away, in the courtyard of a school in the city centre, Sven von Fersen gets to work on an overweight immigrant. So what did he think, that Målin enjoyed hearing such a gross story? Huh? Did she? Tereesz stands far away at the courtyard door and doesn’t dare to step in. He hopes that Jesper will feel too pained to look on. Reflection.

The Linoleum Salesman moves along the sidewalks of the suburb; his boots have gathered fringes of salt from the melting

snow. The Linoleum Salesman hasn't slept all night, and the bright light, the sun reflecting on the ice, makes his eyes hurt. His hands shake from coffee, his head screams. Nerves bluish-red; a throbbing relay. Thousands of pictures of nighttime conversation swell within the Linoleum Salesman. He puts his hand in his pocket; the bottom of the pocket has had a hole cut out of it with scissors. He makes his rounds in the horse car, getting off at the Fahlu stop every time and slipping through below the bridge; he looks at the willow bush, and then gets on the tram again from the other side of the road. The Linoleum Salesman's head rests against the window. Sometimes he falls asleep, and even then his imagination keeps running, the form taking increasingly strange poses, stretching its legs in front of the Linoleum Salesman. Even in his sleep, he would *want*. But the Linoleum Salesman trains his nerves. Outside the tram window, the clock strikes two, and the school day ends. The Linoleum Salesman's teeth chatter; he is awake. Children file through the tram cabin. In the garage at home, sample rolls of linoleum are lined up. He lives here now—in Vaasa, in Kexholm. He walks the streets of the suburb of Lovisa. The Linoleum Salesman hangs from the handrail. He would like to squirm. One lady looks at him strangely. It's the same lady. She was also in the previous tram, and yesterday's. You can't anymore, you have to choose. Fahlu comes and the Linoleum Salesman exits. He crosses under the bridge and looks at the willow bush of his longings. He will suffer no more. Small lumps of ice drip from the willow branches, and the Linoleum Salesman's breath warms them. Drip-drip. The sun shimmers on a drop of water, and on the other side of the willow bush, visions pass by, four in a row. The smallest chatters endlessly. Chit, chat, chit. This is the most beautiful moment in the life of the Linoleum Salesman. He wants them. After that, it's over—he kills himself and rids the world of the Linoleum Salesman. But before that, them.

The smell of heart medications is nauseating. Jesper wipes his neck, nervously adjusts the tie in his sweater collar. It's like all those joint ointments somehow got on his skin. Who knows why anyone would cling to life so tightly? White lace curtains are tied back on both sides of the window; something is crawling on the

walls of Deerek Trentmöller's ward, which has been tricked into looking like a room. Tree branches cast shadows on the floral pattern of the wallpaper. Sometimes, rarely, when a motor carriage rustles by, the shadows come to life in the headlights and slide along in the gloom, in the yellow of the table lamp. Layers of flowers and tree branches slide over each other. Death—the word that appears so rarely in the conversations between the boys that it seems as if it does not exist. Everyone just evaporates, they leave.

Then, when the time comes, Jesper steps out into the December air. The light of the house cube remains behind him, and the ski trails lead him to the outer border of the settlement. The forage fields stretch out there under the snow, and Jesper crosses them, to where the wall of trees darkens. *Zig-zag dröm*²⁵, spruce branches sweeping his white coat. The dark forest, the dark green of eyes. In the cold air, the girls' voices sound out like sleigh bells. They are waiting... under the permafrost, in a habitat untouched for millions of years; deep in the lungs of Graad, where no man may go. Jesper doesn't tell anyone about it.

The shelves in Deerek's room, or rather the ward, are full to the brim with junk. Family photos in frames sit on a small bookshelf, behind reflective glass. Jesper does not dare to look at these photos. Children, nieces? Do these nurses ever clean here? Above the bed stands a silver icon of Dolores Dei, and below it sits Deerek Trentmöller, arms folded, a chequered blanket around his shoulders. A tiny silver cross glitters around his neck. An IV pole rises above the headboard.

"You know, boys, my memory... Tomorrow I wouldn't recognise you. This is the best thing that ever happened to me. It's like a blessing, for someone like me. Some mornings I wake up and can't even remember my name. I don't remember who I am. And even less so about those things..."

Tereesz stands in front of the curtains with his hands behind his back and examines the window frame. "Right now you seem very put-together." He turns around. "Who did you get *the drawing* from? Of Anni-Elin Lund's back. From whom?"

"Oh, my Lord..." Mr. Trentmöller shakes his liver-spotted face tiredly. "I don't remember such things anymore. The things I do

²⁵ "Dream", Swedish.

want to remember, I don't remember. I don't remember my son. Then, those other things, like that..."

"Don't hold back, Deerek." Tereesz squats in front of the old man and puts his hands on his knees. Khan watches in horror as Agent Machejek drills into Deerek's hooded eyes. "Pull yourself together. You told your cellmate, Vidkun Hird—you can't say that you don't remember *Vidkun Hird*, can you? Who could forget? You told..." Tereesz puts his hand under the old man's chin and turns his face towards him again. "Do you hear me? You told **Vidkun Hird** in prison that you knew someone who kidnapped the four Lund girls from the beach in Charlottesjäl twenty years ago. And you drew him a picture of one of the girl's birthmarks as proof. Deerek, the drawing fits!"

Tears flow down Mr. Trentmøller's deflated cheeks.

"Deerek! Hello! The picture fits!"

"I did... I went to the gay park. I don't remember, I don't want to..." Deerek cries his old man's cry, but Tereesz gets angrier and angrier. His upper lip is already starting to pull back over his tobacco-stained teeth. Deerek shrinks away as if he's seen a ghost, but Tereesz's hand is covering the emergency button. "If you are not cooperative because of your *memory disease*, then keep this in mind! We have quite the machine nowadays. It's like an ice cream scoop, Deerek. I'll use it to pull whatever I need out of your skull, and then..."

"Tereesz!" Khan has gotten up from his chair and is holding his shoulder.

"... then the blessing will come!"

"Tereesz, don't start with that!" Jesper doesn't understand. Confused, he watches as the agent leans over Deerek, hand on the alarm button. Khan angrily pulls him by the shoulder. "You know how it ruins you, Tereesz, you know. We need you in the ICP. You can't get fired. I have some other ideas, we don't have to..."

Tereesz calms down. "Okay. Jesper, man the door." Jesper peers out into the empty corridor. The retirement home is quiet in the evening, as if abandoned. He pulls the door shut. Heart pounding in his chest, he leans his back against the door handle and nervously ruffles his blond hair. The air in the room is thick; Jesper

sees the old man shaking on the bed. He hides his face from Tereesz behind his hands.

“Linoleum Salesman.” The ICP agent says those words deliberately. The little man’s sad, wrinkled eyes widen, his eyebrows rise. “Who?”

“Linoleum Salesman. Your boyfriend. He made the drawing. He told you about the girls. Who is he? Who, Deerek!?”

“He is just... He was just...” Deerek doesn’t whine anymore. Tears dry on his cheeks. He slumps under the quilt as if struck by lightning. “Just a Linoleum Salesman. They all were. That’s how they referred to themselves, by profession.” A tired sigh rolls out of his mouth. “Oh my God, help me...”

It is quiet in the room. Outside, a lone motor carriage whizzes by, and the shadows of the trees slide over Jesper, leaning against the door. Khan quietly pushes Tereesz aside. “Well done, Deerek. You can see how good it is now.” With his big almond eyes, he looks at the old man under the quilt. “You’ll help us find these girls, won’t you?”

“Two places,” Tereesz whispers to Khan.

“Two places, Deerek. Tell us two places this man went. Where did he live, in which district? Do you know that?”

“In Kexholm, they were all in Kexholm.”

“Very good. Well done. And now one more. Think, Deerek, think of where else the Linoleum Man was staying. Help us find the girls. Where would he usually go?”

“He watched them... on the beach. From a hotel.”

“Havsänglar?” Tereesz paces nervously by the window.

“I don’t remember, please...”

“We have it.” Tereesz nods and takes two steps towards the door. “Havsänglar. Let’s go!”

Eighteen years ago. Vidkun Hird sits behind a self-made desk in the corner of the cell, a single strand of his old-fashioned side-combed hair sticking to his forehead—in those days, you could still call it “classic-looking”. Vidkun is young. Relatively. Wrinkles don’t cover his forehead yet, and his cheeks are only just beginning to droop like a Nordic bulldog’s. His desk is piled high with manuscripts. Future philosophy, historicism, eugenic universal

theory. It explains everything in the world, it is his legacy to mankind.

“Vidkun Hird: ‘Vidkun Hird’” is written in bold letters on the cardboard cover. Two metal spring beds stand by the wall, and daylight streams in from a small window near the ceiling.

Deerek Trentmøller is lying in bed. He is old-ish, and somewhat distracted. He takes the silver cross from his neck, looks at it for a moment, and then starts laughing. “Hah! You will like this! I think there’s even an element of superhumanity in it. Adventure and even scientific work in between, and all of this, without a doubt, beyond good and evil.”

What a honeymoon of the fantastical work of the mind! Deerek talks and Vidkun takes notes. Nods matter-of-factly. Asks to stop for a moment while he replaces the ink can. The spot of light from the window creeps across the floor and up the steel door. It gets dark, and Vidkun turns on the table lamp. He lifts a page into the air and blows on it.

Good times, good times.

Deerek stretches in the middle of the room and leans closer to Vidkun. “And you know what he said then? The Linoleum Salesman. I’ll never forget it! He performed ‘brilliant surgery’ on them. He ‘joined them together’. The smallest died. The others survived. Like this, you see.”

Linoleum Salesman. Linoleum Salesman. The Linoleum Salesman reaches for the toilet paper. Salty sea air seeps into the guest room from outside Havsänglar’s balcony, where a telescope sits on the reed carpet. A special camera is connected to the back of the telescope. Afterwards, he wanders around outside.

He reads the timetable in the waiting pavilion, but the last tram has already gone towards the city—with the girls on board. The summer evening is warm, and it warms his heart. He takes off his sandals and walks barefoot on the sunny asphalt. The asphalt is pale and crumbled; the tram tracks feel cool to the touch. Charlottesjäl in the evening. He loves it. He loves the girls. He loves the beach where nothing means anything anymore. He is in love. This will never happen to me, he had thought, the northern lights winding over the polar settlement. Couples in the shade of

greenhouses. Snow falling behind the glass. This will never happen to the Linoleum Salesman. But he loves the beach, and the girls. One of them in particular; especially this one. And the others, too.

Sand under bare feet, between his toes. Daytime heat, and then humidity. He walks by the water's edge; music drifts from the gardens, the lights of the houses shine far away among the pine trees. Away, under the cliff, where no one can see. The stones are slippery from the water, and cold under his bare feet. Where did his shoes go? He doesn't remember. He walks along the rocks, under the cliff, and the waves splash onto his pleated trousers. In the gentle darkness, he sinks to his knees and laughs. The pine trees are rustling. A swim! He goes between the rocks into the water, and no one can see how happy he is. His trousers get wet; he slips and hits his knee. So what! The water is dark and warm, and there are stars in the sky.

"To Telefunken!" Jesper snaps his fingers. "I have friends there, and it's close by. You can make as many calls as your heart desires from there, Tereesz. Work your magic." His hand is in the air as the three of them try to get a taxi on the only highway in the suburb of Lovisa. The machines whiz past and take off on the pillars of the motorway behind them. A wall of trees rises on the other side of the road; traffic is sparse in the evening. "It's half past ten, we'll make it."

Khan waddles along. "I don't know... Why rush? We should talk instead."

"What's there to talk about here? Let's get on the phone, let's make some calls and act on it tonight, already." Like Jesper, Tereesz is also on the warpath—his hand is up even for those taxis that don't have their yellow signs lit. "What are we waiting for? Haven't we waited enough?"

"Exactly. And I don't care about the details." Jesper stands on one leg. A passing carriage splashes dirt onto his clothes. "If you think that I'm dying to know what kind of horrible, *ruinous*—very emotional, Khan—machine you, Tereesz, are using, know that I'm not interested. You're doing your work and you don't have time. Three days is the time during which the percentage of finding someone alive, especially a child, decreases by half every day,

every day. One hundred, fifty, twenty-five percent, Khan. What would you do?"

"That's not important! Damn it!" The rain in the upper atmosphere slowly becomes a late fall sleet. A sizable wave from under a wheel splashes over Khan. "You and your taxis, the stop is right in front of us! Jesper, you don't understand, neither of you understand how it affects someone! Damn mesquine... lysergene..."

"Great! Got it!" Jesper runs along the side of the road after the taxi and shouts behind him, "You would rather use the good cop tactics, right?"

"Look, really, that's enough..." Tereesz mutters under the window. The cabin of the taxi smells like leather.

Khan slides himself sideways into the cabin and pants, "I guess you, Jesper... don't understand that this stuff is... *illegal*. In all the countries that have signed the declaration... By the way, the countries where the ICP have, well..."

"Authorizations." Tereesz finishes the sentence for Khan, and then says through the wire-partition into the driver's compartment, "Telefunken." The cabin is quiet for a moment. The machine jerks into motion. Slush crunches under the carriage's wheels. Jesper is looking for an argument, but Tereesz butts in before he can say anything. "Yes. I used the machine on Hird. My decision. He would have never—*ever*—told us anything. He'd be sitting there, grinning, telling me about crossing-breeding kojkos and kipts for two hours, and that's all."

"But Tereesz," a whimpering note comes into Khan's voice, "they're going to let you go!"

"It's under control. And you know what? I don't want to talk about this anymore."

The next day. The warm summer rain shimmers in the Linoleum Salesman's spyglass. The picture shakes as he adjusts the tripod and then stays still—sharp, clear. The Linoleum Salesman's ears are ringing. Clouds glow in the sun, rain falls on the hotel balcony. The wet line extends over half of the reed carpet. And the rain is pitter-pattering on the beach below, but in his head he hears the happy drumming of drops on the sunshade—the parasol with small red flowers centred in the eye of the telescope. It's almost a

kilometre away, on a cliff, but the Linoleum Salesman stretches his hand out into the rain, and touches. Get out of the way, fat boy. The Linoleum Salesman had bought a women's magazine in town. There on the cover was the fashionably dressed Ann-Margret Lund, a woman in politics. And inside, there were pictures. Ann-Margret in her beautiful apartment. And there beside her, on the coffee-coloured sofa, her four daughters. The names and ages were lined up under the picture.

Anni-Elin...

What stories *didn't* he invent the day he saw them for the first time? Scary things. How he takes them. The Linoleum Salesman is a physician, a doctor. Doctor Linoleum Salesman. And he makes them walk like this, walk in front of him. And even that wasn't enough for him. How his nerves screamed then, hungry; they wanted to eat them alive, those nerves. And how it all drew back, when he came here. What a place! They chatted behind him, two seats facing each other in the tram. And the Linoleum Salesman could smell their white, white hair. The tram rolled down the slope, the horses trotted along. The beach came to him, not the other way around. And the four of them led him there. A veil of dust rose from the asphalt, cattails swayed, and the sun shone in a pale, blue sky. It was not like those other beaches, in Arda, and nearby in Vaasa, in Östermalm, where the Linoleum Salesman would sweat. He had shifted between the disgusting, walrus-like bodies, and chased the little walrus pups with his eyes. This was not the Yelinka swimming pool, where the Linoleum Salesman's eyes would redden from the chlorine water, and he had to wait two hours before he could get out of the pool.

The wind ruffled his hair. And the spaciousness! The world would fit inside it. The wind blew; he had taken the highest hotel room so that the wind would blow into him and cool the Linoleum Salesman.

He looked at them gently; he didn't even dare to go down to the beach, close to them. He would burn to ashes if he even touched them. He took pictures. The photons travelled—the same light that was tanning the girl's back bounced off her tiny, tiny birthmarks and ate away at the jet black negative. White dots like stars in the night sky. The exposure time of a memory. He made a

rope out of linen, a loop, and masturbated—for the last time. His breath fluttered against the sheet, and the Linoleum Salesman came out of him along with his cum. And evaporated.

The memory of the Linoleum Salesman and all that the Linoleum Salesman saw fades day by day. Drops are pattering on the parasol, and Anni stretches out her hand to the piano-like clattering rain. Today, when He woke up, He no longer remembered the Linoleum Salesman. A family photo was taken in the photo shop, with a small walrus, and he briefly remembers the Linoleum Salesman. And also later, though less and less over time, He remembers the Linoleum Salesman. Anni shakes her white head in the rain, her braid on her back. And behind the telescope, only He is left to stare in dismay.

Thousands of kilometres and two months more than twenty years away, on the other side of winter's orbit, the meteorological research ship "Rodionov" stands in an ice prison. It's half past twelve in the polar night. The Northern Passage stretches out in the floodlights before the crew, a cold vision. Men in fur coats are bustling around on deck, their silver-grey collars pulled up to their fur hats. The crew is in a panic. There, where the darkness seems to recede a little, but the distance moves infinitely forward—without the slightest sense of a horizon—that's where the pale begins. The crew feels and fears, although no one can see more than a hundred metres into the night. The probe's antenna unit broadcasts a desperate distress signal, along with scientific readings. This radio transmission reaches the Katla Graad Oblast relay station in a monstrously distorted curved mirror from the approaching pale: "*Sinus-Oreole-Sinus, Sinus-Oreole-Sinus...*"

There is a rumbling sound as the ice caps arch into the sky, a sweeping gust of wind like music reversed and slowed down tenfold. The pale is approaching—an avalanche of the world's memories—and burying matter greedily. The expanse of the night sky disappears, star by star, under its rolling crest.

From orbit, the communication satellite "Iikon" can see how the pale sweeps over the entirety of Katla's Northern Passage in one wave. Samarskilt, a rocky desert in South Samara, and half of Supramundi in Mundi also sink. The pale cycles, bends; in its

peace, a rebellion against matter gathers. Funnels swallow in the eye of the storm. “Azimuth” calibrates on the edge of the stratosphere. Zones of imminent entropnetic catastrophe now include: Lemminkäise; the Nad-Umai ecoregion in the taiga of North-Eastern Samara; Yekokataa and the Severnaya Zemlya²⁶ irrigation zone network in Graad; the Semenine Islands on les Immensités Bleues. Distant corners of matter, abandoned by life. It is the twenty-ninth of September in the early seventies. The class reunion was two nights ago. Now it’s the end of the world.

And two hours ago, Tereesz Machejek, on a phone dragged onto a table in the restaurant on Telefunken’s panoramic floor, ordered Havsänglar’s secretary to read to him *the entire* guest list for June *and* July of the fifty-second year. The table is overflowing with food. The claws of an exquisite crayfish lay halfway on top of the phone. Khan is quite enjoying the exquisite crayfish, as Jesper explains how to suck out the meat and juice from inside this and that tube.

“Suck, keep sucking,” Jesper says and motions to the waiter to take the appetiser plates away. Today’s dinner is *à la* Jesper, at Jesper’s expense—and Jesper likes to eat well. He doesn’t concoct slop out of rice and macaroni.

Khan keeps sucking. “Well, I don’t know. This is better, of course, but if you add *dumplings* to the rice and macaroni...”

Jesper sips ice water. “Tereesz, listen, I can take Kexholm myself. I designed a paediatrician’s living space there, and they know a developer. I think he should have access to, what was it called...”

“The register of residents,” says Tereesz. His shoulder throbs in pain. But the Yugo-Graadian red wine here is so inviting that you can’t not drink it. And to do that, he has to put the phone on his shoulder again. The secretary already hung up once. Then Tereesz called the administration and asked to pass on the following message: “The lives of four little girls will be on your conscience.” It worked. Next to the glass of wine in front of him, Khan is holding a notebook open with one hand, and there are more than two thousand names written on the wavy pages.

²⁶ Northern Land. Северная Земля. Russian.

“Halfway, ma’am, only two thousand more.” His head screams from all the Lars’, throbs from all the Berg’s, Åke’s flash in front of his eyes like train lights.

“Okay, then,” Jesper unfolds the napkin, which had been folded into an impressive cone, and wipes his mouth, “it’s half past eleven. Another hour and a half to go, and then it closes. I can bargain for two and a half. So. Let’s start, I’ll work on getting the register of residents.” The waiter brings another phone to the table. The rest of the guests watch the trio eat with restrained interest. For the second hour in a row, the thin kojko is reading names in a monotonous voice and writing them down in a notebook. An overweight tawny-skinned man in a black, double-breasted Perseus Black dress shirt pushes up his glasses, cracks open a crayfish claw, and then waves to a lady in a hat at the opposite table. In Tereesz’s notebook, the queue gets messed up after that. “Khan, hey, you don’t have the hardest job here. Get to it!”

“Tereesz, listen, for God’s sake, let’s take this notepad.”

“No. It must be in the notebook.”

“What’s the big deal with the notebook?”

“Deerek Trentmøller,” Tereesz says in a familiar, mechanical voice, and then looks at Khan with wide eyes. “Deerek Trentmøller! Hello! Are you sure? Has he marked something there too?”

“Vacation.”

“What else?”

“Linoleum Salesman,” the secretary says in a tired voice on the other end of the receiver.

“Deerek damn Trentmøller, seventeenth to twenty-fourth of June. Linoleum Salesman.”

Jesper bangs his fist on the table he designed himself five years ago.

Khan puts a crayfish claw on a plate. “Now it’s ZA/UM’s turn.”

Deerek Trentmøller dreams of the Linoleum Salesman. All the things that the Linoleum Salesman saw revolve before his eyes like a homogenous mass of flesh and darkness. From time to time, he wakes up. He doesn’t feel sleepy. Then the maelstrom of flesh and

darkness comes again, and Deerek falls asleep. In Deerek's dream they are lovers, he and the Linoleum Salesman. He is someone else. There is a clicking sound coming through the emerging formless memory. The wooden window creaks. The panes are rattling in the frames. Then there's a thump; Deerek wakes up.

Death. It must be death. Dark brown flowers on floral wallpaper. The shadows of the branches sway and the curtains flutter in the wind. Yes, it is exactly as Deerek always imagined it. In front of the open window, a tall thin figure takes off its herringbone coat. There are more to come! Fat death thuds from the windowsill to the floor with his hat on and whispers, "Okay, inside. Keep guard."

The tall death comes to the bedside and disconnects the alarm button. The fat death turns on the desk lamp and steps over Deerek, placing a hand softly on his hair. Those big, dark brown eyes look familiar. "Deerek. Don't freak out. We need something from you now. We need you to remember, and that's why we're giving you a little injection. It doesn't hurt. It's like sleep."

Deerek hears the click of a suitcase and the tall death presses a leather-gloved hand over his mouth. What a strange smell; everything dissipates, as kind dark brown eyes watch.

"But what if he really doesn't remember? Will it still work then?"

"We'll see."

Deerek Trentmøller opens up in front of Tereesz. This time Tereesz is the monster at the water's edge. A tiger wading through water. He's always there, spying. And wherever Deerek ends up, the tiger prowls, sniffs, and finds a Linoleum Salesman. In Norrköping, in the fjord town of Arda, on the magnet train, in the polar settlement of Yelinka, he stalks, his phosphor-green eyes glowing, into the dark nooks and crannies where the Linoleum Salesman hangs out. He's in a low-ceilinged, concrete-walled basement when the Linoleum Salesman makes faces at his niece. When he finally reaches Vaasa, the tiger is waiting at the floating train station, sitting at the end of the platform and licking its paws, where the shine of the streetlights does not reach. He rustles the alder bushes in the park, and the Linoleum Salesman is startled.

When he's walking through the streets of Lovisa on a spring morning, with a hole cut with scissors in his trouser pocket, the tiger's heart becomes visible for just a moment. A school yard, a fight; small boys appear.

When the Linoleum Salesman comes to Charlottesjäl, Tereesz is there treading the wind—he is a bird of prey, he is watching. He has the eyes of an eagle, and he sees all. Until one night, he sees the Linoleum Salesman disappearing in the top floor room of the Havsänglar hotel. Half of the person is gone. Day by day, he forgets that the Linoleum Salesman ever existed. Until finally, only the senile, old Deerek Trentmöller remains.

“Linoleum, linoleum, linoleum...” he hums, “does such a word as ‘linoleum’ even exist?” A strange, strange feeling of loss. But it is not at all the linoleum that he misses. The Linoleum Salesman mourns himself. Sometimes he remembers himself and imagines a life where he never disappeared. He spews profanities and reads Vidkun Hird's memoirs. Keeps fantasising, in his own ways. Deerek Trentmöller longs for something completely different.

It is the twenty-ninth of August, twenty years ago, and he is unwell. Something is wrong, he couldn't catch any sleep for the whole night. The morning newspaper is lying on the bathroom floor. The four daughters of the Minister of Education have disappeared. Deerek Trentmöller can't breathe, the world is going wrong, time is out of joint. In the shine of a red bulb, the hobbyist photographer is developing pictures taken from the balcony of the hotel. His hands shake; he's sure they were there. So sure. But lined up and hanging from clothespins on the clothesline, the photos all have *horror vacui*. Nothing.

The contours of the cliff appear on the photo paper floating in the development bath. A pale summer sky. But not them.

Khan and Jesper carry Tereesz, who's drifting in and out of consciousness, into a taxi. His shoes slide along the ground; he trembles. Jesper's voice comes from the convex mirror. Jesper... Jesper is a totally cool guy.

“Tereesz, Tereesz! Stay awake. What're we gonna do with you?”

“He did not do it. He didn’t do it.”

“Okay, but what are we going to do with you now, take you to the hospital? Tereesz!”

Tereesz’s voice is barely audible. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know, you tell me! Are we taking you to the hospital, or are you sleeping it off?”

Tereesz tries to gain stability. “No, you don’t understand. It was a dead end. I’m so sorry... I don’t know what to do next.”

Khan holds Tereesz’s head down as the two of them put him in the taxi. “Hold on, tiger. First, you sleep it off. Then it’s my turn. I have a plan.”

Tereesz faints. Everything fades.

9. SACRED AND TERRIBLE AIR

What was that sacred and terrible smell, that elusive smell in the air that time? My name is Ambrosius Saint-Miro; the Suruese say “Ambrosius Pyhä-Mirä” and in Graad they call me Svjata-Mira. “*Diduska*²⁷?” they ask, their eyes wide with affection, but I answer them: “No. I am not your *diduska*.” I am Ambrosius Santa-Mira of Mesque, Ambrosio Hagiamira of the Cypreians²⁸, I am ambrosia, the holy world. You chose me, validated me with your life, with your thoughts, in your thought cabinet. In the evening, when you went to sleep and the next morning, from the windows of public transportation. But what I am doing is no longer a discussion; there are no arguments here, there is no need to choose sides. The time for doubt is over.

I come once in an age. It is a great joy to live when I am in the world. I am innocent, and now you are too. When you make a decision, either it was right, or it was mistaken. When I decide, my decision is what it is. Back then, when God still seemed an interesting thought to you, I was Pius of Perikarnassis; I was Ernö Pasternak—you wanted to be betrayed and lacerated. I made you

²⁷ “Grandpa”, Russian.

²⁸ “Küpreede” in the original text.

sing pasternakials²⁹, about how awesome I and my unnecessary war were. You wanted to hate me, then. I was Franconegro, you were nationalists—you wanted an international, black banknote and militarism. You wanted to work in a factory, longed to serve God. And mediaeval-industrial architecture, you wanted to live under a concrete arch. I was a woman, Dolores Dei, when you felt like you wanted a mother, a perfect mother. I had beautiful breasts, I was young and so were you, you wanted to fall in love and I let you. Humanism, renaissance, caring for each other. I put you in school and taught you languages. You got tired of me, and I died. You wanted a world without me. Then I was the innocence Sola to you, an indifferent girl, sitting back and watching you orchestrate coups. “Ah, do it yourself then, make mistakes, don’t learn anything,” I thought.

I was a citizen. I went from country to country, from *insel*³⁰ to *insel* and introduced you to my thoughts. Everywhere I went, I infected you with my pessimism and nihilism. I talked on the radio about how everything is wrong, how everything is *egal*³¹, *pohhui*³², who cares? Presidents, kings, princes and sheikhs—all were afraid of me, no one wanted to let me into their *suzerainty*. They wanted me in their publishing house, on the big screen and in their talk shows. But when I signed autographs in the bookstore, they saw! You gathered in heaps. And when I spoke on the radio, the ratings went up. I was brilliantly successful. Thank you—you made me happy. They let me on their talk show, and there I showed what thoughts a person is capable of. You may be right, too. And how witty you are; you kept listening and laughing. You called your whole family to the radiola, and together you heard about how special you really are: “I could have a supermodel *girlfriend* too,” I said, “but I have chosen loneliness. Wouldn’t it be bourgeois. Dear supermodel, of course I could spend the night with you. We’d have fun, you’d be numb as a pillow from cocaine, I’d pipe milk up your ass and watch it squirt out. Sure, I’ve thought about it. But that

²⁹ Pasternakian hymns.

³⁰ “Island”, German.

³¹ “Nothing matters/no matter/all the same/whatever”, German.

³² “Nothing matters/no matter/all the same/whatever”, Russian.

wouldn't be *me* anymore. It would go against everything I believe in."

But it's a show. That's not why you chose me. I was the only one who asked: What was that sacred and terrible smell in the air, that time? I don't have the weakness and arrogance to *tell* you what it is. I don't pretend to know what terrible beauty is to you. The secret of your heart. End of story—I'll show you. I want to peel away the world, layer by layer. And this time it's not a scam, or a figure of speech—it's *realpolitik*. I attack. Revachol, then Graad and then further. It never ends. I open front after front. Then when all who are not with me are dead, and the pale sweeps over the world, have at it! Here are the terminals where you would fall to your death. Go of your own free will; it means nothing. I'm evacuating the world. We will go to live in the past. In front of the outpatient clinic, on the park bench, you will come again! You are together under the *paradna*³³, the rain is pouring down, you are talking. Your friends come across the square, in the snowy city, their collars are up too. All that remains of this world is a memory, an entropnetic catastrophe.

You could never quite tell what that was. Even when your eyes were rolled back and staring straight into your head, you couldn't tell. A ghost, she slipped into all the lost places, into the irreversible. I'll give her to you to take, her smell in your hands, a sacred and terrible smell; now rub your face with her. The pale, she is ripe with colour, seeping through the grubby slits; I open the blinds and the intermediate frequencies, all the terrible lost colours of the past come out. Everything *is* again.

This is where nihilism leads. It is no longer what could be, or what could not be. It is.

The entire world is a zone of imminent entropnetic catastrophe.

³³ "парадна", a Russian word for the outside front door of an apartment building.

10. GOOD NIGHT, ANNI

The lights are off when Jesper arrives at his suburban home. He wanders around until his eyes get used to it; gradually, the square-shaped outlines of the furniture emerge from the darkness. He doesn't even take off his boots. It is clean and quiet; the wall of windows, spanning more than half of the room, has been freshly washed. Someone has packed away Tereesz's bedroll, and the ICP agent's vomit bowl is gone. The parquet shines. Mud seeps from Jesper's winter boots into the wool carpet. A bookshelf wall separates the sleeping area from the large main room. Jesper stops, several department store bags catching his eye: "Ozonne", "En Provence", "Tea Shop". Smells like green tea. A microscopic silver dress dangles from a coat hanger on the shelf. The fabric glimmers in the dark.

Jesper parts the curtains and slips between them into the bedroom. Dim light spills from the corner window onto the bed. Between the sheets, her blonde hair splayed across a black pillow, sleeps Anita, Jesper's model girlfriend. Shadows run along the young girl's body; she has shifted out from under the feather duvet. There is a single birthmark on her chest, the curve of her ribs. Jesper watches her chest rise, and tries to remember. Four years. They've been together for four years. What is she now, nineteen? Jesper is thirty-four.

"Psst, hey, wake up!"

The girl hums in her dreams like a child. Jesper blows in her ear, a blonde lock of hair fluttering in his breath. "Anni, wake up! It's Jesper here, hey!"

"Hmh... Jesper, come to bed." The girl pulls the edge of the blanket up under her chin. "It's so nice and cool here..."

"Listen, I can't, I have to go."

"Go... where to now?"

"Get up and let's talk a little bit. Want me to make some tea or something for you?"

"I brought you some tea; did you see?" The Vaasan-Oranjese mixed model stretches, her joints slide; black shadows move across the sea of blankets.

"I saw, yes, thank you so much. It was really thoughtful of you."

"Let's talk tomorrow, Jesper," the girl begs, sleepy vowels drawn out as long as her legs. "Let's go to bed..."

"I already said I can't talk tomorrow. I'm going away." Jesper watches her face. Silence. The numbers in the flip clock rattle for a moment. The wind howls outside the window. She chuckles, suddenly. "Mh, don't go into the woods with your friends again; I haven't seen you at all. We'll be together tomorrow. I came to spend time with you, after all."

"No, you don't understand, I'm leaving *today*."

"Today? What time is it now?" The white flip numbers rustle. "Two at night! Where are you going like this? You've been really weird lately!" The girl pulls herself up onto her elbows, her mouth twisting anxiously. "I came here for you. I wouldn't have come otherwise."

"I'm sorry. Really. And I'm also sorry for what I'm going to ask you to do now, but be a dear and get out of bed for a second, I need to move it."

"What do you have under there?"

"Things."

The girl stands on the cold floor, rubbing one leg against the other and watching intently as Jesper drags the bed aside. Its legs squeak. The Vaasan-Oranjese model holds the blanket around her shoulders like armour. She is very beautiful, but that doesn't mean anything anymore.

“Where are you going?”

In response, Jesper kneels, the floorboards creaking beneath him. “I’m going to disappear.” A hidden hatch opens in the floor, and Jesper drags out a snow-white, bulging suitcase from within it.

“And when will you come back from your disappearance?”

“I could give you some slick answer, but it would be too cruel. It’s better if I don’t say anything.” The suitcase zipper slides open, and Jesper takes a stack of papers out of the pocket.

The girl is annoyed. There are some Jespers that she likes—homely Jesper, who makes tea; practical Jesper; the Jesper who gets awkward showing his sympathy—but this is the kind of Jesper she doesn’t like. “Please don’t treat me like I’m an idiot. This isn’t some newspaper culture section interview you’re doing right now.”

“Okay then.” Jesper nervously rolls up the papers into a tube. “Remember when I told you about the thing I had with the Lund girls? That I knew them, that they disappeared, and so on.”

“At my parents’ cottage?” The girl’s eyebrows are still raised suspiciously, but the set of her mouth softens at the memory. “You were so drunk!”

“See, now, that’s why I don’t drink,” Jesper laughs awkwardly. “But you just had to ask, didn’t you.”

“You were so funny back then!”

“So funny,” Jesper repeats bitterly, “back then. Alright. I was funny. Anyways, I’m going to go looking for them.”

“Looking for who?”

“Cornelius Gurdi, who do you think?”

The doll-like model leans back against the wall, her knees popping in her enviable bone structure as she slides down to sitting. “But you said back then that it was pointless! You said that you’d, you know, put it behind you. Maybe you don’t remember saying that?”

Jesper taps the rolled up papers against the palm of his hand and takes a few contemplative steps across the floor, as if he were in consultation with another Jesper—the one who got drunk at Anita’s parents’ cottage. A very inappropriate incident, very inappropriate for Jesper. But still, that Jesper is a thousand times smarter, a thousand times better off than this baffled creature here.

He ruffles his blonde hair with the roll of papers and says, "There's still hope."

"Jesper..."

"You don't understand. I *have to*." Jesper places the papers, his real estate papers, in the girl's scrawny hands. "Stay here, take my house and live here, please. Sell off both of the apartments in the city centre as fast as you can. Prices will start falling tomorrow. First thing in the morning, run to my real estate agent. Look, here's the number..." The girl's shoulders shake, but everything is silent; only the wind still whines outside the window. Jesper squats down in front of the model-girl, the hem of his winter coat brushing the parquet floor. He puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey. I'm going to make tea now, alright?"

The flip clock reads "02:30". Cups steam on the floor; brown cubes of sugar sit in a square sugar bowl, with a special spoon for lifting the cubes. It is difficult to pour, in the dark, but it doesn't feel appropriate to turn the lights on either. "02:45".

"I don't understand. What does this mean, now?" The girl swallows at the end of a long silence.

"Well, what do you think it means?"

"... And all this time, you had that suitcase," the girl points with her index finger to the centre of the room, "as if I didn't exist at all."

"It was there long before you."

"What, so I was supposed to be able to change your mind?"

"Hey now, try to be understanding."

"Understanding? You know what I think?" The model angrily sets the teacup on the floor. "I think this Lund girls thing is complete bullshit. You're just a paedophile."

The look of betrayal on Jesper's face is unforgettable. Even the girl is stunned by the power her words hold. For this moment, and only for this moment, she regrets them.

"Okay then." Jesper stands up without a moment's notice. He picks up the suitcase and calmly steps out from between the curtains. Indignation overtakes Anita again, and the photo model, naked and angry, rushes after Jesper into the main room.

"You can shove your cube up your ass! I'm not going to stay in this Katlan backwater for the rest of my life!" The stack of white

papers flies from her hand, scattering across the dark room, fluttering down one by one onto an extraordinarily beautiful wooden table, onto the herringbone pattern of the wooden floor. Jesper doesn't turn around yet; he pauses and tilts his head. "So where do you think you're going if you're not staying here? Are you going to work at an ammunition factory in Graad?"

"You're pathetic! You and your *girls*, it's just pathetic. Everyone warned me! And I knew long before the cottage, too! Everyone knows! I was just fifteen then, I was so stupid..."

Anita is out of breath, leaning on the kitchen counter with one hand. "Anni this and Anni that. My name is not Anni!" Jesper feels his hands go cold. The word "morbid" circles back to him. He remembers himself, the underage lingerie model in his arms, dozens and hundreds of times in a row: "Good night, Anni. Good night, Anni. Good night." I'm so happy. He falls asleep, the branches of the trees rustling outside the window like a second chance. This is sad? It's all totally great!

The photo model returns to the bedroom and shouts, in an inexplicable fit of wickedness: "*Good night, Anni!*"

The human mind is inherently sincere. It doesn't think that such nightmarish³⁴ coincidences are possible, at first. But the clearer the difference between Jesper's own thoughts and the mocking voice that rang out in the room becomes, the more his breathing slows, as if his body was preparing to pass out from shame. He picks up the papers from the floor, sheet by sheet, and taps the stack into order on his knee. He chooses his words, not even knowing who exactly he wants to attack. Most likely the entire world. He walks back into the bedroom, places the papers on the bedside table, and plays his terrible trump card.

"And do you think you can return to Revachol? It's not in a *good* state anymore. It's not there—look."

The girl sits on the bed and pulls on her evening dress in a childish fit of anger, not really understanding yet what this is about.

"The *city* is no more," Jesper repeats, and now the girl gets up, startled.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, there's been no contact for five days."

³⁴ Original word "košmaar". Nightmare in Russian. кошмар.

“What are you talking about? Contact with what?”

“With Revachol. An explosion. Gone. You really should read more newspapers!”

“Are you **kidding**?”

Caught up in his revenge, Jesper doesn't quite know yet what's wrong with what he's doing. He senses something, but it's too late now. The girl gasps for air, her hands shaking in panic. Her fingernails click on the buttons, and in the dark, the yellowish radio panel lights up. The wheel spins under her fingers; there's an ethereal hiss in the speakers, full of squeaks and whines as the needle on the panel slides through the shortwave frequencies. Foreign language news programs speak with anxious professionalism, all jumbled together. Her cosmopolitan mind grasps only horrible fragments of it: “Mesque aggressor”, “Saint Miro”, “Revachol”, “atomic weapon” and “half the population”. She trembles so intensely that Jesper begins to fear for her health. With every moment of this crackly radio report, she just falls more to pieces. Finally, a female Vaasan announcer delivers the death blow. The girl breaks down, as the announcer with the voice so specific to this reality reads over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' list of domestic travellers: “... well-known singer, Pernilla Lundqvist, while recording her third studio album...”

Anita's big eyes are wide and dull with horror in the darkness. “My God,” she bawls, “my sister! My sister is there!”

“I'm so sorry,” Jesper says.

“Are you sure? How can they be sure!? Why aren't they **doing** something?”

“I don't know.” Jesper grabs his suitcase.

The girl gasps for air like a whinnying horse. Her mouth transforms into a huge dark scream. This mouth threatens to swallow the world. And so it does, because Jesper can't remember what happened next. White, white snow blows into the vacuum of the scream, the room echoing with a concrete-shrill “Don't go!” Jesper's wrist has bruises from her fingernails. He slams the door shut behind him and stands in front of the house. It's storming outside. It's cold and the wind is whistling, but his skin is feverishly hot. He grabs a handful of snow and shoves it in his face. On the edge of the courtyard, at the mouth of a tunnel made of

spruce trees, stands a black motor carriage. Tereesz Machejek steps out of the machine and, standing in the light from the cabin, gestures to him. Jesper strides across the courtyard, his coat fluttering in the wind and a white suitcase in his hand. The spruces are flinging snow-streaks into the wind, *zig-zag dröm*. And then suddenly the world is so light, as if all meaning has disappeared from it. He is no longer worth anything. Jesper smiles.

It's warm in the cabin of the taxi. The machine sways as he flops down across from Khan. Tereesz shuts the door and slides in beside him.

"How did it go?"

"Well, let's just say it didn't go too well," Jesper replies, collecting himself for a moment. "Let's ride."

The night leading into Monday, seven days earlier. The city explodes in the taxi window like a discotheque; Tereesz trembles, losing his mind. Jesper holds on to him tightly. "Hey, he's having a seizure or something. Seems pretty bad. We need to take him to the hospital."

"Tereesz, listen." Khan leans over his friend. "We really should take you to the hospital."

"No!" Tereesz grabs Khan's jacket. "Please!"

The men look at each other questioningly and shrug. "You have to promise me!" Tereesz says, face dripping with sweat. "Promise you won't give me up!" His chin trembles for a moment, and then his gaze goes blank, his body stiff as a board.

"What the hell?" Jesper shakes Tereesz, then puts a hand in front of his mouth. "He's breathing. Look, I don't know, maybe we shouldn't take him?"

"Yeah, let's not. Your place then?"

Jesper sighs heavily. "Ugh... Okay, my place. There's just one problem: my girl from Revachol is coming over the day after tomorrow. What do you think, will he be okay by then?"

Khan shakes his head irritably. "How am I supposed to know? You don't know any private doctors?"

"Private doctors', Khan?! You can't get a licence if you don't work in a hospital!"

"Well, I thought maybe *you* might know someone."

“I know one ordinary doctor, Khan. Will an ordinary doctor be good enough?”

“All right, all right, don’t take offence now.”

The taxi speeds through the Vaasan night. Meanwhile, Tereesz is the Linoleum Salesman, then Vidkun Hird, then Deerek Trentmøller, then Tereesz Machejek again. Sometimes he feels like he doesn’t really exist at all anymore. Squid-black ink pours over Vaasa’s explosion of colours; the aquarium darkens. Tereesz’s suit is the blackest of blacks. It’s made from leaves from the trees, from the sound of slush under tires, from the sky above the city. He pulls his cuffs straight and adjusts his tie. He’s solemn, he’s dapper. His suit smells like dry cleaning. And then, like umbrellas under the birches of the cemetery, a *funeral party* opens up before him—the feared, the longed for. Everyone is there! The girls’ mother wears a black lace mourning veil over her elegant worry-wrinkles. Paper industrialist Karl Lund holds an umbrella above her head. The birch leaves are trembling in the end-of-summer rain.

Khan and Jesper are also at the funeral. Even Khan’s mother has come, and the whole class, too. They are all much older now. Tereesz doesn’t recognise most of them, but this must be Sixten, and there’s little Olle. Von Fersen talks to his lackey. And Zigi! The baddest boy in school is also present, still wearing his black leather jacket. Jesper is the only one holding a white umbrella. Tereesz walks through the funeral party—everyone is talking quietly, patting each other on the shoulder. As Tereesz passes by, under the piles of flowers, inside the soft fluffy soil, there is a series of toe bones, ribs, the arcs of clavicles, skull bones lined up like relics. Nothing is missing, everything is still there, safely stored. The papers are as clear as schoolwork; it’s a *magnum opus* of forensic identification. They’re going to teach this at the academy. There’s a handful of teeth too—Maj’s little milk teeth, pearls from Anni’s jaw, Målin’s evil, evil grin—everything is there, everything adds up: every little filling, the missing piece of Anni’s molar from a bicycle accident. And Charlotte’s movie star smile. How tempting it would be to take something from there! Just like that, as a souvenir. How they would clink in the palm, those gems! But you can’t do that—that would be unprofessional.

A doctor comes and injects saline on Monday night, going into Tuesday. Tereesz's head clears slowly; it's chilly, and at the funeral party everything is grey and silvery green. Grey mist over the chokeberry bushes, old-fashioned crystal ware with fruit motifs on the table. It's quiet. In the bushes, something rustles like a radio broadcast. Regaining consciousness, Tereesz realises what it was. The news of the collapse of the Northern Passage has created alarm in the public space, and he hasn't the slightest desire to play along. He asks Jesper to switch to classical radio. Classical radio, they say, will still broadcast the music of dead white-skinned men in wigs, even when the world has long since ended. The waves of Perouse-Mittrecie are beautiful to listen to, like the ocean, mm... *grave*. Everyone dances, slowly, and the more Tereesz thinks about it, the clearer it becomes to him that the funeral party will never come. The case has been exhausted. By Tuesday morning, he's ready to admit to himself that they'll never know what happened to the Lund children.

Heelplates leave indentations on the floor mat of the taxi. The girl lifts her leg over her knee, her coral-red varnished toenails all in a row beneath the skin-coloured straps securing her Serj Van Dijks. Gem clusters sparkle where the straps all come together. Elegant, wouldn't you say? If there were some obscene crystals stuck onto department store shoes, that would be a complete *faux pas*! But this Serj Van Dijk here—the one we are looking at now—cost 10,000 réal. The other one cost 500 réal more, for maintenance work. A lone diamond leapt into a sewer on the Revachol delta, what a dizzying night that was! And besides, Serj Van Dijk himself said that there is a difference between elegance and snobbery. And since Serj designed these shoes... well, draw your own conclusions.

"Körsfall, please. 130. I think it's a bit out of town, will that be a problem?"

Shoe size 37, and what an arch on the foot! Like the arcades of the West... The Podiatrist from the Kexholm ring would give these a nine and a half on the trapping-in-a-basement scale. Out of ten.

A chime sounds from her suitcase phone, and the lid opens with a click. But we're still watching those ten-thousand réal Serj

Van Dijk, how the gems shine as her foot swings to the rhythm of Fakkengaff playing on the taxi radio. We simply can't get enough of them. "Hello! Berenike, dear! Ozonne! So nice! I've always wanted to do something with them! No, I won't stay long. A couple of weeks."

The taxi door closes. "Thank you." Thirteen-centimetre heels tap on the footpath. It's getting dark; here it's always either dim or dark. Where did the day disappear to? Her white calves flash; the concrete cube can be seen under the spruce trees in the distance. The lights are on inside. Moss glistens and frost covers mud puddles in the cold before the October storms. Her travel suitcase is lowered down next to her shoes at the front door. The doorbell chimes. Jesper's model-girlfriend's legs go on forever—we crawl our way up and up, but it seems like the edge of that bell-shaped coat will never come. Just at the curve of her butt, the Mesque world-destroying air fleet, black as lubricating grease, reaches the horizon of Revachol. In fact, in the fashion capital at Anita's kneecap, they're already putting their hands over their eyes and asking, "What is that ominous chimney smoke over there on the ocean, like storm clouds?"

"It's unlocked!" Jesper shouts from within. The girl walks in and the main room opens up in front of her, smelling of sweat. Tobacco sweat; lots of both tobacco and sweat. Jesper walks across the room from under the window. There's some guy on a mattress, his greasy potato-coloured head peeking out from under a blanket. Jesper takes the girl's suitcases and introduces her to the fat guy next to the sweaty guy. The immigrant smiles awkwardly, and when he offers his hand, it, too, is warm and sweaty.

"Anita," the girl introduces herself.

"I'm Inayat, but everyone calls me Khan. You can call me Khan too. And this here," he points to the pile of blankets, "this is my mate Tereesz Machejek. He's not feeling well, as you can see." Khan thinks he did quite well. It could have gone worse: "What the *what*?! Jesper, why didn't you tell me you were dating a real model?? Totally rad! If I had Anita Lundqvist, I would tell everyone. Hey, give me an autograph! Hey, your sister is Pernilla Lundqvist, right? Give me Pernilla's phone number, show me your tits! Jesper, tell her to show us her tits!"

Khan ruins the jovial introduction by grimacing to himself about “tits”. Now he finds himself looking at them too, under the girl’s loose fashionable tank top. “Tits, tits, a model’s tits, a famous model’s tits,” he thinks, his grin spreading. Of course, he doesn’t notice that the girl is already asking about Tereesz for the second time.

“Poor guy, what’s wrong with him?”

“Food poisoning.” Jesper grabs her by the arm and guides her into the bedroom to change clothes. Khan, applying some tact, shouts from the door, “Hey, okay then, I’ll see you tomorrow, alright?”

“Are you going already? Wait, I’ll call you a taxi!”

“You and your taxis, I’d rather walk.”

“Goodbye!” the girl exclaims amicably. As Khan trudges along the forest road and over the frosty moss to the stop, the girl on the bed pulls on some pants. On the loose bohemian-fashion tank top is printed the face of Serj Van Dijk, in a revolutionary two-colour scheme, grey and turquoise, as if stencilled. What? It’s not pretentious! Van Dijk is also something of a revolutionary, in his own way. Like a fashion revolutionary. He’s the Mazov of the fashion world. Only he doesn’t send the bourgeoisie away to the taiga of Northeastern Graad as much as he, well, sells them clothes.

“Jesper, who are those people?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve never told me about any Khan. And that other one?”

“Tereesz. They’re just old classmates, from high school. We had a reunion the other day, a class reunion. Didn’t I tell you about that?”

“No.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah, weird.”

“Well, we were just reminiscing a bit about old times. Listen, Tereesz lives in Graad. He’ll probably stay here a few more nights. Hope you don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” the girl says, but she has a bad feeling about all of this. Her suspicious gaze drills into Jesper’s back as he brews tea. How she was welcomed left much to be desired. One lousy kiss. The girl paces around the bedroom irritably, until she notices a

ring box among the books on the bedside table. Oh, a surprise! For the evening? The box is just far enough for Jesper to be able to reach it from the bed. Could it be? Maybe not, but it's still better to know what's coming. And besides—curiosity! Her mood improves immediately. A black velvet box, a tiny box. The girl opens the box—click!

Night settles over Vaasa. In downtown Königsalm, a fox cub runs across an intersection. The steam from the animal's breath paints the air blue; its ears prick up. The street is quiet and empty; the balcony baskets of the downtown houses stand in a row, and yellow traffic lights flash in the mirrors of dark windows. The northern metropolis is a light installation at night—a beautiful modern thing, only there are hardly any visitors. The Royal Architecture Museum, built in the Dideridaada style, looms over the river, the lighting on its facade making the building glow golden. In the dark below, river water drifts by, like viscous vodka fresh out of the fridge. Bridges arch over it, rows of pearly lanterns lining their backs. A lone cyclist rides home in a whirlwind of spokes, and there is a smell of farewells in the air. The billboards sitting on the corners of the department store roofs are buzzing off to power-saving mode. The giant lingerie model floating above the rows of payphones smiles and disappears. Anita Lundqvist. "Dear child, cover yourself up," the praesidium chairman Sapormat Knezhinisky would say. "Aren't you cold?" Two ICP agents run up the stairs of the police station. "Tereesz Machejek! Where is Tereesz Machejek? You arrested him four days ago!" This man is the Man from Internal Affairs. He is the angel of death.

"Tereesz who? Machejek?" The on-duty officer waits for a response from the machine. "We haven't had anyone with that name here."

The asphalt sparkles. In Saalem, the night is cold and the mud puddles are frozen. Wooden houses huddle along the sidewalks, and sparse footsteps echo from the street. Somewhere inside, in a basement, Inayat Khan flicks the lights of "Harnankur" on and off. In the dark room, the model airship's display is the only source of light. Every time it turns off, and then lights up again, Khan's face comes into view. The lines of lights on the ship's decks are

reflected in the thick lenses of his diamaterialist glasses. He has an idea, a spark—the kind you only see when all the other lights go out. Khan has been waiting for this moment for two years. He cuts through the strings, cradles the airship like a baby, and dances with it in his arms. An empty display case remains standing in the middle of the room. The glowing filaments of spotlights go cold on the other side of the road, in the manège; the carriages of the horse-drawn trams disappear into the darkness. Horses sleep in rows in their stables.

Suburban streets pass by, white slats of picket fences. The distant barks of dogs can be heard, window frames glow in the dark and wooden garden furniture stands empty on the porch. Who's rustling around in the gooseberry bushes? The night smells cold, the fear of the future lurks in the dreams of a nuclear family, and where Lovisa ends, the coniferous forest begins, and Jesper de la Guardie rolls out of bed. Anita fell asleep angry, and Jesper is worried. But not because of that—Jesper can't find his precious scrunchie. He sneaks around in his underwear, checks the bedside table, the bookshelf, and then pulls on his bathrobe and steps through the curtains into the living room. The wall of windows shines in the dark, and the floor is a minefield made of milk cartons, socks, mugs being used as ashtrays—and a hermit crab named Tereesz Machejek, who's settling into his new shell.

The agent wakes up, nose pressed against the glass. Jesper puts a cup of tea in front of him. It smells of mint.

“Hey! Wake up! I'd like to talk a little bit. I don't know, just chat or something.”

“Okay, but I want to smoke inside.”

Mouths move, bursts of laughter can be heard, and hour by hour it turns more blueish outside the window. A pile of mug-ashtrays and cups slowly emerges from the darkness.

The blue morning light also glows outside the windows of the “Kino” cafe. Wednesday—outside in Östermalm, the early risers are busying themselves, the street sweeper growls, morning papers fall into rows of mailboxes. Traffic rushes by, and a driver scrapes the frost from their windshield.

Inside the cafe, a moustachioed copywriter in his late twenties drinks coffee and eats scrambled eggs on the side. Suddenly, his

coffee goes down the wrong pipe, and he runs to the bathroom, coughing. The morning paper remains open on the table. In the announcements section, there is a copy of a letter, in Målin Lund's handwriting: "Everything is alright. We're with the Man and we like it here. We love you". Below the copy of the letter are Inayat Khan's phone number and text that reads: "Good person, it is not too late. If you have information about this letter, if you sent this letter, or if you know anything new—anything—about the disappearance of the Lund children, please get in touch."

"I'd like a carton of 'Astras', with menthol; no, wait, has there been a delivery of 'Radar'?"

"No, sorry, Ulv, sir, it's this evacuation stuff! No new goods are coming in at all anymore, I don't know how long I can keep this store open."

"Well, in that case, give me three cartons of 'Astras'," says the young man with the chestnut-coloured curls. "Then that blackcurrant wine from there, how strong is it?"

"Let's see, let's see." The village store manager takes a dusty bottle from the liquor shelf. "Huh! Twenty-three per cent. Must be pure spirits in there."

"Very good, do you have more of that?"

"There are two bottles here."

"I'll take those and then that vodka over there, 'End of the Line', the litre bottle, pale-aged, right?"

"Well, where else. If it wasn't aged, I'd consider bringing it there myself, it's already behind the meadow!"

"So, then, a pack of matches, a pack, not a box. And those candles, are there any more? Ah yes! I'd like this wild strawberry liqueur too, last time I forgot to grab it. Give me the two you have over there."

"This other one is raspberry, we're out of wild strawberry."

"Well, I'll take it then. Since you're closing, better give me the rest of the alcohol as well. And some smoked sausage too."

"**All** the alcohol?"

"Yes, and half a stick of smoked sausage."

A scruffy young man rides a bicycle through the village town of Lohdu, in Lemminkäise, on the edge of the zone of entropnetic

catastrophe. Dusty bottles jingle in his bike-trailer, mixed up with cigarette cartons. And half a stick of “Doctor” smoked sausage, wrapped in paper. On the village road, the streetlights shine like diamonds in the morning twilight.

11. SELF-CHILLER

In the early fifties, a young mother watches her four-year-old boy at a playground in Lovisa. It is the middle of summer, the poplars are shedding grey tufts, and the sun is shining in the sky, but the mother is worried. Other children run around the playhouse, the boys giggle and pull girls by their pigtails. The suspension bridge of the playhouse wobbles as the little ones rush across its planks. Below, on the wooden edge of a large sandbox, girls and boys build a city together. A bright blonde-haired girl spins a tiny model ship around the tower, and two boys dig a tunnel, one on one side of the ridge, the other on the other side. The tunnel meets in the middle and the boys laugh triumphantly. The girl is bored; she starts crying, and other girls come to ask what's wrong.

Only little Ulv sits alone, far away, on the other side of the sandbox. And if someone asks him about the lonely house that Ulv has built on his enormous piece of land, Ulv doesn't answer. He just stares vaguely into the distance and smiles his mysterious childish smile. Like he's somehow... too *cool* for that. Too cool of a guy to tell the rest of the brats about his house. The others soon tire of Ulv's arrogant demeanour and leave him alone. The young mother doesn't understand why her child isn't interested in having company. Even with his parents, Ulv hasn't exchanged more than ten words. He does talk, but only when he's alone, talking with

himself. Sometimes his mother listens to him from another room and doesn't understand what is wrong with her little boy.

A distant street parade can be heard, the bass drum thumps: da-dum-da-dum... Ulv sits in proud solitude in the corner of the sandbox and bobs his curly head back and forth to the rhythm of the music. It looks like he's...

... *self-chilling*.

It's Wednesday afternoon in the forest near Jesper's house. This time, Khan comes first and the others try to keep up with him. He's heavily caffeinated, and he hasn't slept—all night long, he flicked "Harnankur's" lights on and off, made coffee and long-distance calls, and listened to sad songs until his mother asked him to turn it down. Khan waves his hands as he speaks, his orange windbreaker unzipped, allowing a striped scarf in Iilmaraan turquoise, orange and violet colours to flutter free. His mother knitted it for him for the winter solstice, and then made a pom pom beanie (also in Iilmaraan colours) for his last birthday. They come as a set.

The forest path winds between the hills, tall pine trees on both sides of the road. The three of them side by side—Jesper in the right wheel rut, Tereesz on the left and Khan right in the middle on the tuft of grass—come down the hill of snow and sand along the road. The grass is frost-patterned, crunching under their boots. Individual snowflakes fly in the air; the dry end-of-autumn scenery sparkles.

Khan breathes in the fresh air. The lichen decays. He slaps his mittens together on their string, then flings them over his back. "I've never believed in a criminal solution, you know that. Every step forward is a step forward, and in that sense, of course, it's great to hunt down Linoleum Salesmen, but Tereesz, sometimes I feel like you collect these guys like I collect memorabilia, you know? Now, I don't mean it in a bad way, of course."

Tereesz blows large puffs of silver-grey Astra smoke and makes rings in the middle, which are scattered by the quiet wind. "No offence taken, you're right too. You collect this stuff because you think you'll find something about the girls. I collect my monsters for the same reason."

“And what do you collect, Jesper?” asks Khan.

“I don’t collect anything, you morbos. But it’s nice when a man has a hobby, I guess. Listen, what’s gonna happen now?”

“Well. Trentmøller’s possessions must be searched, his relatives must be interviewed,” Tereesz lists on his leather-gloved fingers.

“And what do you mean, you saw that he didn’t do it?” The forest road bends; light brown hay like a person’s hair fills the ruts and rustles under Jesper’s feet. “Oh, you’re not sure?”

“You can never be sure of the Psychedelic Cabinet of Captain Pepi Popikarnassos,” interrupts the hyperactive Khan and turns around. Taking a few steps backwards, he explains to Tereesz, “That’s why ZA/UM is not admissible in court. It’s psychedelia, you understand, it doesn’t help on its own, reality has to *correspond* with it. There have to be witnesses and things. It’s all nonsense anyway!”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that it’s completely pointless.” Tereesz throws his cigarette butt under the trees, an orange spark bouncing up where it lands. “But you’re right about Pepi Popikarnassos, the subject’s fantasies and reality get mixed up in there. It seemed to me that it was more like... an aspect of him. With one that ceased to exist, or... If I get time, I should let the local authorities investigate these things.”

“But now it’s, how do you say, *basta*³⁵?” asks Khan.

“Right now it’s *basta*, yeah.”

“Great, because let’s be honest! Who wants to find them in a ditch somewhere? Really. That’s not a goal in itself, that won’t amount to anything!” Khan waits for comments with a sly smile and sees Tereesz raise his hand.

“I want to. And it is a goal in itself. Have you ever heard of the concept of *closure*? There is such a thing as that.”

Jesper still looks down on Pepi Popikarnassos’ synthesiser whirring, the masturbation of an overrated futurist. “Do you have something better to offer? *Tempus rev*³⁶? This time we’ll do everything by the book?”

³⁵ “Enough”, Italian.

³⁶ “Tempus” is Latin; “rev” is not a word. Apparent meaning here is “reverse time”.

“It wouldn’t be bad. Honestly, I wouldn’t say no to that, either.”

“Come on, Khan, be sensible.” The cold air smells of match sulphur as Tereesz lights his next smoke. “Time is running out. Communication has broken down with Revachol, and with the Occident. Half the world is on high alert. When war comes, all investigations are stopped; documents, papers, and people can get lost. You have to work quickly, tie up all the loose ends before it’s too late.”

Three small silhouettes move through the undergrowth at the edge of the fields. They just keep their balance while arguing over the log bridge, where ice drifts downstream under the trees; they jump over fallen trees in the twilight of a forest tunnel and move single-file through white meadows. Khan ducks under a barbed wire fence, and Jesper, like Tereesz, jumps over. The paddocks are left behind, the forest thins out; the sandy furrow of the road sits below the line of tree roots like a tiny canal. A sea breeze rustles in the treetops above, and in the air you can feel how the vastness of the body of water is growing closer.

“We’ve been doing your thing for so long, and nothing has come of it. Give me a chance too,” Khan explains, more with his hands than his mouth.

“Okay, you’re right that it’s at a dead end,” Tereesz admits. “But then why don’t you just say what the plan is and let us think about it? If I think that something can come of it, then okay, let’s do it. If not, then we have to take time off.”

“You don’t understand,” Khan says with a shrug. “If you say no, we’ll never know. There are no other leads anymore. I can’t risk you saying no. Let’s take a little trip first, eh? Go and talk to a professional? We should have been in contact with him a long time ago, now we’re a little too rushed.”

“What do you mean, there are no other leads?” Jesper doesn’t understand. “What about Målin’s letters? Someone had to send them, and the handwriting was a match. By that age, the handwriting would have developed a bit, and a fifteen-year-old’s handwriting may not match a thirteen-year-old’s 100%. A 95% match is very promising, I’ve read about it. Right, Tereesz?”

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” Khan jumps in. “But you know what? I have an idea about how we can fix it. Right *now* it’s no use to just wait around. We’ve got to take action, immediately!”

“What idea?”

“Well, I put an ad in the newspaper.”

Tereesz ambles along in his fifties-style herringbone coat, looking like a true kojko, his mouth thoughtfully ajar. “That might not be such a bad idea at all. When did you post this ad?”

“I submitted it yesterday, it should appear today. I put your number there too, Jesper, in case I’m not at home myself.”

“And what did you write there?”

“That if anyone has any information, they should come forward, that nothing bad will happen, to please help out, you know!”

“This kind of thing can be more effective than you think,” Tereesz explains to Jesper. “Especially with such old things. But you still have to fish for months and months on different columns. Where did you send it?”

“To Dagens and Kapitalist. I had no more money. By the way, you both owe me a fiddy. And the consultant I recommend is going to need some too. And we need money for the trip. We’ll need at least a thousand, he’s very expensive, very highly valued. I’ve been waiting for it for so long, reading about him...”

Jesper is getting impatient. First of all, he certainly doesn’t want to go anywhere right now, and secondly, he already knows whose money they’re talking about here. Khan lives off the settlement from when his father died on a fuel oil rig, and if Tereesz doesn’t start an investigation, he won’t be covered for anything. “Listen, lay it out, what kind of consultant are we talking about here?”

The three silhouettes reach the rocky bank. The vastness of the sea greets them, across the dried meadow. The grass is white-spotted from the snow, and a single shrivelled pine tree sways in the wind. The sky darkens as the men approach the edge of the bank; Jesper pulls his coat collar tighter, the roar of the sea ringing in his ears. He often walks the six kilometres to the bank alone. From here you can see what they all long to see—the beach

strip of Charlottesjäl on the other side of the bay, in the snowy distance.

Khan leans on the log railing and looks down. Gargantuan waves smash against the rock wall, the water curving and the white crest of the wave breaking into a million clumps of foam. The view through the man's glasses blurs from the spray. Jesper appreciates the autumn current; it comes once a year, and now he has a clear plan. Let them go—I tell the girl that I'll go too, then think of something else to tell the boys. He measures the wind.

"The self-chiller," says Khan. "It's high time to talk to him about the girls."

Jesper starts to laugh, but Tereesz is serious.

"Wait, wait! He confirmed the skeletons of Abadanaiz and Dobрева to the nearest kilometre," explains Khan. "More? Two years ago, following his tip, they went to Corpus Mundi to look for Cornelius Gurdi. The chain he brought out has now sunk into the pale, but they found Gurdi's cutlery and the remains of his camp nearby. After five hundred years! The self-chiller, Jesper, he lives in Lemminkäise, in a country house in the woods, and we're going there."

It's snowing on the tin-grey sea, the temperature is at zero; the wind in the gulf is less than ten metres per second, and for the next two weeks, storms in Western Katla, right at the edge of the pale, will cause the ocean to swell. A two week window, perfect conditions. Jesper can already feel how the mass of water breaks into waves on the Charlottesjäl beach, ten kilometres from here. The prows of waves move in his eyes, long and stable like beautiful thoughts.

"Okay," says Jesper, "but I have a conference of my own. Design stuff. From Thursday to Saturday. And by the way: Lemminkäise is not a very good idea right now. Or maybe you didn't hear?"

Little Ulv is nine years old when modern dance music is born in Oranje. Johan Hauer, Rietveld, and Arno Van Eyck spin records in university halls; in Vesper, in Viderunt, the world's first disco "Das Baum" opens; on a summer evening in Messina's arcade square, after the most epic set in human history, the ecstatic crowd

crowns Theo Van Kok to be an innocence. Ulv comes home from school wearing a backpack. He is in the fourth grade, and he sits alone on the back row, because he doesn't care what the teacher says. Ulv is not interested in mathematics, and natural sciences don't interest Ulv either. Ulv isn't interested in mean girls; Ulv is only interested in one thing in this world. On his way home, he stops with his mouth agape in front of the Phono-Store in Västermalm, where music lovers file in and out. Theo Van Kok's coma remix of one of the old overtures plays, and music lovers watch, with tapes under their arms, as little Ulv dances under the speakers in front of the store as if possessed by an evil spirit. Tears flow down Ulv's cheeks and the whole world evaporates. Everyone laughs and watches with delight as the little boy squirms and scrambles, spins, bellows, waves, shouts: "Wow, no way?!" He punches the air with his hands and feet, slams his palms against the hood of a motor carriage, and they simply cannot understand: "How is he **so** hardcore?! It can't be that hardcore!!!"

A clerk in a trendy sweatshirt comes out of the store; from out of the grey chaos of lost things, where a coma echoes over human history, a young man steps in front of Ulv and hands him a Stereo 8 tape. "Theo Van Kok/" it says on the cover, "*Comte de Perouse-Mittrecie*". This is the first and last time in Ulv's life that a living person has been worth something to him.

The motor carriage's chrome tire spins and snow crunches under the wheel chains, but Inayat Khan is not there; he is thirteen years old, and he steps down from the porch of Tereesz's father's cottage into the apple orchard. It's dark and grasshoppers are chirping. The self-chiller puts the Stereo 8 tape into the player, two plastic discs spinning. A *sound check* is in progress, but that June night is quiet. The music is not audible way out there, it's twenty years in the future and a long, long way from Inayat Khan. The air is filled to the brim with scents; it meets the boy like a spirit from under the trees, circling around his knees and smelling of early-ripening Suislepps³⁷. Khan walks barefoot on the dew-soaked grass. The other boys are sleeping inside, on the second floor, but

³⁷ A red and yellow Estonian apple variety; it ripens in late summer, rather than fall.

he couldn't sleep. At half past eight in the morning, they had gone to work together. Khan's body is exhausted from the construction work, but his heart is restless. The money isn't there to make ends meet either. The dealer, Zigi, quoted astronomical sums on the other end of the phone. 300 réal. Jesper took his "Man from Hjelmdall" collection of adventure novels to the antique store, after a lot of persuasion. Khan sold his binoculars.

Sixteen-stroke combustion chambers beat in the heart of the machine; far away in Lemminkäise, the windows of a country house vibrate to a bass rhythm. *Check, check...* But Inayat Khan is not there. A Suislepp drops onto the grass at his feet. Little Inayat polishes the apple clean on his shirt sleeve and takes a seat on the garden bench. He crunches into the fruit and feels a sweet pain stabbing in his heart, making it hard to breathe. It's the feeling of a possibility slipping out of your hand, which grows throughout the day and then makes itself felt in the evening. "Talk about something... you always have such awesome presentations. In history and science classes..." Dark green eyes, extremely kind and so very interested. Are you sure, Khan? Try to be reasonable, now, there's no point in humiliating yourself like that for nothing.

There is steam under the hood, the engine belt is running; the tape slides against the magnetic reader. But it's still quiet in the apple orchard. Inayat Khan doesn't believe in God, not especially. God was apparently invented by some man named Pius in Iilmaraa sometime, certainly more than three thousand years ago. Maybe. But now Khan throws the apple core into the bushes, brings his hands together, and prays.

"Please make Målin like me back. God, please make it so that she really *like*-likes me, not just... well, you know, cause you're God. I promise that then I will no longer think that some guy—Pius of Perikarnassis—invented you. I promise I will believe then that you have existed from the beginning of time and drawn heaven and earth with your... er... golden compass, or whatever it was. I'm sorry, God, that I'm ragging on you like this, but look, it's really hard for me to believe that you exist when Målin Lund doesn't like me."

Khan looks up at the sky. It's spinning in the darkness of his heart, the expanse lighting up star by star. Love, like a sleek-furred

cat curling into a ball inside his belly. Love, for him, is the fear of loss.

The red glow of the taillights turns the snow blood-coloured, fumes rattle out from the muffler of the motor carriage. The chained tires swish on the snow and the engine rumbles for a moment. Gear shift. Tone rising. The acceleration pushes the reckless driver against the backrest. In the driver's cabin, the young man's fingers are frozen to the steering levers and his racing glasses are on. An unlit mountain road is reflected in the frosty surface of the glass as it disappears under the wheels.

The atmosphere roils above the Lemminkäise zone of entropnetic catastrophe. The snow-speckled peaks of dark mountain ranges cut into the horizon, gritted teeth like those of a Linoleum Salesman. At the bottom of the valley, among the clearings and spruce forests, a black motor carriage is speeding along a winding road at one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour.

"This is fucking **awesome!**" exclaims Khan. Tereesz nods. Fuel oil exhaust fills the cool air of the cabin, until it's like industrial acid. The agent looks out of the window—the fence posts lining the road are flying by in the falling snow, and white masses of forest are visible from the valley below, chequered with dark logging squares. Khan jumps out of the seat next to Tereesz, and into the seat opposite Tereesz. He lets the last drop from the wine bottle fall onto his tongue. A curve knocks him against the wall of the cabin with a *crash!*

"Done." He shows Tereesz the empty bottle. Immediately, a new flavoured berry wine appears in Khan's hand. The screw cap flies off with a crinkle; "Sugar: 25%" crunches between his teeth. Far away on the other side of the valley, on the opposite slope, lights flash in the dark. All the other machines have been moving in the opposite direction since Wednesday night, away from the entropnetic catastrophe. That was when Khan, agent Machejek, and the mad Suruese rally driver Kenni—just Kenni—had set off together from Vaasa:

"What's your name?"

"Kenni."

"Kenni who?"

“Vain Kenni. — *Just Kenni.*”³⁸

“Kato, entroponeettisen romahduksen vyöhyke! Ei voi olla, kuusetkin rupee taivaaseen ajautumaan, saa-ta-na, ihan kuin ne sanoi, se kyllä täytyy nähdä! Ja talot myös! — *Look, the zone of entroponectic collapse! It can't be, even the spruces are starting to drift into the sky, fuck-ing-hell, just like they said, this truly is a must-see! And the houses too!*” Kenni barks from the driver's seat over the engine noise.

“How's it going?” shouts Khan in response. He, unlike Tereesz, is still a little worried when the machine shakes, and in the darkness of the driver's seat, in the yellow glow of the speedometer, he sees the pointer move to one hundred and seventy.

“Hienosti menee, ihan hienosti, en huolehdi ollenkaan! — *It's going great, totally great, I'm not worried at all!*”

“And the road, how is the road?”

“Että mikä, tiekö? Ei, hyvin on, en huolehdi ollenkaan. — *Say what? The road? No, it's all good, I'm not worried at all.*” Kenni isn't worried at all. Kenni wants some flavoured berry wine instead, and when Khan thinks Kenni shouldn't drive drunk, Kenni says: “Älä huolehdi, alright? Mä oon puolet tiet juonu jo, muuten mä nukahtaisin. Se auttaa mua keskittymään, kato! — *Don't worry, alright? I've been drinking half the trip already, otherwise I'd fall asleep. It helps me focus, y'see!*”

The road continues along the hillside, between spruce trees. Kenni drifts on the curves in order to stay on the road. Khan feels safer only when the motor carriage plunges down the slope and deep into the forest along the village road. Snow crunches under the tire chains and the engine screeches; the square window panes have been totally covered in snow, with only circles of visibility left. A ghostly black forest wall flutters beyond the portholes. Suddenly, Kenni pulls to the left side of the road, and Khan jumps back to his side. They whiz past a red Graad Telekom van. The news agency camera crew waves at Khan from their own snow-frosted window; Khan waves back.

³⁸ Kenni speaks Finnish, untranslated in the original, while the lines Khan and Tereesz speak back at him are still in Estonian. The two languages are somewhat mutually intelligible. The Finnish lines have been edited to correct some spelling errors.

He's been drinking in the cabin with Tereesz for the last two days. Kenni refuses to stop—he wants to break a record. He has a stopwatch on his hand. And the whole time, they watch all the rest of the traffic go the other direction. Even two hundred kilometres out from Vaasa, the traffic jam was still crawling along in the opposite lane. People from the outskirts, on their way to cities to visit relatives. From the hiss of the car radio, they learned that a similar panic was taking place everywhere in Katla. In Arda, Norrköping is the place where everyone flocks just in case, for its floating train stations. Tickets for the next two months are also sold out in Yelinka, near the collapsed Northern Passage. You can't escape—a last resort might be to leave by foot over the boreal plateau.

The wide open landscape out the side window gradually became rounded, hazy whale-backs gliding on the horizon, with spruce forests riding the humps. The motorway also changed into a highway late in the night, but the traffic in the opposite direction didn't thin out; the road just came down from its pillars, into the middle of the fields, where land was a gleaming white from the thickly fallen snow. Khan fell asleep with his head against the side window; in the darkness before them shone a diamond sea of headlights on one side of the road, and the bare, empty pavement on the other. A single pair of red taillights slid hurriedly towards Lemminkäise. Only military convoys and the machines of foreign news agencies with radio antenna units on their roofs went alongside them.

In the morning, Khan opened his eyes to a deserted Suruese village passing by outside the glass. Waves of electric wires meandered between the poles, and below them, on an empty village street, a country girl in a long skirt and jacket was riding a bicycle. She looked Khan straight in the eyes, reflectors shining on the spokes of her bike. They were fifteen hundred kilometres in from the border of Vaasa, and fifteen hundred more were still ahead. Kenni drove quietly—in the cabin, they could hear the ice breaking in the mud puddles under the wheels. The girl waved and turned onto a side road at the outer border of the settlement. The darkness of the forest gate engulfed her, the rear light of her bicycle flashing to the rhythm of its dynamo. It was already snowing in the tree

tunnel ahead. So they went—Inayat Khan, Tereesz Machejek, and the meanest guy in the taxi fleet: Kenni, just Kenni. For a few hours, the boys sat quietly and watched Suruese land pass by in the haze of twilight. The cold stars of streetlights lit up in the distance, eternite³⁹ crumbled from the roofs of the houses. The closer the night got, the thicker the snow became. As the dark, sawtooth mountains appeared on the horizon, and the villages became less and less frequent, Tereesz suggested popping open a flavoured berry wine.

“Otherwise it gets depressing.”

Above the darkening mountains ahead, they often saw military airships. Once, an iron barge whizzed straight across the bridge and caught them in its floodlights, its downdraft threatening to upend their motor carriage. But then the ship was gone. Only her lights were still visible, gliding through the darkness above the forest. This is what’s called ‘an evacuation’.

The checkpoint stood abandoned by the road, along with glowing letters reading “LEMMINKÄISE”. A military barricade made of concrete blocks ran across the road; Kenni put snow chains on his wheels and turned over half a field in the process of driving around the fence. The border point disappeared behind them, along with the invisible boundary of winter’s orbit, beyond which is eternal winter. The asphalt also disappeared over time; they encountered rural families on sleds along snowy gravel roads. It is their great privilege to have seen the pale with their own eyes, where it has towered behind the silo since childhood. A passing family, propped up on all their belongings on a horse-drawn sleigh, waved at the funny fat man with dark yellow skin and diamaterialist glasses.

“How strange, they wave every time,” says Khan, as the Graad Telekom van falls behind them in a cloud of snow kicked up from under the wheels of Kenni’s machine. Far away in the dark forest, neither headlights nor sled lights blink any longer. Only those who want to stay here are left now, in the farmyards, the fronts of the combine factories, and the closed village shops. The pale rises in the dark.

³⁹ Asbestos cement.

“Kuuletko sen? *Do you hear that?*” asks Kenni from the driver’s seat, “Harmaa... se on nyt varmasti harmaa! Mua vähän huolestuttaa. — *The pale... that’s definitely the pale now! I’m a bit worried.*”

Tereesz and Khan listen. Indeed, a new sound is growing under the storm, an ominous rumble, a low crackling noise. Like a wave breaking, slowly-slowly... To Khan, it sounds like the beginning of a song. He heard it in a dream.

“I’m not with the ICP anymore, they let me go,” Tereesz shouts, drunk, hands raised to his mouth and shaped to amplify his voice.

“What?” Khan can’t hear at first; the noise is mesmerising. He feels the hairs on his body stand up, and chills run through him, as if he had just taken off his sweater in a cold room.

“They let me go from the Collaboration Police!”

“I know!” Khan exclaims, handing Tereesz the flavoured berry wine. “You’ve been showing some Somerset Ulrich guy’s badge the whole way!”

“How’d you know?” From Tereesz’s mouth, the smell of alcohol wafts into the cold cabin.

“Because all the border checkpoints called you Mr. Ulrich and Agent Ulrich and Somerset Ulrich.”

“That’s a missing agent whose papers I took. I’ve got more of ’em.” Tereesz takes a sip. His lips are red, and a sticky liquid spills from the neck of the bottle onto his shirt collar. “The papers, I mean. And the missing agents. I went by ‘Machejek’ in Kronstadt, otherwise they wouldn’t pick up the trail. I thought I’d go to Lemminkäise with Somerset Ulrich and abandon the trail, let them follow me!”

“You’re wanted, aren’t you?”

“Yes-yes, haven’t I told ya? A guy had a heart attack from that little thing!”

“From ZA/UM, or?”

“Exactly,” says Tereesz, and in front of him, the Suruese rally ace Kenni sees the black mass of the forest slowly drifting into the sky. The earth crunches and cracks as the spruce trees tear themselves out of it, roots and all. The wood screams, and the frozen earth too, like they’re in a dentist’s chair. A cloud of

limestone gravel flies into the air, and far above in the dark, the first trees are subsumed in the pale.

Two years ago.

Khan hears the phone ringing throughout his dream. A cold and strange noise, a false awakening. He opens his eyes in his mother's basement and gets up, clad in his pyjama pants and slippers. He feels that something is different, but he still goes. The basement around him is rendered strange by the dream—things are in the wrong places. Nadia Harnankur smiles eerily in her locket, and Gon-Tzu has a peach of immortality in his hand instead of a compass; it's moulding.

An empty glass display case shines on the table in the middle of the room. Khan doesn't dare look in there; there's something in its emptiness that he can't remember. Something wrong. There's something wrong with the phone ringing too—how it sounds through the darkness of the apartment, from the upstairs hallway.

He goes up the stairs; the hallway sleeps around him, the phone rings on the wall. He reaches out, afraid. His hand sweats on the plastic of the receiver, and feels something forbidding him from answering. But he has to. It's important; every thread is. So he picks up the receiver, and the hallway fills with the hiss of the pale. It grates in his ear.

"Hello?" asks Khan.

But no one answers.

"Hello, who is it? Please tell me who you are!" he repeats, more and more pleading each time. The hissing becomes louder and louder, until finally it deafens him, the pressure in his inner ear goes awry, and only that vibration from who-knows-where remains, its centre. The silence goes through his flesh and bones like waves. It's cold.

"Please," plump tears flow from under Khan's glasses, "tell me who you are..."

"You know who I am." The vibration emits a child's voice; it says terrible things with it. Khan begins to shake. He slumps in the corner of the hall, receiver in hand.

"It's not you, it's not you!" he cries. His real body shakes along with his mind. He wakes up crying in his bed. His ear throbs;

the dream continues while he's awake, only that there is an airship model in the display case again, Nadia no longer smiles, and Gon-Tzu is holding a compass.

Sitting on the display case are dried cheese sandwiches from his mother and tepid coffee. And an envelope—a morning shipment from Graad, by magnetic post. “Sarjan Ambartsumjan” is written in the sender's area, and inside is a single key, golden and immeasurably complicated.

He has two years.

Deleted scene “KHAN’S MOTHER”:

TN: This scene—found on ZA/UM’s old nihilist.fm blog—contains slight spoilers, introducing ahead of time certain elements that the text will treat as a surprise later on. It is probably why it was deleted, and we suggest reading it after you have finished the book. It does however add very interesting context, and more depth of character to Khan and Khan’s mother.

“Please,” plump tears flow from under Inayat Khan’s glasses, “tell me who you are...”

“You know who I am.” The vibration emits a child’s voice; it says terrible things with it. Khan begins to shake. He slumps in the corner of the hall, telephone receiver in hand.

“It’s not you, it’s not you,” he shouts. His real body shakes along with his mind. He wakes up crying in his bed. His ear throbs; the dream continues while he’s awake, only that there is an airship model in the display case again, Nadia no longer smiles, and Gon-Tzu is holding a compass.

Five minutes later, Aliyah Khan wakes up to the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. She fumbles along the headboard of her bed, and a tasselled night lamp lights up. She goes to the kitchen in her nightgown. There, in the dark, with his back to the door, her son in his thirties stands sniffing. The big guy washes his coffee cup, his back shaking.

“Bad dream?”

Khan doesn’t answer; he drops his cup in the sink and the handle snaps off.

“Sit down, now, let me do it.” The mother leads the man to the table. “Do you want me to make you some tea?”

“Coffee.” The man wipes his cheeks. “Make some coffee.”

The old woman turns on the lights in the kitchen. The water sloshes in the sink as she washes her son’s favourite mug. On it, Ramout Karzai’s final journey winds through the dunes. Then she puts water on the stove and sits down next to Khan.

“I asked...” he gasps, “for her to tell me where they are, but she didn’t say.”

“And she was...”

“Målin.” Khan swallows. “She called, and the others were there too. They told me to leave them alone. They said that I’m *tormenting* them.”

In the quiet, the kettle on the stove starts to whistle. Khan’s mother gets up from the table and searches the cupboard for coffee powder. “You know what that means, right?”

Khan is no longer sniffing. He stares blankly at his fingers on the table. “Everyone else would have gotten their own. I’d have been the only one who didn’t...”

“No, honey.” Aliyah sets the coffee cup on the newspaper in front of her son. “You’re the one who’s giving yourself advice like this. You yourself know what you have to do. You don’t have to chase this Zigi guy, and you don’t have to go to the man who speaks with the dead. You have to get a job.”

“But I already have a job!” Khan takes a sip. “I’m a leading specialist in my field, I’ve told you about it before.”

“Maybe, yes, but this is not a normal field. I mean a real job. If you start taking care of yourself, women will come to you, too. I have an idea, listen! In the morning, you go to the employment agency...”

“Mom, didn’t I just tell you?!”

“Let me finish! Bright and early in the morning, you go by and ask them for retraining, and accept it! They offer it for free, after all. That’ll give you some self-confidence, some structure...”

“Of course,” Khan laughs hollowly, “*structure*.”

“... and on Friday you go out with this girl. She’s up for it, and she’s very nice. Agne is a very pleasant woman, I don’t think her daughter will swallow you whole.”

“What daughter?”

“Why don’t you ever listen to me? I’ve been telling you for a month now that my co-worker’s daughter is your age and is also single. She actually really wants to meet you! Put on a nice suit and shirt and take her somewhere nice to eat.”

Khan lowers his head into his hands. “Where would I take her, mom... to Abu-Babu’s kebab, to eat börek? The place where I’ll be getting that retraining.”

“You know what we’ll do? I’ll give you some pocket money. An advance. Right after the employment agency, you’ll make a

reservation... at Telefunken!” Khan’s mother watches him with a sly face.

The man lifts his head from his hands and wipes his nose with a handkerchief. “How’re ya gonna make that happen?”

His mother splays open a newspaper on the table. “Through your acquaintances.” A young man in a t-shirt and a suit cut to his waist is posing next to his interview in the culture section in the newspaper. The shirt features the iconic album cover of a well-known dance artist; the interior design of the renovated panoramic floor shines in the background.

12. ZIGI

Nineteen years ago, in late autumn. It's 8:15 AM, and Khan is late for school. He hurries along in the city centre of Königsalm. White streaks of traffic glow in the morning darkness, and thick sleet falls. With a backpack on his back, the boy runs across a crosswalk; there's a honk, and a motor carriage whizzes by. He almost got run over. The slushy snowflakes aim for his eyes, and melt on his cheeks and woollen hat. Khan is running up the stairs to the main door when something pins him in place. The financial manager and the cleaning lady are scrubbing at a big red letter O on the corner of the school's facade. The letter is as tall as the cleaning lady. A policeman shakes his head and looks up at the wall, where a huge slogan decrees: "THE WHOLE WORLD IS A ZONE OF IMMINENT ENTROPONETIC CATASTROPHE".

That is the kind of boy Zigi is.

Zigi is the baddest boy in school. Zigi is so bad that some would even say that Zigi is *too* bad a boy. "He's in year ten, but you know what? He came here from another school, and Sixten knows someone at that school, and that person said that Zigi came to their school from another school as well. Guess which year Zigi was in there? Exactly! The tenth. I swear it. And you know what else? The school he was at before that... he was in the tenth year there, too!" Zigi's mother is a radiant Vaasan woman who works in the Ministry of Education and gets along well with the matriarch of

the Lund family. That's why the boy can go to school in the city centre, even though he's had to repeat a year twice. At home he has chequered notebooks, filled with all kinds of siege machines, city walls and trajectories, but Zigi doesn't want you to know that about him.

Zigi's father is a nihilist, a kojko and a drunkard. Zigi is very proud of this: "My father? Ah, I don't know... a nihilist... a kojko... a drunkard..." Zigi's real name is Zygismunt Berg. Tereesz saw him once in the boys' bathroom, raised his left hand into a fist and said: "Frantiček the Brave!" Zigi said nothing. Zigi was taking a piss. Pss-pss. Then Zigi went to the door and stood there for a moment. The zippers on his leather jacket jingled.

"Hey, listen, man!"

"What?"

"Stick that Frantiček the Brave up your ass."

Zigi is a nihilist, and a communist too, if necessary. The word "bourgeois" hangs from his lips like a butterfly knife: "bourgeois", "the bourgeoisie", "typical bourgeois", "bourgeois art", "petit-bourgeois opinion", "you are bourgeois", "your bourgeois parents", "your parents are bourgeois", "it is because your parents are bourgeois", "it is because you are bourgeois, Ann" (Zigi also calls his teachers by their first names), "whore of the bourgeoisie", "puppy of the bourgeois", "paederasty is a bourgeois disease, paederasts are bourgeois". Zigi is a well-read boy and is also familiar with all the other beautiful names of the bourgeoisie: "pursui", "*bourgeois*", "*petit-bourgeois*", "boujee", "bürger", "kulak", "middle class", "rentier", "big landlord..."

His influence is enormous. A girl with pigtails from the fourth grade comes home and asks, "Dad, why is social democracy so weak?"

"Where did you hear such a thing?"

"Zigi said that social democracy is weak and communism is powerful. Why don't we have communism, dad?"

But above all, Zigi is still a nihilist. He reads dia-mat⁴⁰, says that animals are automatons, is a fan of behaviourism, and adores the pale and the nihilistic innocence of Mesque, Ambrosius Saint-Miro. "If you had a bit of courage, even an ounce of it, you

⁴⁰ Dialectical materialism.

would also follow Saint-Miro.” Zigi talks about his homeland in the midst of a coup d’état. It is no longer part of Zigi. Zigi has no homeland. The geography teacher sent him to the principal’s office, and Zigi stopped at the door, the zippers of his leather jacket jingling. “See you in the pale,” he said, and ran his index finger across his throat. Back when entropnetics was not discussed at school, many people gathered around Zigi during recess, and the corridor echoed with his half-truths: “The pale is made of the past,” he said. “All the lost things are jumbled up there, sad and abandoned. The pale is the world’s memory of the world. It accumulates matter and sweeps away everything in its path. This is what’s called entropnetic collapse.”

“But when will it happen, Zigi?”

“Yes, Zigi, when?”

“It will happen in your lifetime, little Olle. At least, I hope so. History swallows the present; the world of matter disappears, *desaparecido*... That’s why there’s no point in our generation going to school. There will be no future. When you grow up, don’t have children like your underdeveloped bourgeois parents did. You’ll get to see them die, and that’s it. Compared to the pale, there’s only a small amount of the world left! In the end, the isolas will sink, dozens and hundreds of square kilometres of land mass, can you even imagine? Like a ship keeling over into the pale. Fwooom...” Zigi makes a sinking ship gesture with his hands, the zippers of his leather jacket jingling; the children gasp. “Don’t worry, Olle, this will be the peak of humanity.”

Zigi smokes. In the school bathroom, in the wardrobe corner. Zigi has a *sprechgesang*⁴¹ band, and the manager made a big mistake when he let Zigi perform on the winter solstice. Zigi’s *sprechgesang* is like a machine gun. Four hundred rounds per minute...

Hook:

“Have a smoke! In the school bathroom, in the wardrobe corner,
abraq adabra, in the lobby (*aa-yeah!*) in the cafeteria queue.

⁴¹ In real life, an expressionist vocal technique between singing and speaking. In Elysium, rap (Source: Disco Elysium special edition artbook).

1st verse:

Nasty morning, it's dark, I'm tired,
nasty slush, mood zero, down by the corner of the house
(*mama doesn't see!*)

I light a fat ciggy, mmm... do you get it, makes me feel
good.

Chubby cig, I'm warm inside, everything disappears!

Hook:

Abraq adabra, in the school bathroom, in the wardrobe
corner,

abraq adabra, vanish like the world."

And so on. In January, Zigi was expelled from school. And mind you, it wasn't because of his confusing rhymes. In the tolerant educational space of Vaasa in the fifties, such *sprechgesang* was seen as rather a natural part of the development process. The issue was that Zigi was a drug dealer. That's why he came to that school in the first place. At that time, no one could have expected such a thing, and Zigi was more than aware of it. He acted fearlessly, talked openly and loudly about transactions during lessons, distributed samples, and reaped the benefits of Vaasa's naïveté like Vidkun Hird or the Linoleum Salesman. He also partook himself—he came to class high, he was an anachronism, twenty years ahead of his time. Zygismunt Berg was a dark, spewing stain.

When the police finally tracked him down, Zigi emigrated to his father in Graad and dropped off the radar. A few years later, his charred body was found in an incinerator on the heating floor of a particularly depressing block of flats.

13. MATTERIMONY

Little Jesper de la Guardie frowns under the sun, a lock of blond hair hanging annoyingly in the corner of his eye. He is standing at the transportation hub of his own sense of time. Everything leads here, and everything starts from here. He's wearing a white sailor suit for this occasion, and he holds a sailor hat with a dark blue brim in his hand, squeezing it nervously. Jesper is thirteen years old. He has a bottle opener in his trouser pocket, a handkerchief with his name on it, twenty-four speed pills, and a bouquet of lilies sitting on the bench next to him. All preceding time flows to this point, at the Charlottesjäl tram stop, and it is from this stop that everything to come emanates. It's the first of July in the year '52, and in the waiting area under the funk!pavilion's dashing white arch, Jesper stands on the edge of a summer evening. He's scared; this amusement park attraction has been screeching in his ears since last Sunday, as he's been slowly carried up its lift hill. It's been like this the entire week: the height and the feeling of vertigo are waiting ahead of him. And the fall—he is so indescribably excited. The first tram comes, and the girls aren't there. Jesper feels a strange sense of relief, like when he proved to be too short for the Steel Mountains three years ago at the Revachol Amusement Park. The danger is almost over. But when the next tram also pours passengers into the stop, the girls aren't among them either. The feeling turns upside down in his stomach—into disappointment.

What if they don't come? It's half past nine, and they were supposed to be here an hour ago. "You have to be at least this tall to ride the Steel Mountains, little boy." Jesper gets up on tiptoe and takes a sip of beer to reassure himself. Beer is a terrible idea, he knows it; beer makes you smell like hops.

"It's a terrible idea, Tereesz. Beer stinks, chicks hate beer!" But after a week of construction work, a sum of three hundred réal to Zigi, the baddest boy in the school, to redeem the mysterious pills... after record player batteries, flowers, and God knows what else, Tereesz had been right. He'd said, "We're out of options, Jesper, and *dry*... we won't go sober." So they'd stood in front of the beer stand, as their helpful vagrant licked his lips and dreamed of taking a sip of his bribe. The vendor had looked down at the three naughty boys, and the boys had watched as the frothy liquid flowed from the cistern into the cardboard cups.

"Like piss," commented Jesper.

Khan took the pint between his brown hands and watched as Jesper drummed his fingers against the brim of his sailor's hat. "Shut up and drink, look at your shaky hands."

"Mm... you've drunk piss, if I'm not mistaken?" Jesper declared cheekily and sniffed his cup. "We thought about maintaining a facade of virginity, but here you both are smelling as classy as **piss**!" Khan, with his low tolerance for jokes, had giggled and sucked some beer down the wrong pipe.

Now Khan is nervously pacing in front of the bus stop, kicking small pebbles across the road. Every now and then, a beach goer gets hit in the foot with a pebble and shoots him an angry look. Khan apologises and waves his shirt, with its still-drying beer stain, in the sea breeze.

"Does it smell? Jesper, tell me, is it noticeable?"

"Yes, it stinks, it stinks really badly, and you can see the stain. Go check what time the next tram comes."

"It's nine, twenty minutes to go."

"No, don't *tell* me, go check!" Once Jesper has gotten rid of Khan, he empties his cup. The cardboard flies towards the trash can and barely misses the edge. "Damn it!"

Tereesz, freckled like a devil from the sun on the construction site, bounces on his knees and does a little jig in his ankle-laced

kirza boots. He has a portable record player hanging from leather straps on his back. Cream-coloured plastic relief letters announce “Mono” with modern audacity. The machine is enormous and weighs more than a load of bricks. In his hand, Tereesz tosses heavy batteries up and down. “Well, how is it, you buzzed?” he asks Jesper. “I’m buzzed.”

Jesper is buzzed, but not much.

“It’s good that way, the idea is to get some confidence, not to get knocked down. It’s just to take the edge off.” Tereesz tries to sound smart. He’s probably the only one who isn’t derailed by the hour-long delay. We—the potato-haired ragged kojkos—who were buzzed throughout a genocide, the Yugo-Graad massacre... As long as we have a smelly hop drink or flavoured berry wine on hand, we are not afraid of anything.

Khan takes his bunch of chrysanthemums from the bench, and now the three of them are sitting in a row, tapping their feet on the asphalt and patting their knees. Uncoordinated, unrhythmically. A sound of screeching rails comes from beyond the slope, and Tereesz’s grip on his bouquet of seven red roses tightens in fear. The clickety-clack of the hooves is approaching, the horses are already on the slope, and the silver insignia can be seen flashing on the driver’s hat. Their buzz has vanished like a fart in the wind. Tereesz nervously picks at the silver paper of his flower bouquet. He wasn’t playing around: seven red roses, a full complement. He would’ve bought an assortment of sweets too, a posh one, in a box with gorgeous gold embossing like in a Graadian novel, if only his pockets were lined with réal. Something flashes from the tram cabin, and out of the corner of his eye, Tereesz sees Jesper stand up. Let Jesper be proud of his lilies, let Khan play around with chrysanthemums! Roses, red, seven of them—now that’s chic! *Róże i bombonierka, bardzo wykwinnie, Tereesz Machejek!*⁴²

The doors of the carriage fold open on the steel frame, and the boy doesn’t even notice how the thorns are pricking his cramped hands. The anticipation is remembered in detail, but the incident itself is too brutal, the central moment remains hidden in time behind a veil of suspense. Something that sort of was, something he had done. The girls, three of them, stepped from the carriage onto

⁴² “Roses and a chocolate box, very exquisite, Tereesz Machejek!” Polish.

the asphalt, knee socks on their long legs—my God, what cruelty, they’ve glammed up! Skirt edges flutter, casually chic, as if nothing big is happening. Charlotte, cool as she is, puts her hand on her hip and stands in front of him, but Tereesz, unable to play along, makes the mistake of embracing her. Arms around her, a gorgeous bouquet of roses hanging against the back of her dress, and—oh yes, the flowers are covered with gold dust. How *wykwintnie* can it get? He notices a foreign scent on the girl’s neck. They look at each other then—Tereesz and the goddess from the ninth grade—and Tereesz, his face brown and red, a goofy smile up to his ears, says, “Hello!”

“Well, hello to you too!” replies Charlotte with boyish charm. Like it’s nothing. She accepts the flowers, and together they go under the pines, where the evening sun doesn’t reach. It is dark and quiet, and no one knows what to say.

Outside, in the yard of the Self-chiller’s country house, Kenni manoeuvres the motor carriage into a ready-to-go position. The heavy gas-rattling of the machine merges with the noise of the forest mass in the distance, on the edge of the pale. You could even feel the sweeping pale from the big house, behind its stone-lined walls. The machine’s lights cut in from the yard through the old manor house’s dusty window, illuminating the hall and its cracked stone floor. A smiley face lights up on the window, drawn with a finger in the dust.

No one came to the door when they knocked, and the padlock was invitingly open, with flashlights hanging from nails in the hallway. So Tereesz Machejek, a former ICP agent, and Inayat Khan, a basement-dwelling desaparetist, now walk through a maze of dark rooms with flashlights in hand. Rows of garden tools, a disassembled wheelbarrow, and piles of old furniture pass by in the flashlight beams. Khan fumbles between stacks of roof tiles, and the taller Tereesz in front of him has to practically crouch under the low ceiling. Another unoccupied broom closet. Looking into the next door, they can see a spacious kitchen with a black-as-coal vaulted ceiling, smelling of chalk and mould. Racks of bottles flash from within, along with what looks like half a stick of smoked sausage. Every now and then, Khan calls out for the master of the house, to no avail.

“Are you sure we’re at the right place?”

Khan is sure; Tereesz feels as if he hears a sleigh bell ringing in the distant, muffled chaos of the disaster. The ringing comes closer, phasing in and out like a dream. But it’s not coming from outside, where tree roots rattle in the ground and electric wires crackle into the sky. It’s coming from somewhere inside the house without electricity. Tereesz sits on a pile of waste paper and observes the dusty room around him with the flashlight. He’s still a little tipsy from all that berry wine, but the darkness is sobering. Doors surrounded by all sorts of junk lead out in all four cardinal directions. He also thinks he hears the low sputtering of an electric generator in the background, in the heart of the house, and points himself towards it. Rattling a jammed door, he steps through it into a large, low-ceilinged hall.

Tereesz turns the flashlight off and carefully steps over the springy floorboards. It’s cool inside. The smell of gasoline cuts through the mould. Black snake’s nests of tangled wire meander out from under his shoes towards the dim back corner of the hall. There, green and yellow lights are flashing rhythmically. The hall is barely lit by candles—they flicker on wagon wheel hubs suspended from the ceiling, casting yellowish circles of light on the floor while the windows are sunk into darkness. Tereesz stands in a circle of light and feels how the sound waves of the sleigh bells prowl around him, icy and alien. Equipment towers high above them, stacked in decks that lean against the plastered walls. Khan stops next to the door and runs his fingers over embossed lettering reading “Mono”.

“Tereesz,” he whispers, “‘Mono’! Look, and this one here says ‘Hertz’.” The high-frequency notches just barely tremble under his fingers. “It’s...”

“... a disco,” Tereesz finishes with a nod. “This is a discotheque.”

Three quarters of a century ago, a dark night comes to the Ozonne islands. Everything is grey, dark grey, and under the overcast sky, black waves break on the sandy beach. Palm sabres swing over the heads of the revolutionary lovers. The coups have been thwarted, everything has come to nothing. Dobрева opens her anarchist eyes, lined with dark make-up. A bit of dried poison

bubbles in the corner of her mouth. Ampoule fragments crunch between Abadanaiz's teeth. He strokes the woman's head. "Listen!" he says. The mesmerising rhythm of the bells rings over the water in the pitch black. Colour has slowly started to seep into the black-and-white world.

"A dance!" Dobрева shouts, like a young girl. She gets up and goes. Abadanaiz follows her into the waves, the black water crashing around his ankles.

"Do you hear that?" Tereesz asks Khan.

"Like some kind of ringing, right?"

"Exactly." Tereesz lifts a wagon wheel hub bearing a candle from the end of a nail and points it into the dim recesses of the room. The two of them move reverently across the floorboards to the back of the hall. Bit by bit, rows of sliders on a mixing console appear from the dark, monolithic speakers rise to the ceiling on both sides of the console, and behind it sits a young man in a trendy sweatshirt and headphones. The connecting bridge of the headphones presses his curly hair against his head. Ulv jerks his chin to the rhythm of the sounds, but his eyelids are squeezed shut, as if under high tension.

"Mr. Ulv," Khan whispers quietly. "Sorry, but..."

"*Shh...*" the young man puts his finger to his mouth. With his eyes still closed, he furrows his eyebrows so intensely that it seems as if an explosion is bubbling behind his eyelids.

"*Please... do not ruin... my intro,*" he enunciates, like a huge river, a superhuman cubic metre of partying, is rushing up against the dam of the Self-chiller's teeth. He points his finger at the mixing console, where dozens and dozens of sliders move up with excruciating slowness.

"*This is the most important... part.*"

Khan carefully places his envelope on top of the studio monitor indicated by the Self-chiller's trembling hand. Tereesz steps backwards like he's in an explosives warehouse. Even so, he manages to read the girls' names from the envelope. And, still a trained agent, he doesn't fail to notice that there are actually two envelopes—there's another one hidden under the girls'. Tereesz can't see what's written on it. He keeps his mouth shut; as he and Khan tiptoe through the house, the ringing of the bells around them

grows even louder than the entropnetic catastrophe outside, and it seems to him that the two are somehow in the process of harmonising. Khan and Tereesz make their way through minefields of junk-filled rooms. The sound rises behind them like a shock wave, a gunshot in slow-motion, where everything is back as it was eighty years ago. Kras Mazov rises from behind his cabinet, in the black and white of history. Gunpowder smoke rises from his mouth, and outside, in the garden of the Parliament building, a sea of counter-revolutionaries roars. But Kras Mazov no longer hears the treacherous voice of this world—the *intro* rings in the cabinet mirrors.

“Well, what happened at the design conference? Åre Åkerlund talked about how he would have nothing against the war. Do you remember Åre? I once made the mistake of letting him sit on the couch next to me for a design magazine cover. Now everyone thinks he did something there, too. Åre included. In his opinion, war today is more like a *happening*, a media experiment. And no, I can’t rule it out: it could easily have happened. He *could have* used the word ‘paradigm shift’.” Jesper paces circles in one of Havsänglar’s top floor hotel rooms and practices to himself: “After he left the office, you know... he went totally cuckoo. Writes music record reviews for Dagens. By the by, he’s gone deaf from nose candy! Really, it can happen. He’s had a collapsed nasal septum twice, you should see him! He looks just terrible. Like a pig. How does he still write record reviews when he’s deaf? No, see, he doesn’t actually write reviews, he just summarises foreign ones. He deducts one star for *rock*, and for ‘disko’, like you, Khan, would say, he adds two stars on top.”

Jesper stands in front of the bed and nods approvingly at the cube-shaped beige table. “What happened in Lemminkäise, you ask? Ah, just like that, we went with the boys, surreal stuff, nothing bad about it, I really liked it. Snow, spruce trees, the end of the world. What, dear? Why did we even go there? Well. A specialist lives there, see. Ulv is his name, and he knows how to throw a party by himself. Only a few are born this way. Most people tend to throw parties with other people, otherwise they can’t have any fun. But not Ulv. Ulv is a self-chiller. Or so they say. Evening falls, you

get a little drink, put on a record, dance, talk to yourself. Kind of like I do now. Only harder. And then in the morning, when normal people go to work, you're still self-chilling." Jesper pulls the frilled curtains of the balcony window open and outside the sky is dim and cloudy. The balcony seems damp from rain.

"Say what? Ah, yes... Well, you know, as always. He talks with the dead. That's right, talks with the dead. They'll come if he plays them some Van Eyck and old Rietveld. That's why he's alone like that. No, dear, apparently he doesn't tolerate Fakkengaf." The door handle clicks, and Jesper steps onto the reed floor of the balcony. "He communicates with the pale. Well, whatever that means. You can understand how it would... fascinate us. That thought. Yes, because of those girls. That's right, ha ha ha!" This is where Deerek Trentmøller watched them that day. Weird. He can't say he's *creeped out* here—it's a perfectly normal hotel room. A few less nautical paintings wouldn't hurt, the cattails in the hall are gross, and the wallpaper is... well, the wallpaper is still wallpaper. Otherwise, everything is peak fifties elegance. Jesper looks down from the balcony. Charlottesjäl's sand is damp in the rain, and autumn waves break on the beach. The balcony is high, high in the sky, on the twelfth floor. Jesper stands there alone. He spreads his arms. "Don't be naïve, of course not *really*. But the show was good. The show is the most important thing in that particular field—quackery, that is. Think of them as entertainers. Well then. Where are we going for dinner? No, I *really* don't want to talk about it any more."

Before going out, Jesper stands in the middle of Havsänglar room number 1212. The cover on the sofa is moss-green, and the frilled curtains seem apricot-cream coloured in the soft light of the floor lamp. No, he doesn't mind. Outside, the world is uniformly grey, and the feminine chic of the room dozes smack in the middle of it. A real petit-bourgeois dream. Jesper spreads his arms as if waiting for something to happen. He also takes a few defiant steps before stopping, defeated, with his hands on his hips. The dial of the radio shines on the cube-shaped bedside table, the clock is ticking, the curtains in front of the open balcony door billow like a sail.

"Please," Jesper says and looks at the room, its clean walls and high ceiling. But nothing happens. Before the interior designer goes down to the beach, he says to the room in frustration: *"Motherfucker."*

Jesper walks along the wet sand with a stubbornly determined step. The rushes rustle in the late autumn cold. The boys' cliff, now much smaller, looks bluish in the distance, through a mist of water droplets. A slender white surfboard cuts through the autumn sky like a sabre. Jesper lifts his beauty above his head and casts haughty glances at the windsurfers in the water. You could spend two hours in the water in this wetsuit, playing around on the same dying wave as ten other guys. No, Jesper is going to his spot. He already feels, deep in his chest cavity, how the waves are swelling there, waiting for him.

A skirt shines in the dark of the pine forest, fluttering around the skinny, tanned legs of a fourteen-year-old girl. The boys follow after, an echelon led by the flag that is Charlotte's skirt. How long have they been going like this? They've never been to this side of the pine forest, where the sandy roads disappear into the muted green of blueberry shrubs. The familiar places were long behind them, the suspension bridges and the road that led up to the cliff. Everything passes by in dim silence, occasionally interrupted by broken bits of conversation. Shadows lengthen on the dunes, and far in the distance, the curtain of trees gradually parts.

The field ahead of them ripples in the salty sea breeze. A blood orange sun hangs low in the sky above it. The sea of fumitories rustles as Charlotte's legs dissect it in their knee-high socks. Six long clock hands slide across the field, the girls running with relief and the boys following at their heels. Is it still Charlottesjäl, that field with the swaying reeds rising at its edges? Where the brownish-beige carpet of hay transitions into a strip of fine white sand, Målin stops and takes off her shoes. Next to Khan, she breathes the sea air gluttonously into her dress-clad chest. On the horizon, in the light blue mirror of the water, another sun blazes, fractured like an explosion by a gentle breeze. Inky splashes of cloud, black against the light, are torn apart above the water. The children stand there among the reeds, all of them shading their eyes

with their hands, and the reed giants bow reverently to them from either side.

Anni, in shorts, plops onto the sand, and Tereesz stoically sets the portable record player down next to her on a clump of reeds. He pulls out the antenna in the silence of the arrival and switches the shortwave radio to a popular youth station. Guitar pop sounds from the speakers, in stark contrast to Tereesz's defeated mood. The girl hadn't hugged him back. How stiff she had seemed, Charlotte, and how straight she had held herself on the heels of her strapped shoes. He doesn't dare to look at her now; he feels that something has broken in the meantime. It feels like... like something had broken. Such a thing brings to mind the Yugo-Graadian massacre. When the buzz is gone, you'll find that our difficult nature comes out. After all, we are all kojkos with potato-coloured hair and hazel eyes. But Målin, the radiant northerner, happily snaps her fingers at the sun and asks Khan, "Did you get *it*?"

"We did!" Jesper jumps in. He watches satisfaction bloom on the girls' faces as he digs out a paper bag from the bottom of his pocket. Målin spreads the beach towel on the sand, and Anni pulls six sparkling bottles of water out from the depths of the bag. The bottles are set in a line in the sand as Charlotte explains how it makes you extremely thirsty. How they'll have to fetch more water from the beach later. But that's all right, it will be an excellent adventure for the brave couple who dare to go. Shivers of excitement run through the boys at that word. Couple!

Only Tereesz didn't notice. Tereesz is still thinking about the genocide.

They sit on the beach towel, the six of them in a circle with the girls opposite the boys, and Charlotte tilts the pills out of the paper bag into her hand. The bag rattles. Everyone's noses press in closer as they watch twenty-four crimson-red diamonds sparkling in Charlotte's palm. She tosses the gems from one hand to the other, the tiny little pills jumping happily. One bounces off, the girl goes "oops!", and Målin picks it up from the sand like a trinket. She blows on it carefully, gives her older sister a reproachful look, and then runs her finger over the surface of the pill like a ruby polisher. Khan sees how the girl's lips blush. They're the same colour as the cherry speed.

“Listen, be a good man, tell me what *it* is,” Tereesz finally blurts out, in the twilight on the playground. The zippers on the dealer, Zigi’s, leather jacket are jingling. It is yesterday evening, and a boy with black greasy hair is walking on a seesaw. He places his jean-clad legs one in front of the other on the board, his arms outstretched for balance. And he begins: “You know how they say that drugs are a waste of your health?” The other end of the seesaw snaps to the ground as the boy passes the centre. “An escape from *reality*, right, pointless nonsense?” The question is rhetorical in nature. Zigi answers it himself: “They’re right. Nose candy makes you a bastard, pop makes you an idiot... Stay away from that crap. It dulls the mind, and frankly, it’s dangerous for an undeveloped organism. It’s not worth it.” Zigi jumps off the seesaw, sand flying up from under his sneakers. “But *this* here, this particular drug! Those people can only make such generalisations because they haven’t yet...” he pulls a paper bag out of his back pocket and shakes it under Tereesz’s nose, “done Samaran meth! You can’t even imagine how lucky you are right now! What a waste! I don’t understand why I’m even selling it. Why don’t I do it all myself now?” Zigi’s black eyes glisten in the dimness. “This stuff is so new that it doesn’t even have a name yet! Girls call it cherry speed, boys say ‘Samaran amph’. It comes from the People’s Republic of Samara, that’s why. All good things in this world come from the People’s Republic of Samara. They bring it in through the pale. The world’s first communist-invented street drug! Over there, the entroponauts do it, in the pale, to be fearless! But to throw a party? It’s a very pioneering way of thinking, very progressive. ‘Flying Communist’! That’s what they say about it in Graad. But I, personally I say... You want to know what I personally say?” Shadows are cast beneath Zigi’s cheekbones; his black eyebrows and the creases in the corners of his eyes take on a sly look.

“What?” Tereesz asks.

“*Matterimony*⁴³,” says Zigi. “I say: a matrimony of matter.”

⁴³ “Ainelaulatus” in the original, made-up word. “Aine” is matter, substance or colloquially a/any drug. “Laulatus” is a wedding ceremony.

Little Inayat Khan sits cross-legged across from Målin and watches as, without the slightest warning, she pops the pills into her mouth like candy. The screw cap of the bottle crackles, and Målin wipes the water from her lips.

“Well,” she asks briskly, “what are we doing anyway? Let’s down it now, it’s a good forty-five minutes before it starts working anyway. Waiting around is annoying.”

“You took two?!” Charlotte is freaked out. “Stupid!”

“So what?” grunts Tereesz, and Khan feels terrified next to his friend, the freckled absurdist philosopher. Still thinking about the Yugo-Graadian massacre, Tereesz crunches the pills in his mouth. He doesn’t drink any water; the sugary, bittersweet chemical fizzes in his mouth, but Tereesz doesn’t really care. “I took it too. ‘Flying Communist’,” he says, and swallows before stretching his arms out like aeroplane wings.

“Okay, stop!” Charlotte shouts. Anni sulks. “Two is too many, start with half. What are we going to do with you now? Shall we call an ambulance?”

“It’s not necessary,” Målin says with a smile. “Last time, I did a whole one right away at the beginning and, you know, it was really good. I think it’ll be twice as good now. What do you think, Tereesz?”

“I know bank robberies for which less preparation has been done for than for this evening,” Khan suddenly bursts out, to his own surprise. “Look—gas lanterns, in case it gets dark,” he angrily unpacks three lanterns from Tereesz’s backpack, which he has now confiscated, “and extra water!” A keg filled with water clangs as it drops into the sand. “Because Zigi said that under this—honestly, I still don’t get what the name is—under this *thing*, everything tastes disgusting. And everything’s already getting... I don’t know, strange.”

“Exactly.” Charlotte lifts a single crimson tablet into the air between her fingers. She looks at Khan, whose budding leadership qualities confuse her, and announces expectantly, “*Skål*?”

“*Skål*,” answers Khan, and Jesper watches as his nerdy desk mate and Charlotte reach for water bottles together. Only Anni still hesitates in front of him, rolling the cherry speed in her palm. “Well?” She looks at Jesper, hands propping up her chin. “*Skål*?”

Jesper casts a careless glance over her head, at the curve of her butt in her side-slit summer pants; at her crooked knees, her feet with flip flops dangling off of them sloppily. The girl smirks; she doesn't swallow right away, letting the spit melt it on her sharp tongue.

"It's sweet like that, disgustingly sweet. I really like it. I think I like it just because I know what it does to me. You would also like it if you knew." The girl looks at Jesper and Jesper looks over her legs. The sun explosion out in the water has cooled. A sudden gust of wind makes the reeds around them whisper; everyone is silent and listens. The boy puts the pill in his mouth and feels the saccharin glistening on his tongue. He hesitates a moment more, and then swallows. The gall of fear rises up against the object going down his throat; the acidic environment of his stomach cavity reacts, unsuspectingly disintegrating the crimson diamond. Binding agents and dyes effervesce. Before his eyes, the waves wash over the beach, as quietly as if in a dream, and the seagulls cry; to this fading world, the boy in the white sailor hat is now nothing more than a traveller, at the mercy of semi-synthetics. Jesper surrendered himself, going last out of the six, but still voluntarily—like all the others. He doesn't know it yet, but already his undeveloped metabolism is scattering microscopic flakes of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen; a non-naturally occurring combination of elementary particles settles inside him. Nothing here depends on him anymore; everything depends on them. They have their own plan, and they have forty-five minutes before it goes into action. They become compatible with him, they shape new patterns of behaviour, they take over like silent weapons in a secret war.

But nothing in this quietly floating rain of psychopharmacology can reach the level of the blizzard devastating Målin Lund's thirteen-year-old body. Khan watches, head bowed, as the girl stands up in front of him and undoes her ash-blonde braid. Her hair flutters in the wind. As if proudly expecting a child, she places her hands on her belly. Under her white polka-dotted dress, her metabolic centre works overtime. She can already feel morning sickness upsetting her mid-digestion tenderness, the phenethylamines whizzing against her pink, petal-veined skin. The

ultimate synthesis of amphetamines, *non plus ultra*! Her body wants to get rid of the intruder, but she is so brave, she keeps it all inside. She's also clever—she hasn't eaten all day—and she is also beautiful, very beautiful.

On the cover of a girl's magazine, like beads on an abacus, twelve diamonds stand in a row. At first there were twenty-four of them. Charlotte took one, Anni took one, Jesper took one, and Khan took another. Tereesz took two. Run the numbers yourself. As the wind ruffles Målin's hair, she already feels how everything is flooding behind her blood-brain barrier—her silent secret. An apocalyptic whirlwind of serotonin rises in her. Well, what can she say, Målin Lund has wicked kitten teeth and soft curves, she has straight A's on her eighth grade report card, and she really likes to enjoy herself.

The six of them sit silently in a row with their hands on their knees. Anticipation; the edge of the horizon is a dusky gold, the sun is sinking into the water, and there is a dirty blue-green plume in the sky above it. Målin measures the remaining time with her thumb like an hourglass. The sun is setting behind her thumb, and every moment the dome of the sky beyond the back of the child's head sinks into a darker and darker blue. The stars light up, one after the other, and in the silence you could hear the sand at the water's edge, fizzing under the receding waves like a bottle of lemonade.

Jesper stands on a solitary stretch of beach. Twenty years lie behind him, and in front of him, waves rise out of the ocean. He holds the white sword-blade of the surfboard up by his right side, and his other hand rests expectantly on his hip. Jesper wears black rubber for this occasion, as always—a full body wetsuit. His light blue eyes look out of the eyeholes like in a bank robber's mask; his mouth, through the mouth-hole, is red from cold. The empty beach says its annual greeting to Jesper. The coastline has changed a lot, the width has crept over time like quicksand, but the basic layout always remains the same. Jesper slowly steps through the reeds and into the ocean. The ten-degree water of the North Sea clings tightly to his rubber suit, getting deeper and deeper with every step. Despite the suit's cold-resistant neoprene skin, body heat is lost to

the water—it happens over time, imperceptibly. After up to three-quarters of an hour, hypothermia begins.

The waves beat at his waist and swell before him in the dark grey gloom. Jesper drags himself onto the board on his stomach and starts rowing. The water splashes against the board, and the waves break around him as he rises into them. The farther he goes, the higher they rise, until finally he can no longer row through the crests of the waves. Before the swell can lift him up, Jesper presses the sharp nose of the board under the water and dives. The hypothermic icy water explodes against him, the currents swirl around him in an underwater vortex. It burns in his eyes like molten metal. The jet-black silhouette of Jesper slides against the bottomless grave of the sea, pushing the glowing white line of the surfboard into the darkness.

“What comes next? What does it feel like?” asks Tereesz at last. When Charlotte, together with Anni, conveys to the boys the heightened physical sensations and indescribable sense of ecstasy, it all shifts above them like a high pressure system in the darkening dome of the sky. Khan is possessed by a strange indifference to the situation. He blinks his eyes behind his diamaterialist glasses, breathes calmly, and feels himself, his overweight body around him, his fluff and excitedly beating heart, as if none of it is a part of him any longer. Målin apologetically moves to Khan’s side, and they separate from the group.

Khan’s quiet horizon-striped world feels calm to be in. It seems like the Iilmaraan tricolour—that vibrant combination of colours that comes to mind when the girl thinks of Khan—has cooled down into a night sky. Målin tells him as much, and at the same time warns him that there’s still much more to come of such openness today. When *that* hits.

“Very good,” Khan nods, and moves ever closer to his new self, the self which the industrial empathogen is making him into. For the night ahead, and for the rest of his life, too. When he needs to, he returns to this place where everything is fine. Everything is under control. “And by the way, that’s where it comes from—the colours of the evening sky. Turquoise, violet and orange. They’re so bright on the flag because Iilmaraa doesn’t have the right

pigments in the soil. They don't occur naturally there. That's their misfortune, that and the insanely bleaching sun. That's why they seem to have bad taste. But really, it's like that because of the soils and the sun. They'd like to do more peaceful things, but they can't."

Målin nods. "You know, sometimes I just don't have anything to add. Especially to something like this. I don't know anything about coloured soils, but I like what you say. So don't pay it any mind, alright?"

"No, you don't have to apologise. I know it's interesting—the soil colours of Iilmaraa, the pale-crossing capability of antique airships, even the nonsense I told you when I sent you home—no one needs to tell me that." They laugh quietly, as if hiding their joke from others. Khan finally falls silent and lifts his chin to the ocean again. "And what would you say, how is it? That feeling? When it hits."

"I don't know why, but I'm in a colourful mood right now," Målin explains, and Khan calmly nods to her. "I would say it's black. Very dark. A very good darkness." Khan nods again. He begins to quietly enjoy this new demeanour that has opened up for him. He'd like the whole world to talk to him, about everything. And Khan would quietly nod back, showing his humble approval. Inayat Khan's approval. This is not a joking matter. He feels his palms sweat, his hands go numb. Målin tells him that it's supposed to be that way. This is all completely normal. It means it's coming soon. It's about to hit.

Khan suddenly looks at the creature in front of him with fervent care, and the creature looks back at Khan. He wants all the best for her. She trembles slightly, her teeth chattering as she squeezes a beach towel in her sweaty hands. Beautiful thoughts flash behind Målin Lund's dark green eyes; her serotonergic neurons are being reassembled in the tree-branched network of her synapses. This law—this terrible thing called mood swings, original sin, serotonin reuptake—is being suppressed. This chemical cycle that teases Målin Lund with its meagre rations of sweets, day after day—from school morning to evening, and then again when her homework is done—it stops working now. And not only that, but her neurons also pump up the unused amounts with

unnatural kindness. The girl is drenched in its inky black, its overripe clusters of delicious juice, pure liquid intoxication. Fifties guitar pop blares in and out from the portable record player. Her transport proteins keep pumping out more and more pleasure, and all of it becomes so much that neither her body nor her mind can react yet.

“I’m afraid,” Målin says suddenly. “It’s somehow different from last time. I can still hear you, but everything else is just spinning. I feel like... I don’t know how I feel.” The girl’s breathing speeds up visibly. She turns her back to her older sister and says quietly over her shoulder, “It’s so hot, Lotta. Be good, pull my dress over my head.”

“What, already?!” Charlotte quickly glances at the clock, and with her other hand, pulls down the zipper on the back of Målin’s dress. “There should still be fifteen minutes to go. Of course, it could also be less this time.”

Målin’s voice is weak, an intermittent string. “My head is spinning, I can’t see anything...” She raises her hands in the air.

“It’s okay,” says Khan calmly. He hasn’t lost his nerve. The more complicated the situation becomes, the calmer Khan feels. He’s still quietly blinking his eyes and breathing in and out. The coolness of the rolling ocean spreads before his eyes, always so vast and disinterested. “If your head is spinning, close your eyes,” says Khan, and he thinks that, at least for now, it would be gentlemanly not to look her way. The white wrapping paper of her dress rustles in the air, as Charlotte lifts it in one go over Målin’s head.

The girl is barely breathing. “My God, I’m afraid... My God...” She collapses between her sister’s knees. Her blushing lips call out in the dark, seagull-like: “It hit...” Khan can’t stop looking any longer. The crown of Målin’s hair ripples across Charlotte’s dress, her swimsuit-clad body glows in her sister’s arms, her eyes are widened to mydriasis—huge black discs, wells of pupil without the slightest hint of her green irises. The five of them sit in a circle around her; Målin looks at Khan.

“How are you so calm?” she asks.

Khan looks away from the softness of her body, the joints shifting feverishly before his eyes. He looks at the cold North Sea,

into which the sun has sunk. The dark shadows of the ghastly clouds are disintegrating. "I don't know," says Inayat Khan, taking his wet glasses off and wiping them with a handkerchief as he always does. "I think it's probably kicking in. I've felt abnormally calm for some time now."

Charlotte caresses Målin's head. "It might be, it came on slowly for me the first time, too. Are your palms sweating?"

"Charlotte, my hands sweat all the time. But yes, I think they're sweating now too."

Målin slides around in her sister's dress like she's between cool bedsheets. She rubs herself in there, in the cradle, in the nursery bed; the fabric of her dress crawls around her like starched laundry, smelling so pleasant and airy... Her body is only thirteen years old, but in the red twilight of her central nervous system, rivers of oxytocin have already been unleashed, like in postpartum bliss. Favour and trust flow over her almost sprouted mammary glands, orgasm hormone rises like yeast in the warmth of her fatty tissues, and she blushes through the waves of care. She loves everyone. Anni looks at her rolling around with envy. "Hmph, you're feeling pretty good already!"

"My God, how good I'm feeling," exclaims Målin. "You can't even imagine how good it is. Say something nice, it's beating so loudly. I'm afraid that otherwise things will get very sad."

"That can happen." Charlotte nods her noble head and presses her hand against Målin's chest to check, then pulls back in horror, as if she had touched a stove iron. "My God, your heart is beating so fast! Like a horse's gallop, can you hear it?" Anni lowers her ear to her sister's chest. "Målin, how much did you take? Tell me honestly!"

"Two pills," Målin lies. She didn't take two, she took *six*. She strokes Anni's smooth hair with one hand and finds Khan's hand above her with the other. She presses it to her chest as well, in her need for closeness, and breathes, "Everything is fine, believe me, everything is exactly as it should be, God, how good I'm feeling..." She shakes her head slowly, cautiously, as if she would be retreating from cold and heat waves; maddened, it speeds up in front of her, the horses' mouths foaming. The matter rages, ravages. "... I haven't had such a good time in my life, everything

is so soft, feel it for yourself..." The girl presses Khan's hand firmly against her ribs. The circle of servants tightens around Målin. Khan straightens himself up as he sits above it all. He raises his chubby chin to the girl, proudly, an indescribable peace reigning in his heart. It already moved inside him, but the feeling is growing stronger and more sure by the moment. The dark-skinned boy stares out from under his furrowed brow, his diamaterialist glasses exaggerating the now darkening wheels of his eyes like magnifying glasses. He is the Lion of Serber, a true khan of nations.

"Målin, listen, I think it just hit me. That magic." He narrows his eyes.

"I infected you!" The girl blushes and smiles generously at her firstborn. Khan exhales and feels how his breath is eerily warm against the girl, like a sword, and the world around him tingles darkly with its joy. The atmosphere vibrates, everything comes through a noise filter; a flock of wandering grasshoppers chirp, rubbing their legs against the filaments from which everything is made. This throbbing heart attack runs through everything, even in the soft soil, under Khan's hand, and in the warm darkness of Målin Lund's body, an emergency alarm sounds.

The mad Suruese rally ace taps the wheels of his motor carriage in front of the house. It's getting worse and worse; the high frequencies float in his ears. Give him even a moment of quiet and let Kenni wonder why it won't shift into third gear. It's concerning, really. He looks up at the door of the old wooden manor house, hanging open, and for a single clear moment, the world stops, snowflakes floating in midair. A roof shingle rises from the house, black against the dark blue expanse of the sky, and everything is calm, quiet. It falls back to earth. A silver puff of breath rises from Kenni's mouth into the stillness of winter.

Seventy years ago, Nadia Harnankur steps from the edge of the bridge into the void. Her gorgeous ball gown turns inside out, the dress fabric fluttering. She falls, her head tilted back, straight as a match, and through the white jellyfish of floating petticoats she says goodbye to the world. The river Veera flows beneath her fall, a mercurial stream laced with foam. And from far, far away, sleigh bells sound, like from a childhood memory.

Inayat Khan steps out of the country house's door alongside Tereesz Machejek. The tall ex-agent looks around in surprise in the silence. It's so beautiful to watch the snow float in the light of the wheel-hub-lamp that Tereesz has forgotten he's holding. Kenni waves to them from the motor carriage, one hand on his heart with relief.

They manage to take two steps where Tereesz is still able to hear how the snow crunches under his shoe, before the low frequencies suddenly explode. Kenni sees the two men turn in horror towards the house. A deafening beat sounds, the windows shaking to its bass rhythm.

Little Tereesz dances uncontrollably, forgetting himself like a Yikutan shaman. He waves his fingers in the air; they're numb and comfortable, and the world whispers around him. A gust of wind rustles through the rushes, cooling his sweaty forehead and bare upper body. The world's benevolence is inexhaustible, the Yugo-Graad massacre never happened, and Frantiček the Brave is coming with the SRV revolutionary army behind him, waving white flags. Tereesz could ask anything of the world, but he doesn't dare to look at what's moving right in front of him. It's not a part of this world anymore. Only the low tones of a bass drum, coming from the "Mono", reflect in the black mirror of their hearing. The six of them are hiding among the rushes; it had seemed like such a good idea to all of them. "Let's go, yes, let's go over there, let's make a nest!" they squealed throughout.

Khan lights gas lanterns in the dark. The gas has a disgusting, slug-like smell to his olfactory organs. The lighter flashes and the lamp flickers to life; blue tongues of fire dance in his glasses, and the surrounding rushes cast subtle shadows on the children. Khan looks at his handiwork and likes it. He likes the way the shadows flicker on Målin's cheeks. He's not afraid to tell her that either, and she's grateful to hear it. Målin Lund is saturated, overripe, wrapped in Charlotte's dress and her own white swimwear. Mentally, she can no longer reinterpret the floods of matter into well-being, but the clearcutting in her tissues continues. Matter is now punching the girl, brutally, jealously. And nothing in this feverish night shows signs of abating. It hits again, and Målin pushes her hands to

her sides from the direct impact; she chokes. The pleasant texture of the dress rubs on her lymph nodes, on the smoothness of her armpits; her nipples are bumping against the tricot fabric, but the nerve endings have long been numb, too numb to notice. Its sensory units overheating, her physical apparatus is incapable of receiving more intoxication. Bottled water spills from the girl's hand onto the beach towel, but no one notices it; everyone keeps chattering around her. A warm reddish glow sticks to the insides of Målin's thighs; she sags, the blacks of her eyes glowing at one and the same frequency—burnout mode. Bouquets of lilies, chrysanthemums and red roses wither on the sand all around.

She calms down, her body collapses under the tension. "Please comfort me, it's too good..." she murmurs, "it's too sad to be."

The operetta star's eyes fly open, nothing but whites; and regret, gland-suffocating regret! What have I done, I, a foolish, foolish woman! Ice-cold water splashes into the lungs of Nadia's lifeless narration. Everything that Nadia has done will go down in history as a casing, lacking body heat, distorted. She's an imprint, a hallucination; almost no one remembers who Nadia really was. They haven't even heard of her breakout hit in "The Officer's Wife", and her sleazy number "The Shipboy's Mistress" is, at best, a historical curiosity. A ridiculous exaggeration of its era. She's been forgotten, she's grown old, what can a nice dress mean to her anymore, there's nowhere to go out! But above the water's flickering surface, the chandeliers are still just being lit. Everything is yet to come—piccolo flutes, her favourite instruments, and brisk fanfare, what a splendid sound! The rolling thunder of the timpani, the sound of water in Nadia's ears is like a furor, life, ovations, and warm, warm tributes. She comes back to the surface, and the people, young and beautiful, are there with her once again. It seems to Nadia that a real party is going on. The world will probably end soon.

"No," says Frantiček the Brave, "there are still eight years."

What a pleasant young man, and what cheekbones, like a steppe eagle! "Eight years? But then everything is still possible!"

"Yes, everything is possible for this world," says Frantiček the Brave.

Anni, the younger sister, gives Målin bottled water with the care of a nurse, and Khan parts the rushes with his hand like they're curtains revealing the sea waves. He begins to speak. A couple of silhouettes are frolicking against the backdrop of dark, splashing water. They're dancing, one madly, and the other in the same rhythm but three times slower. Anni wraps her burning sister in a cocoon of dress fabric. Charlotte herself hatched out of there a while back. She had downed her second one forty minutes ago.

She comes to Tereesz through the darkness, in a whirlwind of dancing, and opens his eyes with her voice. The half-naked girl puts a water bottle in the boy's mouth and says, "Tereesz, yoo-hoo! You have to drink or you'll get heatstroke. And you guys too," she shouts behind her, "don't forget to drink water!" The boy takes the bottle from her and pours; his thirst is unquenchable. This way, as cool as water, his zeal finally subsides. A blissful chemical calm crushes the boy under its weight. Thumbs absently hooked in the hem of her golden panties, Charlotte Lund moves her newly hatched body in front of him. She nods along to the pounding rhythm of the bass drum, her head slightly bowed and her eyes closed. She gives a quick smile, a momentary sound rings out. Charlotte only laughs at her own jokes this way. This breaks Tereesz down; this and the half-dose he secretly downed. He hears a tremor of laughter echoing there, in the mystery of the stranger's cerebral cortex. How would it be to *laugh* that laugh? It's not about anything or with anything, it doesn't even consist of words anymore, it's long gone, lost to Tereesz.

Machejek came down the stairs in his school uniform. How was he supposed to know that only complete outcasts wear school uniforms in Vaasa? Like the guys who scrub the walls. He only just arrived here. The eldest Lund girl came down the stairs, her booties clicking on the stepping stones, and Handsome Aleksander, the girl's ten-out-of-ten friend, had his eloquent mouth going on enviable tours. Tereesz followed them into the cafeteria queue like a shadow. Charlotte Lund normally never goes to the school canteen; she doesn't eat, she has no metabolism for this world. But Handsome Aleksander charmed her into tagging along. Tereesz Machejek from the eighth grade stood behind Charlotte and poured

himself some mors. The girl turned around and reached for the mors-ladle. Tereesz handed her the ladle. And so it happened.

"You are Charlotte Lund," Tereesz mumbled the girl's semi-mythical name.

"And *you* are?"

"Tereesz Machejek," said Tereesz Machejek. And there it had stayed. Charlotte's satin hair caresses her shoulders as she shakes her head in time with the music. She raises her arms above her head, the webs of her fingers touching in the air, and under her collarbones are small, taut bare breasts and white tan lines. She laughs, "It just hit, Tereesz Machejek!" and happily shakes her head from side to side. "I just. Got. It!" In the sand where Tereesz Machejek is kneeling, the girl peels off her dark blue knee sock with her other foot. And when she crouches down in front of him, Tereesz Machejek says, "Me too." Waves of heat and cold collide above them. The gold of the panties sparkles between her thighs, and Tereesz watches. Selflessly, with the asexuality of a child. Just, well... it's beautiful to look at. They collapse on each other like houses made of matches, free of lust. Just for fun.

Tereesz, Khan, and the mad Suruese driver look outside, their heads tilted back, as the pale approaches from behind the house. Inside, the bass drum thumps robustly, and outside, behind the silhouette of the building, the dark mass of the forest rolls up into the sky across the entire visible horizon. The pale rises vertically from the spruce forests like a wave, from the mountain ranges above the expanse of the world. Its horror moves slowly, humming over the world, but the world is made of matter, and matter is evergreen, ancient; it sustains itself with surprising dignity even at the moment of disappearance, it smiles magnanimously, generously, as Frantiček the Brave once smiled behind the waste disposal facility. The peaks of the mountains darken to black, the clearings expand, the frosty spruce fields sparkle under the stars.

"I'm not K. Voronikin or anything, but..." Tereesz puffs in the cabin of the motor carriage. He rummages around on the seat. Khan stands outside, leaning on the car with his foot, copying Kenni's posture. "But?"

Tereesz climbs backwards out of the machine, holding a bottle of berry wine. “But it seems to me that in half an hour, this will all be pale, Khan.”

“Että mitä? Mitä se sanoi? — *Say what? What did he say?*”

“Nothing, Kenni. I wouldn’t listen to him. He’s not K. Voronikin or anything.” Tereesz unscrews the cap on the berry wine with a crackle and puts the bottle to his mouth. He’d rather not speak anymore.

“It’s an oceanographic myth. The Killer Wave.” Little Khan points in the direction of the body of water. The four of them watch from the safe warmth of a beach towel. Insects buzz in the dark, around the gas lanterns. “For a long time it was just that—a myth, a sailor’s tale. Arda even has a mythological name for it: ‘*halderdingr*’. But now they’re a scientifically documented phenomenon, they *really* exist, you understand? This explains the dozens, hundreds of missing ships. They also say ‘deserter wave’, ‘Draupner wave’ and my favourite—‘weird wave’. It comes seemingly out of nowhere and is well above the level of the rest of the waves. Therefore, the killer wave can also be relatively small. But, for example, in the case of ten-metre waves, they are the highest scientifically measured waves in the world. Oh yes, I’ve seen documentary footage of it!” Khan’s chin trembles, demonstrating the uplifting incredulity of the footage. “Taken from a Mesque mid-ocean oil rig. You can’t even imagine what a monster it is!” Khan feels his tongue and mind working in complete unison. Everything comes out perfectly. He had been inept with language, his mind incomplete, but not now! May it remain so forever. He’s forgotten his hand in the air. It still represents the awe-inspiring height of a killer wave in a ten-metre swell.

Målin looks at how it hangs in the sky. A morbid burst of interest saves her from the clutches of her own body. She now knows what she needs. She should top up. Just a little bit, then everything would start again. But even stronger. The girl’s gaping mouth gulps in air, she greedily pours water from the bottle. The water beads on her mouth. “*Where* do they come from?”

“It’s maths, right?” Jesper is sitting with his hands under his head. “Some mathematical rule explains this?”

“Exactly!” Khan replies. “A nonlinear effect. I won’t act like I know what the deal is either, but whatever! It turns out that a killer wave can come together from any number of smaller waves based on some formula. If they move in a large body of water, such as an ocean, chances are that one day they will birth a near-vertical, extremely unstable wave monstrosity. It *absorbs* the energy of the movement of other waves, and the water pulls around it more tightly. The normal waves turn into flickers and the killer wave almost collapses under its abnormal weight. But before that, there’s huge potential for destruction that it can, I don’t know, *sow*, if you will...” Khan finishes with a big gesture: “And you know where they occur most often, most often in all of the world? *Here*. The autumn swell of the North Sea is the name of this phenomenon.”

“Totally fucked up,” Anni bursts out laughing, her foul language quietly unleashed. The girl’s eyes have long been darkened by mydriasis. She looks at the water from among the rushes, and it seems to little Anni that at any moment a completely fucked up killer wave could rise from it. But instead, Tereesz appears with Charlotte.

“And you know what’s *the most* fucked up thing about it?” Khan asks slyly. He wipes his diamaterialist glasses and then puts them back on. His almond eyes squint behind the magnifying lenses, filled to the brim with popular science mystique. “The same effect—don’t ask me how, I don’t know—but the same non-linear effect also explains *the pale*. They use it in entropnetics. This is how the pale behaves when it sweeps over the world.”

“As big as wagon wheels,” says Charlotte, looking into the boy’s eyes. “You really have it on. By the way, Khan, if I may say?”

“Yes, you can say,” young Inayat nods.

“You are *extremely* wise for your age.” Charlotte’s voice is ladylike and sincere. Khan feels flattered by her compliment.

“And you have very, very good posture,” the boy replies, and the girl laughs heartily.

The crossfire of tributes and expressions of support roars like an ocean; everything flickers, flickers like a flame, and suddenly

Anni raises her head in the middle of it. She moves with the agility of an otter, craning her neck as if searching for something. “Wait a second,” she says, “is the water out?” Jesper doesn’t notice how Anni’s look is directed at him, or how everyone is waiting. He’s still staring at the sea, as if charmed, with his white sailor’s cap on the back of his head. He doesn’t feel anything special, he’s relatively sober, he’s just feeling hot. It’s all a slight disappointment for Jesper. He hasn’t even gotten to snog or anything. But killer waves—they’re not too shabby.

The man in the wetsuit gasps as he surfaces. He splurts ice-cold water out of his mouth and rolls himself onto his stomach on the surfboard. A single black dot named Jesper floats half a kilometre from the beach, at the mercy of the waves. He looks at the chronometer on his hand—another quarter of an hour, and then the critical limit of his body heat will have been exceeded. Rest is in order. Jesper tries to relax his muscles, shaking from lactic acid buildup. He looks behind him, at the streak of pine trees in Charlottesjäl, and at the dim sky above where cloud giants are slowly collapsing. Abreast of the waves, the board rises and falls to the rhythm of his breathing.

Everything is suddenly so quiet. Where did all my waves go?

*“Forever and always those five famous, terrible, last words:
Why’d you leave me here?
I stay firm to myself, I cry, to every god like a wave:
Will you stay this time? Will you stay this time?
Are you staying this time or what?”*

A terrible roar is approaching. Jesper gets up, straddling the board, peels the rubber mask down to the back of his head, and looks, a lock of blond hair on his face. Beyond the tiny speck that is his surfboard, the dark grey foam-lace wall of the tidal wave rises, like a cell membrane. It rises vertically, until the fizzing foam of the ridge hides the sky from Jesper. The swell of the wave lifts the surfboard onto its back. The famous interior designer rows with all his might on it. He tries to turn himself into the wave.

But the *halderdingr* moves with tremendous speed.

"It's such a pity," Anni sighs generously. "I wish you could feel good too." They're standing under a lamppost on an asphalt road, and at the point where the asphalt crumbles into the sand, the enormous beach of Charlottesjäl begins. Forty-five minutes of forest darkness and hearty chatter are behind us. How nice it was to talk, just the two of us.

Jesper holds the keg under the dark red water pump and pumps. The water sings as the vessel fills. "Well, I'm not feeling bad either. It's nice to talk to you, you know, and the others also look pretty happy. And I do feel like something is happening. But Khan speaks as if he has some kind of heavenly peace, and Målin..."

"Målin is roasting."

"Exactly. That'd probably be the right word." Jesper puts the cap on the keg and fills two water bottles. Putting them in his pocket, he looks questioningly in Anni's direction. Bugs beat themselves desperately against the street lamp, and the little girl under it rubs her bare legs together. The gas lantern hangs from her hand. The fuzzy hairs on her legs glow under the electric light. Anni's smile, like an idea spreading across her mouth, makes Jesper wonder.

"I know!" she says. "You're more like a nose boy anyway, with your perfume-talk."

Jesper crouches opposite the girl on the asphalt, and a single pill glitters in the middle of the mirror from Anni's purse.

"We need some kind of mortar, something hard," she says, and when the excited Jesper comes back with his stone, she already has her eye shadow container in her hand.

"But thanks anyway!" Anni carefully crushes the chalky surface of the pill and grinds the pieces into a soft crimson powder on top of the mirror. She licks the rim of the tin with her tongue and then carefully takes a five-reál bill from her wallet. Jesper watches this ritual with excitement. How Anni folds the black banknote in the middle and separates the powder into stripes on the eye of the mirror. They run parallel, like rails. The five-reál bill rolls into a tube between the girl's fingers.

“So. You close one nostril—just like this—with your finger, and insert this into the other.” She demonstrates the process to Jesper with the rolled up note. “And then, with one long breath, you pull the whole strip up your nose. Let me show you!” Anni-Elin Lund is kneeling in front of the water pump under the streetlight. The asphalt glistens as the girl bends over the mirror. Jesper, in his white sailor suit, watches as she busily pulls the strip up her nostril. All the powder disappears inside the paper roll, in a single voracious moment. It all seems absolutely wonderful to Jesper. Anni, groaning, hits the back of her little head and hands him the banknote. “It stings a bit. But pleasantly. It also starts hitting faster. But then again, it doesn’t last as long. Do it!”

And Jesper does. In the tube of the black banknote, drug powder swirls and bends. The crystals break capillaries, his nostrils itch and sting. And when Jesper stands up, everything is so quiet and beautiful. They go down into the forest together, the gas lantern rustling in Anni’s hand and casting long, moving shadows from the tree trunks into the darkness of the dunes.

Jesper pushes himself up from his stomach onto the board with a fluid movement. The roar of water rolls behind him, and the interior designer presses his heel down on the wedge of the board. In an instant, the resistance becomes minimal; everything is perfect, he’s gliding through the water. The board no longer touches the water, it floats on a vibrating cushion of air. Zig-zagging, Jesper surfs up and down the face of the wave, until he’s back at the crest. You can hear how it breaks from behind, collapsing under its own weight. A huge, glistening curtain of water pulls him into it as it falls. Jesper allows it to happen, staying behind and entering the darkness of the tube, where this landscape that exists only for a small unit of time—a complex, elusive dynamic model—achieves stability in its collapse. A wave collapse is a permanent environment, a dim, almond-shaped cavity in the raging maelstrom of water. It’s smooth and quiet in there. If it only lasted forever, it would be the summer of fifty-two.

The summer of fifty-two is a perpetually collapsing object; it is eating him alive. Something is wrong with this cluster of memories. Terribly wrong. It’s as if he isn’t possible anymore, the

world does not support him. But here, for ten seconds, everything stabilises. Jesper strokes the water wall and his mouth, red from the cold, always says: "Please!"

In the yard, where the wheels of the motor carriage have drawn a loop in the snow, Inayat Khan looks up at a farm building that hovers above him like a ghost. Electrical wire entrails hang out of the rotating object, black against the expanse of the starry sky. It drifts on into the pale with a self-evident calm. Up above, a trail of its furniture and crumbling foundation remains. In the yard in front of him, Khan watches how a startled Tereesz and Kenni follow the object's path, their heads tilting back until they hit the wooden fence behind them.

In a strange, panic-free concern, they all look in the direction of Ulv's crumbling house. It seems as if every little crack comes from its limestone foundation. Soon it will rise up. But nothing happens. The pale freezes in place far away, behind the house; the creaking of the forest stops, and the music in the house also stops. Somewhere in the perceptible distance, on the edge of the frozen pale above, the farmhouse falls apart and disappears. Ulv, dripping with sweat, comes to the door and lights a menthol cigarette. He has taken off his sweatshirt and, framed by the doorway, he steams in a tracksuit and a silver tank top. The self-chiller shakes his curly head, and drops of sweat fly. When Tereesz and Khan rush towards him, the man suddenly looks behind him and starts.

"Take them!" Ulv yells, running towards them across the yard with envelopes in his hand. He waves roughly up towards the pale and puts the papers in Khan's hand. "You have to go! *Now!*"

The engine revs up and the carriage's wheels spin in the snow. The mass of the pale can no longer support its phantom weight. It breaks down. The vast clearings crumple under it in an instant, exploding with powder snow; a collapse like a shock wave whirls over the world. Spruce trees bow under the blow, and the pale blasts open the windows of the old decaying manor house. It arches around the edges of the house, as if hesitating for a moment, and then explodes together, encompassing it. The pale grabs the manor in its lap, and somewhere inside, in a room with a low ceiling, the young man puts on his headphones. He reads the sweeping pale

like a magnetic reader reads a Stereo 8 tape. The only indication of the Lund children moving in that lifeless imprint is some Jesper's quaint, impossible memory of them. The pale blows across the fields, on both sides of the village road. Its avalanche crashes onto the gravel; the rumbling wall approaches, glowing crimson from the motor carriage's tail lights.

Chained wheels screech on the stone. "Menee-menee-menee-menee! *Go-go-go-go!*" the mad Suruese rally ace yells to his machine, like a command to a horse. He presses his foot further down on the already-floored gas pedal, as if the car would go faster than it already is. And looking at the speedometer, it looks like it might! Tereesz watches the pointer jump on two hundred in the yellow light of the panel. Next to him, Khan sees the pale. It shifts quietly but firmly across the windows. The electric lighting in the cabin dims. His glasses are fogging up; he's pressed deep into the leather seat from the acceleration, and he holds two envelopes against his heart. Behind his foggy glasses, you can't see Khan's eyes going teary with joy.

"I was right, Tereesz, I was right all along," he says, but Tereesz doesn't hear him. The engine drones too loudly.

Jesper and Anni come through the fumitories in the light of the gas lantern. Jesper is now holding both the lantern and the water keg, and Anni is only holding her shirt. In the glow of the bluish flame, Jesper reads the birthmarks on her arched kitten-like back. Only the delicate straps of her bra still hide them. How pleasantly the fumitories rustle, stroking his leg under his shorts. Little Jesper, terribly thirsty, sips water from a bottle. "It's divine! Divine water! They should bottle it," he says, "and then they should sell it!"

They're greeted at the beach by whoops of joy from the thirsty members of their group. Everyone hugs. By the light of the gas lamp, Anni wipes the lipstick from Jesper's mouth and laughs. Khan is sitting on Tereesz's shoulders and pretending that Tereesz is a *robot*. He turns his friend's head, and the other makes a robotic sound and turns to where Khan is leading him. Then, when robot-Tereesz is knee-deep in the water, Khan is thrown off his shoulders. He manages to admire the jellyfish for a moment, but the others are already running after them in their swimsuits.

Little glowing child bodies go into the water in the dark. Sand sinks under bare feet, silky water laps around ankles. Bodies hypersensitive to the substance react to every last touch. Plumes of sand rise between Anni's toes, so she curls her toes into a nice ball and carefully steps forward. They all go very slowly, hands floating on the cool surface tension of the water. They squeal at times, making the most of every moment of their anointing ecstasy. And the ointment itself receives them, flowing around their hips and tummies. It's cool and flawlessly viscous. Målin cannot—once the water moistens her breasts and armpits, she sinks completely into it. Only the hymn of surrender remains on the surface of the sea. She digs her nails into her palms and feels momentarily like she will break. It won't fit inside her. Hormones are already distorting her slippery body, her pelvis has expanded for birth, unbearable well-being is throbbing deep in her hips. In the grave of her bodily fluids, a tiny *homunculus* closes its pin-sized eyes. The animal, curled up in a semicircle, opens its mouth to scream. But there is nothing, no sound; it had never even been there. Målin loosens—everything is so impossibly good, everything goes dark and echoes there, in the depths of the water. Charlotte's glowing white shadow slides past her, and she feels someone's soft hands around her shoulders. It's Khan. He lifts her to the surface, and she breathes in the salty air, floating there. Water drips from her hair, and the black sky above shines with an endlessly detailed bouquet of stars, like splashes of milk.

All six of them look up and bob there like that, in a semicircle. The stars shine in the black mirror of the water. They flicker faintly, scattered. Only Inayat Khan's spectacle lenses reflect all their brilliant sharpness.

"They are no longer there." Khan hears a weakening voice between his arms. He looks down, the stars sliding off his glasses. In place of the stars, Målin Lund's eyes shift, and the darkness of her mouth moves to shape every word: "But I still see them."

And then, when they woke up in the morning among the reeds, like kittens in a nest, they collected their garbage properly. They put their sun-dried clothes back on, in the blindingly bright light. Their eyes hurt, and the world around seemed foreign in a friendly

way. Everything had been said yesterday, in the dark of the night, and there was no need to repeat it. They went to the tram stop smiling awkwardly and chattering tiredly. There they agreed to a meeting in the last week of August. The girls would be back from their family trip to Graad by then. They couldn't say the exact day, so they would call, and send postcards. At the meeting at the end of August, they also planned to discuss what the changed state of affairs will look like at school, and in the real world in general.

There was no kissing or anything like that at the station. However, a lot of looks were exchanged, filled with secret bodily messages and the regret of leaving. The girls got on the tram, and the boys went to Tereesz's father's cottage. That was the last time they saw each other.

14. LIST OF ABSENTEES

Twenty years later, near Vaasa, a crowd of refugees is stuck in a traffic jam. The sixty million square kilometre landmass of the Katla isola just lost six percent of its total area; the illuminated sign on the motorway announces “All lanes for entry”. The red river of tail lights shines in the autumn night, and somewhere in the middle of the giant traffic jam sits the machine in which Tereesz Machejek has been asleep for a long time now. Steam rises from under its hood, mud-spattered radials arc over its sides. The nickel gills of the motor elements shine under the black plates that make up the motor carriage body. Inayat Khan is also curled up in the cabin, though he’s not sleeping yet. He savours every passing moment, despite being—and precisely because he is—dead tired. The leather of the seat creaks under him, and through his blissful half-sleep he can hear newsroom airships outside. The propellers whir at a safe distance, the dark vortex of sleep beckons and swirls. Khan goes in and out of it as he pleases. Sometimes the machine jerks and moves a few metres. Then the desaparetist opens his eyes and sees Kenni walking by. The mad Suruese rally ace chats with the other drivers and scrapes frost off his windshield. The present moment is one that Khan knows about: he will pine for it. He already misses the diamonds of the headlights, the blood-red glow of the taillights in the exhaust smoke, the knowledge that everything will be alright.

It was twenty years ago when he last felt this way. Full of possibilities. Back when they were waiting together for the girls to return from Graad. Out in the world, behind his closed eyelids, the

kingdom of God begins. He presses his hands to his chest and embraces his invisible companion. All those spaces, the expanses there in the fallow fields and beside the highways, are opportunities. Opportunities for gatherings. As usual, conversations unfold in the darkness of Khan's thought cabinet. Målin Lund walks there beside him, nods and listens and asks questions. She laughs at his jokes, like she has for twenty years. They sit down on the side of the expressway; he doesn't mind. The girl's body has remained untouched by time—she still looks like a child, but her spirit has moved on with Khan. Fully grown, all grown up. She has weight to her now, mysterious and sad.

Two months passed, but the meeting at the end of August never happened. Although the girls returned to Vaasa on the fifteenth of August, they didn't call. Why it was like that, and why they went to the Charlottesjäl beach three times during that period, remains a mystery.

Through the blinds, the afternoon sun painted stripes on the walls. In the living room of Tereesz's father's cottage, the air stood still, something rose up and made it hard to breathe. A vacuum—it was a sense of loss, a terrible, terrible worry. After several weeks of waiting by the phone in vain, they finally decided to call the girls themselves. The three of them stood in the living room. Tereesz hung up the phone. Beside him, Khan was impatient. "What happened? They weren't at home, were they?"

"Their mother picked up," Tereesz sinks into the armchair baffled. "She said they were at the beach."

"Which beach?"

"In Charlottesjäl."

"What? Why haven't they called then?"

"I don't know. Something is wrong..."

And then the argument happened. The one over which Tereesz attacked Jesper two days later. He had immediately wanted to run down to the beach, and Khan was already tying his sneaker laces; only Jesper still thought that it wasn't *cool* to do that. He thought they should wait and let the girls call them. So that's how they stayed, and fifteen minutes later, at one o'clock, Agnetha, the server at the ice cream shop, was the last living person to see the

Lund children. It was the twenty-eighth of August—the International Day of Missing Persons.

From that day on, things had never been “cool” again. He tries not to use the word; it sounds like an accusation. Frozen and gasping for air, the interior designer falls on his back onto the sand. Hypothermia. It smells like rotting reeds; rushes and fumitories stick to the ground in the gusting wind. He’s thirty-four years old. He stomps on the wet sand with his heels. He doesn’t know how or why he managed it. When his joints were cramping from the cold, why didn’t he just roll off the board and into the sea? Why didn’t he just stay inside the wave when it collapsed?

In the dark autumn evening sky above, masses of clouds slowly sink into each other. He grabs his head with both hands and squeezes. His mouth, blue from the cold, opens slowly, as gasps escape from his respiratory tract and his stomach undulates with contractions. He clenches his fists and digs his heels into the sand, but nothing changes. He remembers everything. The fifty-second year still stands inside his skull, a strange, impossible museum exhibit, a replica of the lost world. The smell is ever sweeter and always the same, an irrefutable fact, the weight of which cannot be overstated: there is no going back.

In his dream, he can hear the sound of horses galloping; they’re coming on the black asphalt of the motorway. Jesper! Khan wants to call him and tell him to get ready! This is the real deal now. But there is no telephone booth here, it’s dark in the kingdom of God, and mounted policemen are combing the lines between the machines. The silhouette of a nightmare stops on the other side of the windowpane. Khan opens his eyes. Steam rises from the horse’s nostrils, and it snorts, its moist black eyes glinting at the half-asleep Khan. An officer on horseback directs a beam of light through the frosty glass into the cabin, and then moves along. Horseshoes echo on the asphalt, and the horse moves away, Khan closes his eyes and falls asleep again. His arms wrap into an embrace around his chest.

When they had finally fallen asleep, Khan had heard a terrible voice in his dreams. It was on the night of that same day, the twenty-eighth of August, and with that voice horror descended

upon the earth. At first he heard it in his sleep, how it moved closer and closer and called out, at regular intervals:

"Maj!

Anni!

Målin!

Charlotte!"

The boy woke up in the bedroom on the second floor. He looked into Tereesz's fear-dilated eyes as his friend stood over him and shook him. Khan was wide awake now, but the world's most dreaded list of absentees was still being read out—outside, in Charlottesjäl. Not in his dream, but in the real world. The blood froze in Khan's veins. "Do you hear that too?"

"Yeah," answered Tereesz.

They woke Jesper up. They all pulled their jackets on over their pyjamas and ran outside. It was cold, and for the first time this year, there was a smell of autumn in the air. They stopped in the garden and listened. The names echoed in the forest along with the barking of dogs. They ran through the apple orchard, past the gooseberry bushes, into the darkness of the pine forest. Lights from flashlights and spotlights flashed among the trees.

Search parties.

At the end of the fourth day, the volunteers were sent home. Hundreds of them had come. Everyone wanted to help in some way, to take part in the worry. Thousands of calls came in to a special hotline. Call-to-actions were made, programs were run. The press and radio were getting bold, and the next morning the girls' pictures were right on the front cover. The headlines used the most disgusting sentimentality: "Mother in despair: children, please come home!" Opinion columns discussed the possibility of reinstating the death penalty, and tearjerkers were mixed with a paranoid thirst for revenge: "Who stole the children from their mother?" This tumult of sympathy, in which the boys' own loss was completely lost—all this howling and gnashing of teeth—they felt powerless in the midst of it, it degraded them. At the time it was just a hunch, but now Jesper can put his indignation into words: *back-seat curiosity*. Somewhere beneath his fuming, the obscene bourgeois saw with his own sweet sense of horror all the

things that were done to the girls. Through the newspaper article, he was able to peek behind the blackout curtain, where Per-Jonas⁴⁴ did not dare to look directly. He saw himself there—he was The Man, he gnawed on a meat piroshki and he liked what he saw. But when the pre-teen Jesper looked at the girls from his class, it was an indescribable mystery, an alien kingdom of bodies. The arch of the back, the exposed arm, the slightest part was enough. To this day he hates adult sexuality. To him, it's exhaustingly demanding. Realistically, and in a paradoxical way, this makes him a paedophile.

The receptionist in the lobby of Havsänglar hangs up the phone just as the standard of good taste walks in, in his full-body wetsuit. It's the middle of the night and he's dripping wet, leaving sandy footprints on the carpet. The gentleman looks so miserable, frozen half to death, that the woman forgets her telephone call and rushes to wrap him in a sauna towel.

"No, I don't need an ambulance," Jesper says through chattering teeth, waving them off. "I don't want tea, I don't want it! I don't want blackcurrant tea either!" He calls the elevator and, even after it's already lit up, he keeps pushing the button with his numb, frozen finger. "No, I don't want to, I'm going to take a bath, a hot bath."

"Mister de la Guardie," the woman remembers at the last moment. She puts the toe of her shoe between the closing elevator doors. "You got a phone call, from an Olle..."

"During the night? About what?"

"The newspaper ad."

The volunteers were sent home, and after the search parties, all the others left as well. The pine forests went quiet, as they usually were in the autumn. The boys limped through them. Bloodhounds no longer barked, border guard ships no longer roamed the bay. And wherever they went, it was as if the spirit of the void itself had been unleashed. Everything hung still and useless: changing cabins, a sparse half-empty beach. At the tram stop, the trams went back and forth empty, then half-empty, the doors creaking open and closed. The last to go were the ill-fated divers, three weeks later.

⁴⁴ Average Joe.

And so the boys saw the long surrender begin all around. What that meant, they knew very well, although they never dared to say the word to each other. Together they came up with the most fantastic plans. Exhilarating triumphs, returning together.

The school year had already officially begun over a month ago, and the joint decision of worried parents sent them back to school. There, photos of the girls, flowers, and storm lanterns awaited them on the stairs. The fake grief drifted through the corridors as well. Everyone had somehow known them, everyone was fighting for attention and comparing their losses. The boys disappeared there too. They didn't dare tell anyone what had happened in the summer. Finally, they poured out their hearts to the female officer when she visited their school, and as a result, Zygismunt Berg—a boy who by that time was already a “known figure” among the youth police—was interrogated, along with two hundred others. This treachery didn't bear any fruit, and when the female officer came to talk to the principal at the end of November, the three of them broke out of the classroom. The corridor echoed with the sound of their indoor shoes. She was their only connection to the *investigation*, that heartless entity. They stopped her at the door and pressed her for information until the poor woman had no other options left.

“We have to get used to the idea that the girls are dead,” she said.

The pictures and storm lanterns were collected from the school stairs. The death penalty was not reintroduced. Even Vidkun Hird was only given a life sentence. A year after his disappearance, he was arrested on suspicion of crimes with a similar profile, and the press rushed to link it all to Lund's children. The old maestro himself also dropped some relevant hints, about the cubs that wandered too far from the mother bear and other such Hird-isms. When the three of them got together, it was all they could talk about. This, or one other topic, which was fed to the boys by the volatile media interest: if not Hird or the recently released sex offender registry, then the letter that was sent to Karl and Ann-Margret Lund two years after the girls' disappearance, the details of the handwriting analysis thereof, or, for example, the clairvoyant who claimed that the girls' bodies were buried under

the foundations of the Ringhalle ice hockey stadium. As the articles became rarer, the meetings became so hopeless that each of the boys tried to avoid them in his own way. Jesper secretly went to surf training and played sports. In year ten, Khan was held back for the first time and then dropped out of school; at the beginning of year eleven, Tereesz went back to Graad.

It was only fifteen years later that the press finally lost interest in the Lund girls. The investigation had already ended a long time ago, the leading inspectors had all retired. There was no reason to get together anymore, so they retreated to their personal lives. Jesper found himself an underage lingerie model and pretended not to know Khan when he saw him wearing a light blue cravat at a restaurant table. Tereesz went alone to Charlottesjäl every year; he didn't call the others. And Khan plunged into the blueish-grey world of disappearances once and for all, sitting and clicking on the lights of an airship that went missing a century and a half ago, in his mother's basement. Often.

"You yourself get used to this pointless fucking idea."

The end of the world. At the entrance to the city, the dark arches of the flag stops⁴⁵ rise. The crossing gates are going up. The vests of the customs officials and the stripes on the barriers glow lemon yellow. The motor carriage takes off, and everything moves evenly, smoothly. In the leather-seat-scented din of radio airwaves, there is talk of a nuclear weapon that was dropped on Revachol three hours ago. Khan is warm; the female broadcaster's voice is even and beautiful. Rows of streetlights rise above the road, wreathed in cold halos, and slide under the dark blue morning sky. He drifts along with them, in his hometown, which he will leave behind tomorrow night. There's still one thing left to be done. The lanterns dim. Khan watches, and the ghosts of the buildings come out in the white sky of the *madrugada*⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ A request stop, flag stop, or whistle stop, also known as a "halt" in the railway parlance of the Commonwealth of Nations and Ireland. A small railway station where a train may only stop at the request of passengers in the train or on the platform, and where tickets are not sold. It is usually unstaffed or has very few staff, with few or no facilities. "Pooljaam", "teivasjaam", Estonian. "Полустанок", Russian.

⁴⁶ Dawn, daybreak, morning. Spanish.

The bedroom smells like lilies. Outside the window of the country house, everything is tinted blue, and the bony fingers of chestnut tree branches sway gently. She wakes up early in the morning and leaves her husband in bed, asleep beneath his sleep mask. The woman is fifty-two years old. Her face has fine features, and the smile lines around her eyes have sunk into crow's feet; her dark green eyes are impassive beneath her lids. She goes downstairs, past the wooden handrail, in her dressing gown and makes herself a coffee. The lights are off throughout the cool rooms of the wooden house, and in its spacious kitchen. She likes these blue hours when the house is quiet, when she can hear the field mice scratching under the floorboards. A delicate hand with sharp fingers pushes down the piston of the coffee press. Even the smell of mould that rises from the floorboards has grown on her over time, although she was so petrified by it at first—seventeen years ago, when she moved out here. And the silence! Everything is so quiet in the countryside, but over time, even that absence had become a kind of blessing. She goes across the living room, over the cold floorboards. In the dim light, the furniture shines all around her: the elegance of the fifties, paint peeling off the wood. At the door, she pulls her husband's coat over her shoulders and steps into his shoes. Just like that, with her grey hair put up in one simple motion, she steps out onto the porch.

The autumn cold makes the coffee cup in her hand emanate thick steam. She stops for a moment, breathes, and then takes a seat on the wooden garden furniture of her choice. Then, leg over knee, Ann-Margret Lund smokes her first cigarette of the day. She watches the light, the sun rising behind the morning mist. In the well-kept garden in front of her, details emerge from the fog: the glass of the greenhouse shines, the grass needs raking. This will be her first chore of the day. She puts out the smoke in an upside down flowerpot serving as an ashtray, and goes back inside.

Children of beautiful parents are beautiful, children of ugly parents are ugly. Ann-Margret moisturises her still beautiful body in the downstairs shower. It wasn't always like this; at first, she was as stick-thin as a scarecrow. She was still a little girl then, climbing over planks and up trees with the boys. Then the woman's

hormones kicked in and wove a new, alien body around her. An object of admiration made up of fatty tissues and curves. In time she learned to master its subtleties; graduated from university, taught, fell in love, brought three daughters into the world. Three years in a row, one every year. They were left behind from her like pearls from a necklace. And her body restored itself, young as she was. It made her friends jealous, how she slept in her husband's arms without shame. But later, when she joined her political party, another one came, the youngest one. Her husband loved her, and so he wasn't horrified when the last one permanently disfigured her. Though the earth's force of gravity prevailed in its own realm, her mind rose high—in the ministry, in her career. But now Ann-Margret Lund stands in front of the mirror, and although her skin has lost its elasticity and some of its radiant colour, her hips are narrow again and her thighs are slim. Everything has contracted again, but this time she feels a faintness about her body instead of relief. It doesn't matter that the feeling of absence, silence, peace, and the smell of mould in her new shelter had entered her, secretly made her its own. She is a void. But when she looks at herself, Ann-Margret still gets scared. As if all of that being a woman had somehow never happened.

She tries to not think about it too hard. She dries herself quickly, covers herself in beige day clothes, and leaves.

The woman rakes dry leaves in the garden. Back then, when she went to the school at the end of the first semester, the boys had secretly watched. It was the first semester without them, and Ann-Margret went to empty her daughters' closets. A crowd of respect surrounded her; the children moved away. Only Tereesz, Jesper, and little Inayat watched from around the corner as the woman put her daughters' trinkets from the last year into cardboard boxes. She rolled up a poster of a pop star, and gold stars dropped from between her fingers. None of the boys told each other why they came there to spy. But secretly they wanted to get pats from her, go home with her, look at the girls' rooms. And then make plans to find them. It was a childish longing. They wanted to be important to what was happening, and if anyone had the power to bless them with that role, it was the girls' beautiful mother. That didn't happen, but later they all came anyway, separately, although

they kept it a secret from each other. They found out the location of her countryside home and awkwardly expressed their sympathy to the woman. They also exchanged news, in relation to the investigation, and finally, at last, Ann-Margret remembered all of their names. Although the last time this happened was eight years ago. Later, when Tereesz and Khan confessed, Jesper still lied that he hadn't done such a thing.

"Pretty sad stuff," he had said sarcastically.

Ann-Margret steps out from between the bare gooseberry bushes, hangs her gardening gloves on a nail in the shed, and sends her husband to work. Karl Lund still toils hard like a passionate industrial magnate, although political instability and the resulting international economic crisis are destroying his venture; it doesn't matter that he actually has enough money to go anywhere, even to Stella Maris, to retire. The chauffeur comes to pick him up at half past ten, and his luxury car is wrapped in the grey fog of the village road. Ann-Margret watches him leave from the garden, as the crimson of the taillights fades into the distance.

Besides her husband and her morning ritual of fear, all signs that she had once had four blonde, green-eyed daughters fade away. One had dark blonde hair and another had rainbow-coloured eyes, but when she puts on the music to play softly and moves her shoulders to the beat, she can no longer remember whose features those were. Then when the guilt subsides and daylight comes in between the white lace curtains, Ann-Margret Lund feels light, she floats. As if her whole life had not been lived, and all the impressions, the small dents that a person leaves in the world, would be hammered out in the rhythm of the music. She moves modestly in the shadow of her family tree, from which all the leaves have fallen. She doesn't know anymore that the way she puts her upper lip on top of her lower lip, forgetting herself and humming along to the music, is exactly how Charlotte did it. She sweeps the floors, straightens the tablecloths, and taps the rows of books on the shelves to make them even. She doesn't listen to the radio; it means nothing to her. As far as Ann-Margret is concerned, the world ended a long time ago and left her here to do housework. She sits at the kitchen table with her hands folded and watches how the household shines. It's half past four, the rooms are quiet and

clean. Sometimes she naps like a cat in the afternoon, her grey head bobbing above the table. It had happened overnight, like it did for Dolores Dei. Twenty years ago, on the morning of the twenty-ninth of August, she woke up and her hair had turned grey. She hears music in her sleep; light from the kitchen window floods her hair and, for a moment, it looks golden again. The door knocker raps on the door like a woodpecker. Maybe Karl left something, or he's coming home early... but why knock? It just seems unlikely that anyone would visit her. Almost no one comes here anymore, and she likes it that way. Ann-Margret Lund adjusts her clothes, straightens her over-the-knee skirt that got wrinkled while she was sitting, readies her mouth for a smile, and opens the door.

"Hello, madam."

Three men stand there with awkward smiles on their faces: one is wearing terribly expensive clothing and smells of five-hundred-reál *aftershave*, unable to hide the fever that's making his forehead glow red; the second one is standing next to him in a dark orange windbreaker, with a scarf in the tricolour of Iilmaraa around his neck; and the third, tall and lanky, hurries to extinguish a smoke. Although recognition is slow to come, she invites the men in and watches them stand there in their outside clothing. It's only when she sees the boyish timidity with which they shuffle from foot to foot and scuff the floor with the toes of their shoes that she remembers who they are. This reminds her of the behaviour of a young admirer.

"We have news," says Inayat Khan. "I know, yes, you shouldn't get your hopes up. But this is good news, madam."

When the lady leads them into the kitchen, her heart feels as heavy as lead again, and her hair is silver in the dim half-light.

"Coffee? Tea?"

Five hours ago, Jesper sits in the cafe "Kino". In the midday light, between the glass walls and cubical furniture, he feels a little less *projected* than usual. His head is thick, and his eyelids are strangely heavy. He wipes a trickling bead of sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief embroidered with his initials. The interior designer looks more miserable than usual; he pulls his sweater off over his head. In his dress shirt, he starts to cool down

again. The late autumn cold seeps through the floor-to-ceiling windows; a crowd passes by outside. He orders himself one green tea, with lemon and honey.

"I must have caught a little cold," he says across the table to a man a few years younger than him. He does remember him—it's little Olle. He was four grades below them. Jesper mainly remembers Olle's brilliant talent for forgery. The upperclassmen had used his golden hand for all kinds of signatures, and the boy made good money that way. All these report cards full of failing grades and planners full of misdemeanour notes that needed signatures. Now little Olle has grown a big brown moustache, and Jesper draws his own conclusions from this. Olle is a *copywriter*, and moustaches are in fashion again, in certain circles. In circles where the innocence of nihilism Saint-Miro is seen as some kind of exotic poet. At least that was the case up until two days ago, when the country from which both Saint-Miro and the old-fashioned moustache craze originated hadn't yet used an atomic weapon on another country.

"That-there nihilism trend seems to be kicking the bucket now," Jesper mentions passingly.

Olle agrees enthusiastically. "Yeah, I should get rid of the moustache, I know. The news was a bombshell to all of us. Pardon the expression, do we perhaps..."

"Yeah yeah, it's terrible," Jesper interrupts him mid-sentence. "A total tragedy. Why did you call me, Olle?"

"I read this advertisement and thought about it for a long time. Only when the bomb went off did I, you know, finally feel sorry about it, I guess."

"What the hell, Olle? What's going on? What did you feel *sorry for*?"

The moustachioed *copywriter* starts; Jesper has suddenly turned beet red in front of him. He leans closer across the table. As Olle tries to hide his eyes, his focus is pulled away from Jesper by the albino tiger in the far corner of the cafe. Although the *copywriter* often comes here to make acquaintances, he's never liked that creepy stuffed animal.

"Wait a sec, I didn't snuff them out, I just wrote those letters."

"Why in God's name would you do something like that?"

"I don't know," stammers Olle. "I was young then, I really don't know why I did it. Everyone at school was talking about them after it happened. Maybe I just wanted to see what would happen. Like, will they figure out that it wasn't really Målin. This guy, this Zigi, brought me Målin's old notebook and asked if I could handle the handwriting. It seemed pretty easy and, well, I thought I'd give it a try."

"And you sent them, or did someone else?"

"Zigi sent them, I just wrote them. You know, I'm really sorry about that, you have to understand that I was young then and, well, I considered myself a little bit of a nihilist too..."

"And you have nothing else to say about it? You don't know anything about them? Even if, for example, I went to the police with this story, you wouldn't have any more to say?"

"Unfortunately yes." It seems that Olle is sorry from the bottom of his heart. He smooths his moustache nervously, and Jesper looks out the window to Östermalm, his eyes glassy from fever. A crowd in dark clothes pushes past the window. His mouth reddens; he pulls his sweater back on and grabs his coat from the rack.

"Idiot," he says, and leaves. Olle stays behind to pay the bill. When the cheque is brought to the table, the albino tiger is still glaring at him viciously.

"And that's *good* news?" Ann-Margret asks and ashes her cigarette, six hours later. Puffs of smoke rise from her and Tereesz Machejek's mouths; a uniform, thin grey light seeps from the sky. She sits with the three men around a wooden table on the porch outside, and a gust of wind blows dark brown leaves across the floor.

Jesper, having finished his story, feels wrong-footed. But then Khan jumps in. "No, that's not all! Look at it this way: what's remarkable about this is that twenty years later, with the way the world is now, new things are still coming to light. Meaning — there's still time. And I have a feeling that that's why everything is coming out right now. Because there's something in the air."

The former minister sits with her back stick-straight, her leg folded femininely over her knee. She is expectantly silent, and it

cools Khan's enthusiasm. The man takes a sip of what's left of his coffee. Or rather, he pretends to take one. There's nothing there but a thick layer of sugar.

Khan starts up again. "Now, I don't know what you might be thinking about it, or how seriously you're taking it."

"For example, I don't take it very seriously," Jesper interjects.

"Anyway," Khan continues, a little annoyed, "I'll tell you right away that I do. Take it seriously, I mean. We just came from Lemminkäise, by the way, from a meeting with a private consultant. He's quite well known, although he keeps a low profile. *Self...*" Tereesz gives him a warning look, and Khan changes tack. "Ulv is his name. Have you heard of him?"

"I don't think I have."

"You go to him with things that you can't get information about anywhere else. With things that are stuck. He's been involved in the investigation of at least twelve deaths. And he's always helped somehow. In general, the police don't brag about it, but Tereesz can assure you that it's true."

Former agent Machejek nods his head. He feels the woman's eyes on him and tries to behave as one would behave at work with one of their own, tries to be frigidly respectful, reliable, but he doesn't feel like he manages it. *We love the girls, we love them more...* He's so embarrassed about his earlier thoughts. At first he tries not to look back at her, but then he lifts his eyes. For a moment, his hazel eyes meet Ann-Margret's tired emeralds. "His methods are such that they're not noted later in the official investigation," Tereesz begins. "It's a silent agreement with the prosecutor's office. Mentioning it would give the defence too much to latch onto."

"This is some kind of para-detective, I've come to understand?" Under the pressure of the media, the police and the city government had finally dug up the entire west wing of Ringhalle. The clairvoyant had rolled his eyes and kept pointing, but the only thing that came out of the concrete foundation was more concrete foundation. And that was just one specific case.

"There have been more than enough *necromancers*." The woman allows herself some bitterness.

Tereesz signals Khan to wait. “When I do my job, I don’t do it for the rule of law. I’m doing it for the sake of the victim.” When he talks like this, he forgets himself. His confidence returns, he’s a Collaboration Police agent again, not the leaf in the wind that he’s made himself out to be. “So I don’t care how or from where we get the information, as long as it gets results. It’s true, I haven’t been to this particular private advisor. Unfortunately, his field only deals with cases where the victim is already dead. But he’s got an undeniable talent for this. For example, this same Ulv has himself also been a suspect, in eight different cases that he’s advised on. If that sounds authoritative to you—it honestly does to me. They were totally unrelated incidents, and no evidence has ever been found against him. Do you understand?”

She pulls out a smoke thoughtfully, and when Tereesz offers her a light, Khan takes the opportunity. He laughs across the table and blurts out, “He doesn’t know *anything* about the girls!”

“And what does that mean?” The woman is at a loss.

Khan looks at her with a broad smile. “He can’t give any information about them. Nothing. A completely blank page. He doesn’t know where they are, he doesn’t know anything about their past, no secrets. But that’s the point! He knows nothing because they aren’t dead.”

The woman is secretly horrified; her ladylike posture remains unchanged. Tereesz notices something suspicious in her reaction, but out of great respect, he can’t say what it is yet. “And that same consultant says that?” Ann-Margret keeps looking at them questioningly. Khan places a stack of paper in front of her. “These are my notes, about the girls. This is the summary I gave him. His notes are there at the end. You’ll see that those are the exact words he uses: ‘Not dead’.”

Ann-Margret flips through the pages. The world-shaking calamity slips by again under her gaze, photocopies and dates, a chronology of events. “In such a case, it is customary to give a proofing envelope as well,” Khan continues. “If it’s not possible to verify the correctness of the first—currently, the girls’, we would have nothing to prove with it by itself—then the correctness of the second proves it. And guess who else isn’t dead *yet*?” Khan pulls out his second envelope from his jacket pocket and places it on the

table. It wasn't until Tereesz finally saw this that he began to seriously consider Khan's strange experiment. "Zygismunt Berg" is written on it. Jesper doesn't know anything about it yet. He watches, neck craned out of curiosity.

"I gave him Zigi." Khan is in the zone; he forgets himself and talks directly to Jesper. The arcs of connection he draws in the air become more and more fantastical. How one paraspecialist's statement proves the other, a yarn ball of dotted lines, the label proudly stating "Axiom!". And then these letters too! How they absolutely have to find out what became of that shaggy headed kid in the leather jacket; the arrow jumps, what else can come out of it!

Only Tereesz, who's already heard all of this, is still observing Ann-Margret's reaction. There is none. The woman just stares at one page in the girls' folder. It's slowly getting dark outside, and cold. She's raised her coat collar, and when Tereesz catches her eye, she doesn't answer. She hasn't really been reading for a long time; she just stares, the familiar dark green of her eyes standing still. What is that feeling, just barely slipping along deep down in there? Tereesz thinks he knows. How the corners of her eyes are slightly lowered, this unrecognisability. She is *recalling*. But what?

The evening is drawing in a blue twilight, and Khan, in the middle, burns like a bulb. All around, in the quiet rural village, the air is crystal cold. The man leans back into his folding chair and wipes his glasses with a triumphant expression. Beside him, Tereesz decides on the easiest solution, and reaches out to grab the edge of the folder. The woman is still holding it. She hasn't managed to turn the page yet.

"May I?"

"Yes, of course," Ann-Margret nods. It's as if she wakes up. "It's all very confusing, I have to admit..." And while Khan explains how the children's mother should now contact the police about it, Tereesz looks at the four photos of Lund's children from the folder. Khan has lined them up by age, like pearls in a necklace.

Ann-Margret closes the garden gate after the visitors leave. She waves gently through the back window. The taxi rolls down the gravel road; it's no longer Kenni at the wheel. Kenni has long since gone to his Kenni world, to do Kenni things. They are forty

kilometres from Vaasa, and they can't get away from that white country house in the midst of the chestnut trees fast enough. They're all secretly relieved to leave. It's also kind of embarrassing. No one can say a thing as the gravel crunches under the wheels. In the end, Khan still tries. "She, like... didn't seem too happy. Or something."

Jesper snorts. "You just had to have this moronic idea."

"Well, in your view, what do you think we should've done? Not talk to her at all, let her figure out herself what was up with those letters, for example?"

"Yes-yes! They're not dead, Mrs. Lund, your children are alive, alive children! You just couldn't let her be, could you? The mystery had to be solved."

For a little while longer they sit quietly and stare out the window. Village roads pass, the car rattles, and Tereesz asks the driver if he can smoke inside. He lights up. The match flashes in the dim interior, and the cigarette paper crackles in its flame. The bitter "Astra" smoke circulates around the cabin. After so long in Kenni's machine, it feels kind of treacherous to be sitting here.

Khan's conscience begins to sting. "Maybe we really shouldn't have done it. What if she's resigned herself to it, and we annoyed her like that for no reason? What if nothing will come of this either...?"

"You think?" Jesper retorts snidely. "Maybe it was our duty! To rush into a stranger's home and tell her about her children." He's lost in thought for a moment before starting up again. "I honestly don't believe it, Khan. That she's resigned or whatever. Maybe she's just trying to move on with her life? Of course, I'm not a parent."

Tereesz pulls out an ashtray from the door. He smokes, in silence. They avoid the network of motorways and the traffic jams there, driving along the village roads between fields and groves in the evening. Halfway through their drive, he's on his sixth smoke and the cabin is slowly getting stuffy. The ex-agent politely rolls down the window and fresh air rushes in, along with a few snowflakes. They float outside on the edge of the ditch. Bare bushes rush past them, and snow is starting to fall in the distance, over the fields.

“She hasn’t resigned herself to it,” says Tereesz. “She’s forgotten. I didn’t see any pictures of them in that whole house. She also looked at them in this folder of yours as if she was trying to remember who they were.”

Khan shivers from the cold. Nobody says anything. That means they agree. There’s another long pause before Jesper shivers too. This is how they let each other know how it makes them *feel*. They rarely talk among themselves about what they really think, about all of that vanishing. It’s like this because they talked too much at first. So much so that talking no longer helped. Everything has been said, and they have nothing left to comfort each other with. That’s why it’s so surprising when Jesper says, “Sometimes it seems to me that the whole world has forgotten them.”

“That’s how it is,” says Tereesz.

And Khan says, “Let’s go find this cocksucker’s house.”

“Let’s get it done today, already,” says Tereesz.

Hearing this, Khan asks, “Where do we want to go?”

“To Graad,” Tereesz replies.

And they both look in Jesper’s direction.

“*Davai*,” says Jesper.

With the darkness comes a blizzard. They drive through the streets of Saalem, and the city around them closes down in the storm, for the first time this year. The sweet, cold smell of snow wafts into the cabin with Khan when he comes back with a large suitcase in each hand. He leaves tracks behind in the snow. His old mother stands at the door with her apron on and calls out about something, but no one hears what it is. The machine is already speeding down the road, and snow swirls outside in the street tunnel.

It snows the whole time they’re waiting for Jesper in front of his house. Two hours. It already seems like they might not reach their night train. The wind blows white ribbons from the spruce trees, the black motor carriage is buried under snow. Finally, Jesper finally comes out with a white suitcase in his hand.

“How did it go?”

“Well, let’s just say it didn’t go too well,” he replies. “Let’s ride.”

They drive. Fast. They ask the taxi driver to drive even faster, but that would be dangerous. The blizzard paints streaks in the headlights, its chaos scatters everywhere, on the roads, in the orange halos of the streetlights. Tereesz throws money to the driver and gets out first, glancing at his watch. He runs across the snowy square, the sound of the taxi doors slamming shut left behind him. He doesn't care that Jesper left his things behind at his place.

Jesper's only regret is that he couldn't find the scrunchie when he left the lingerie model. He really could've been harsher. He feels bad about that too. He runs with his suitcase in his hand, snow sticking in his eyes, and all kinds of backhanded witticisms come to mind: "This fashion stuff, with this fashion stuff, you see, it's not *good* anymore. This *model* stuff, it has no future. You're taking my house and you're going to live in Vaasa now. It's not safe to travel, do you get it? It's time to get a real job."

It's nighttime, but even so there's a crowd in front of the elevators. They curse as Tereesz flashes his false documents. "Collaboration Police, move!" He is no longer Somerset Ulrich, now he's Kosmo Konchalovsky. Kosmo is not a missing agent, he's Tereesz's own brainchild. To cover the tracks—no one can trace him.

Only when a filled-to-the-brim elevator car lifts them above the city do the three boys sit down on top of their suitcases and catch their breath. The city is buried in snow; there below, in the bows of the motorways, its light seeps into saturnine green, into the gold of the streetlights, into orange... until the darkness of the floating train station engulfs them. The elevator doors open, and they run under the high steel arches of the station building. There, too, a nocturnal crowd awaits them. It's crowded everywhere, in the hall, in front of the ticket offices, even though the boards show that there are no free seats, and the kitten-like voice from the box-speakers confirms it. Even the flight the day after tomorrow to Samara, SRV, is fully sold out. Exactly! A degenerate bureaucratic workers' republic is where you want to be right now. Not to mention that at this very moment in Graad, the honeycomb irrigation network is disappearing, after which a wave crest will rise menacingly over Yekokataa. Where are you running to? Stay home, join the army!

They squeeze themselves out onto the platform. It's snowing high up under the night sky as well, and when the car attendant cuts them off in front of the five-fold running boards of the magnet train, Tereesz does something he never does. Kosmo Konchalovsky's authoritative flashes no longer have any effect on the car attendant, numbed by the bustle of the crowd. The kitten-voiced girl announces the imminent departure of the flight and asks everyone to step behind the yellow line. They can already hear the hydraulics of the train doors hissing. Tereesz puts his hand under his jacket and pulls out a pistolet. The leather pocket of the holster hangs under his arm. Mahogany handle firmly in his palm, he passes through the doors into the luxurious gloom of the train. The barrel of the gun gleams, and the car attendant retreats before the service weapon. Behind Tereesz, Khan and Jesper also slip in. The doors slam shut behind them, the magnets hum; one of Khan's suitcases is left behind on the platform.

Tereesz puts the pistolet back in its holster and apologises to the horrified attendant. They're not used to this kind of thing here in Katla. The ex-agent thanks the woman for her cooperation, he's back to using diplomacy. Outside on the platform, giant buffers are being pulled off the train. The umbilical cord is cut and thus, freed from the connecting bridges, the entire weight of the train with its five-fold carriage slats sinks onto the magnets. They howl at full power below the train cars. And then the flight begins.

The magnetic support splits the North Sea under it in two. It's quiet inside, the generators humming as the train whizzes by fifty metres above the water. The three of them stand together, laughing. Tereesz extinguishes his smoke in a bronze ashtray, and they turn their back on the observation windows. Ahead, the pale awaits, and past it begins a big world. Somewhere out there, in its cities, streets, or steppe expanses, is Zygismunt Berg, the only person in this world who knows what happened to the Lund children. Through the windows, all that's left of the city behind them is the light pollution, a golden glow in the distant darkness of the snowstorm.

15. MOULD

Deerek Trentmøller lies in a catatonic state. The retirement home around him is silent. He no longer remembers the name of anything, and any connections are meaningless to him. Everything is forgettable. He looks at the whole world with a blissful question mark, like a child. After two months, the nurse comes to his room and, stopping at the door, breathes a sigh of relief. They disconnect the cannula from the old man's wrist. A lace of tree branches slides along the walls of the ward, and outside in the suburbs, a motor carriage whizzes by.

Its wheels crunch on the snow; inside, in the warm cabin, sits the well-known minimalist and deaf music critic Åre Åkerlund, Jesper's colleague from his office days. His prospects don't look bright. It's almost impossible to plagiarise music record reviews from the West if no new records are being made. But Åre Åkerlund does a lot of cocaine, and that, as we know, makes one very intelligent. The social climate is different now, but consumption as such remains. This means that there's still room for advertising. Åre Åkerlund lays the foundation for the later world-famous Ideas Laboratory in Vaasa, an advertising agency that produces *ideas* for advertisements instead of actual advertising. Someone else will actually create the ads later. In a few months, a masterpiece of apocalyptic advertising will be born from the Ideas Laboratory. The transport giant ZAMM's interisalary campaign is also getting

started in the Nordic countries, with the slogan “Escape! It’s not too late.”

At that time or a little later, around the winter solstice, Konrad Gessle’s newly released documentary goes unnoticed by the general public. The winter will be long and dark, and the panicked masses demand lighter entertainment. It doesn’t matter that the director is an eight-time Oscar Zorn nominee. But then the ecumenical aggressor of Mesque brings their fleet out of the pale, this manoeuvre sending them gliding across the far north of the boreal plateau. Beneath the northern lights, black smoke rises into the sky from the Holodnaya Zemlya⁴⁷ oblast of Graad. Arda, Vaasa and Surumaa then join Graad, which had declared war on Mesque two months earlier. And with that, Katla, this patch of land on the edge of the world, is dragged into the great centrifuge.

The viewer numbers of the film “Vidkun Hird: ‘Vidkun Hird’” start to improve. Much to his dismay, however, Konrad Gessle sees the kind of audience in cinema halls that he had feared the most when he started his controversial project. Bad times give discontent a national colour—there sit the military youth, mesmerised, together with senile nazi-grandpas. None of them really understand the humanist Gessle’s subtle treatment of symbols, his irony, his sense of the absurd. The dim-witted militarists sincerely admire Hird’s Blackshirt posturing, without the slightest irony. They’re especially impressed by how the great figure finally collapses under his own superhuman maxims. They find it poetic how he blurts out unrelated talk in his final interviews. The chilling shots of a vegetating Hird in his cell move them to tears. In the end, it turns out that even he, with his mind of a mythical hero, couldn’t survive on those ancient truths. They were too honest, too genuine. Warrior as he was, Hird persisted until the end, without sinking back down into the influence of a diluted cultural space. Therein lay his triumph, his hubris, and his downfall: the truth is simply too mighty.

This is just one of several end-of-the-world absurdities, but Sven von Fersen, inspired by this, decides that it’s time to come out of the closet. Over time, Sven phased out his witty management articles, and replaced them with “statements of support for the

⁴⁷ Cold Land. Холодная Земля. Russian.

government and the armed forces”. When Graad and its northern allies find themselves on the losing side of a world war, the only real opposition is organised in Iilmaraa. Sven von Fersen doesn’t want a helping hand from the camel shits: “Before you even notice, they’ll stab you in the back with a scimitar.”

But in the end, fascism will remain on the fringes of society, where it has always been—between cryptozoology and psionics. The vast majority of people are not like Sven von Fersen. The Nordic sense of style is too clearly developed in them, and extremes can’t find a voice. The editor’s delicate hand eradicates racially insensitive vocabulary from such writings. He doesn’t simply leave them unpublished—that would be against freedom of expression. In this way, this plot of land in the pale enters the phase of geopolitical apocalypse alongside the rest of the world, but rather than collapsing, it drifts apart—still a social democracy. They still generously give out paychecks to those who just loiter around. Cruiser ships are sunk by shell fire in the North Sea, but the state still offers the unemployed artist retraining opportunities in his own field. Graad loses the boreal plateau in the north, Yelinka burns in the three-month winter night and no one survives, but the unemployed Per-Jonas is still talking about the book he’s writing. Graad abandons the insignificant war theatre of Katla in order to gather forces for the defence of its home isola; the road to Arda is now open to the aggressor, and the front moves closer day by day, but there’s still no news about Per-Jonas’s book. In this manner—despite the objections of the extremists—the nation of Vaasa goes behind the curtains of history with its three-year paid paternity leave and impeccably functioning public transport.

Nothing seems to stop future ecologically-oriented projects there either. In the very last months, when the pale is creeping across the ocean towards Vaasa, lobby groups against light pollution see their grand dream come true. Industrial and commercial buildings turn off artificial lighting at the end of the working day, and streetlights are shielded with special filters. As the first and last big city in the history of the world, Vaasa completely eliminates light pollution. This isn’t just a measure against bomb raids—it also saves birds who might otherwise get lost in the city’s maze of lights, and harbour seals whose mating

rhythms are disrupted when the day is too long. You may laugh at this, but in the evening, when the big world in the distance swells into a bloody maelstrom, families come out into the street in Vaasa and are insignificant together. Only distant explosions disturb the deep peace of the winter night, its flawless starry sky. Everyone watches, heads tilted back.

Khan's old mother also watches, in Saalem. Her eyes are painted beautifully in Iilmaraan colours. A golden headscarf covers her hair. It's cold, and the woman's breath steams in the streets of the wooden city. Aliyah Khan had seen her son for the last time that night, four years ago. It wasn't much later—no more than a month—that he called and said goodbye to his mother. Families mill around, among them men of service age. Inayat had said that he wouldn't return, but they come from the northern front all the time—soldiers. Even the war has somehow been neglected. All of this is a kind of degeneration, a giving in, but even in this is the motto—precisely associated with moralism, a movement whose daughter cell is social democracy—reflected. It reads like this: "For a moment, it seemed as if there was hope for humanity."

Then, when the stars bend under the destruction falling from above, many can no longer take the phrase "the end of the world" entirely seriously. The panic has cooled. In the strange indifference of the evacuation, whole families stay behind in Vaasa. There they play board games, in their houses, in their spacious apartments. They love vitamin-rich food, and when the pale is only a few days away, it's always signalled by the same beautiful event. Fruits go mouldy. It grows vigorously on them. Children listen to oranges crackling on the table. Spores sprout from the pulp, apples are hairy with it. If you try to touch them, they crack open. No one knows why it's like that. But few can muster the energy to be afraid of that time, and that's why I say it's beautiful.

Khan's mother is one of those who decide to stay behind in Vaasa when the pale comes. Many others flee. They head up to Arda, closer to the front and away from the pale. There, in the winter's orbit, Anita Lundqvist and her delicate hands go to the munitions factory to polish cartridges. In these last few years, especially after the evacuation, the lingerie model seems extremely strong. All the frivolity and thirst for life that made the girl an

exemplary human being in the functioning world translate into something completely different at the end of the world. These are leadership qualities, and Anita Lundqvist is the queen of the refugee camp. When Åre Åkerlund meets her there, he doesn't even recognise her. Who is this valkyrie? But then Anita comes to him, greets him by name, and reveals medication in her apron to alleviate Åkerlund's withdrawal symptoms. The famous minimalist and deaf music critic is grateful. He tells the girl about an international drug business that no longer operates. And how the black currency HR—the intersolary réal—has been devalued, and the world economy has collapsed. Finally, Åkerlund tells her about the *non-world*—everything he experienced on the way to the refugee camp. He came to Arda on foot. Left behind in the evacuation, he had pushed for two months across the frozen fjords. He came through abandoned ghost towns, alone with the pale on his heels. He crawled across the permafrost, where the wreckage of downed airships was buried in the snowdrifts around him. Åkerlund also tells her about the horse that dragged his sleigh, and that he eventually ate. Anita reciprocates and tells him about Jesper. She says only good things.

The factory where Anita works is a strategic resource. Although it's hidden deep in the fjords, the recently launched Mesque reconnaissance satellite "Mosaic" finds it there. The ecumenical aggressor wipes out the munitions factory with a hail of bombs, and the lingerie model is lost in the whirlwind of war. This is six years after the night of the blizzard when Khan, Jesper, and Tereesz drove away.

Below, above the southern coast of Katla, the enemy of matter, the great transition, buries the former isola. Vaasa and Charlottesjäl beach were once there. Now no one leaves there, even though those who were left behind—friends and family members—are awaited in the camps. Ann-Margret Lund also sits there somewhere in her kitchen, in the middle of the pale; her rooms are quiet and clean. The former teacher wears a beige jacket and an above-the-knee skirt, and watches the moulding apricots. It would probably be too much to say that she hasn't called the police in the meantime. Ann-Margret lets go of her husband's hand. Like everyone else, she can't do anything in this extended stay, where one's sense of the

present slowly drifts away. But whereas the others dissolve into their memories, she simply disappears. It's as if her life had never happened. The past is not awaiting her return. She just wanders around the rooms, adjusts her grandmother's lace doily and bedspreads, arranges the curtains on the rails. And thus, tastefully, she refuses to indulge in those ecstasies which visit the human spirit when the world is disintegrating. Nothing leaves her hands, and nothing returns.

When Katla finally sinks into the pale, Ann-Margret Lund turns, without the slightest pleasure, into a protein mass.

16. ENTROPONAUT

Six years earlier and far away, somewhere on the edge of a different isola altogether, a man wakes up. The year is '72. He's all alone. It's cold in his tarpaulin tent⁴⁸, and the morning is dark. Curled up in his sleeping bag, he rubs his sides to get warm; his wool sweater, worn thin, scratches against his skin. It gets the blood flowing, and the man finally dares to stick his hand out of the warmth of his sleeping bag. He wears woollen fingerless gloves, even when he sleeps. It's a common trick in his profession. He rummages around on the floor, finds his flashlight in the dark, and fiddles with the frozen switch for half a minute. Finally, the light bulb flickers on. The electric light is so crummy that it barely illuminates the one-man tent. The man sits up cross-legged in his sleeping bag and breathes on his fingers to warm his hands, his toothless mouth quivering. In the flashlight beam, on the inside of the tent, there is a stamp bearing the name of the manufacturer: "Cooperative 'Mikrokosmos'".

The man puts his hand against the tarpaulin. It's cold, and the insulated tent has sunk in under the weight of the snow. Not the slightest bit of light seeps in from outside, and he doesn't even hear the whistling of the wind. The storm had died down during the night. An electronic wristwatch shows that today is his

⁴⁸ Tarpaulin or canvas tent. Брезентовая палатка. Russian.

birthday—he's thirty-nine years old. It's 7:15 in the morning. The man climbs out of his sleeping bag and, crouching in the Mikrokosmos tent, pulls his anorak coat on over his sweater and slips his feet into lace-up boots. The zipper squeaks open and, just like that, legs bare, he steps out of the tent and straight into the pale.

Twenty kilometres past the edge of the world, it's snowing quietly. In the dim morning light, the wreck of a man limps a few steps away from his snow-covered tent, to stand beneath a bare tree. All around him, from the black and white dream of the taiga landscape, the fanged mountainsides and the ghostly frills of koshot spruce trees⁴⁹ emerge. Through the snow and fog, a faint blue seeps into the colourless world, where the radius of visibility ends. It's morning—it doesn't get any brighter here. And in the middle of it, opposite the gnarled tree, stands a completely destroyed human being. He is an entroponaut. He's an ageing rocker. His name is Zygismunt Berg. He wears dark blue boxers with a white hem, and he's taking a piss.

The camp is located on a hillside terrace surrounded by spruce trees. Even in the misty distance of the valley below, the clattering echoes of a snow shovel can be heard as the entroponaut digs out the front of his tent. And then—the repeated ker-chunks of an axe. Zygismunt Berg comes back to the tent across the clearing with a handful of branches from the barren tree. Thick snowflakes drift in the air. The man had pulled on what's left of a pair of worn-down jeans and, while he was working, he had unbuttoned his anorak coat and put his hood back on his shoulders—now he stands still, just like that. Something had moved in the pale, right in front of him.

Silence. It is this silence from which all other silences are derived. The entroponaut inhales sharply—the sound of his breathing, the roar of blood in his ears, is so loud here that it interferes with his hearing. The kindling shifts in his lap. He stands motionless, his back slightly hunched as always. Even the snowfall stops, and the pale stands still with him. Minutes pass. The counter on his electronic wristwatch freezes at “07:48.”

⁴⁹ “košoti kuusepuu” in the original, presumably a made-up variety.

There is a sound of hooves stepping on the granite. Right in front of him, on a rock on higher ground, an ibex steps out of the pale. Zygismunt stares at him intently and the ibex looks back at Zygismunt. They both have dark eyes, moist from the cold. Zygismunt Berg has a receding hairline and the ponytail of an ageing rocker; the alpha male has a huge crown of horns. In the pale behind the animal, his herd glides along and pushes uphill, colourless silhouettes, straight legs flexing on their hooves. The horns of the kozorogs⁵⁰ are wrapped in the pale like the spear-heads of a passing army; puffs of steam rise from the kids' snorting nostrils. They go alongside the females, and the king himself goes last. The ibex sways his crown of horns side to side and recedes into the pale. He leaves the entronaut standing there alone.

"Don't go," says Zygismunt, in his pitiful drunkard voice. "Please don't go!" He drops the kindling and clambers up the snowy stone wall. His fingerless gloves slide off the granite, his feet can't find a foothold. Panting, he stumbles through the pale, among the dwarf spruces. There's nothing there anymore, everyone's gone, what are you still looking for up here, you bozo?

"Don't go, please don't go... You're like that old man! You know, the one who goes to the park to spend time with the squirrels: 'Little Mickey, come here Mickey!' The need for closeness is just so deadly. He can't manage."

"But I'm so alone."

"You are never alone, Zigi. You have yourself!"

Twenty-one years ago, on an evening during winter break, Zigi stands at the horse car stop. In two days, the fifty-first year will become the fifty-second. The Vaasan suburb sleeps around him; it's already late, and it's dark outside, but he's not in a hurry to be anywhere. His mother isn't expecting him home. The boy weaves back and forth on the tram stop's wooden bench, the zippers jingling on his leather jacket. His backdrop, the high picket fence of the plot by the road, is a permanent reminder of private property. It pisses him off.

He had just come back from selling gear to rich kids. And shortly before that, he had performed his famous *sprechgesang* at

⁵⁰ Ibex. Козорог. Russian.

the winter solstice party. The elementary school guys guffawed, they totally loved it. Some of the high school folks looked at him like “what an idiot, no way this guy will live to be twenty”. But Zigi isn’t interested in those high schoolers anyway. They’re established. “Little wankers”, as Zigi affectionately calls them—they alone still have hope.

Zigi is also drunk, and he’s definitely ready to look for some trouble. But there’s no one at the Fahlu stop at this hour of the day, so an inanimate object will have to do. Watch him challenge the public transport timetable—but the timetable is a pushover. Frustrated by its lack of aggressiveness, the boy tries to pry it off of its post, but the metal sheet just bends from his effort. And since Zigi is the craziest freak in Elysium—the one who steals public transport timetables so others won’t know if the last tram has already gone by or not—he crumples up the sheet with the necessary information and throws it away. The stop is still empty and Zigi is still in the mood to rumble, so the trash bin’s *weltanschauung*⁵¹ is no longer acceptable to him.

“What did you say?!” Zigi pushes the repulsive trash bin with both hands, but it’s too full and pleased with itself to stand up for its honour. “I heard what you said just now. ‘*Raving lunatic*,’ so full of yourself, ‘*he dares to raise a hand against private property*.’ You think you’re a super cool dude, right? ‘*Lunatic*, ‘*dares to raise a hand*’. What’s wrong with arguing, we’re all educated people... But you know what?”

The trash bin has no clue what Zigi is talking about. It has a snow hat on its head, studded with extinguished cigarette butts—that’s all. Wouldn’t it still be possible to reach a peaceful settlement?

“You would like that, wouldn’t you? Huh? You’d like that, yeah? Kiss my ass, bourgeois!” Zigi kicks a dent in the trash bin and almost loses his balance. With the waste container completely humiliated, this stumbling force of nature turns his attention to the tram stop’s sign. It flutters in the wind, with “Fahlu” written on it.

⁵¹ “Worldview”; German philosophical term referring to a person or group’s encompassing view of the world and their place in it. Coined by Immanuel Kant in “*Kritik der Urteilskraft*” and expanded upon by other German Idealist thinkers.

The sign starts spinning like a waterwheel when Zigi jump-kicks it. But when he lands, he slips and slams down onto his back. A cloud of snow rises into the air, and for a moment Zigi lies there, powder snow falling on his face, and laughs. The streetlights shine above him in the dark blue winter night sky, and snowflakes drift by. Somewhere way up there, in the invisible blackness, forgotten communication satellites from a bygone era glide along their orbits. Everything goes around so sweetly—a beautiful, dark, dizzy world under attack.

But Zigi hasn't partied enough yet. He pulls himself up. Since he dismantled the timetable, he now has no idea whether the last tram has already gone by or not. Fortunately, the young man is still in the mood to change the world, and so we see him proceeding on foot, the knees of his jeans white with snow, his leather jacket open in the front, and his pop idol hair blowing in the wind... He goes along the streets of the suburb, heading towards home. And on both sides of the road, behind the picket fences, wooden houses are sleeping. He casts disdainful glances at them—cosiness is bourgeois. He's looking for the right one, the sweetest one of them all.

He has a brick in his hand.

He has a pimple on his forehead.

Karl Lund, the young paper industrialist, reads a newspaper in the living room downstairs. In the header of the newspaper, there's a silhouette of a centaur with a top hat, and grand serif typeface lettering that reads "Kapitalist". This isn't the journal of a self-proclaimed speculator, it's a newspaper that was started five hundred years ago in the dawn of the market economy, one of the oldest in the world. No get-rich-quick tricks are published here; in "Kapitalist", all political reality is considered through an economic lens. It's seen the way it actually is, on the flip side of the wishful dreams from the beginning of the century. Karl Lund is concerned about the world, so he reads in order to understand, and he understands in order to help. Genuinely. You could read it yourself, with pleasure—and you would be a more influential person for it—but unfortunately, you don't understand "Kapitalist".

Zigi doesn't either. He's tried, but he still doesn't. He didn't try very hard. Crop failure in Yeesut, the tzaraath epidemic in Saramiriza—these things don't concern Zigi. He doesn't feel moved by them. To him, these are just reproaches, negativity. Zigi isn't worried about the world, he doesn't want to understand or to help. He wants something completely different, and in just a moment, he's going to show you what it is. The boy tightens the laces of his sneakers; he doesn't feel cold thanks to his intoxication. He stands at the gate of a white wooden house with a brick in his hand, and winds up.

The brick flies from his throwing hand. Zigi has a beastly grin on his face. The lump of stone catapults further into the darkness of the winter night, and at the receiving end, waiting to be destroyed, is a caricature of life—which is what a person living a slightly more normal life is to the young Zygismunt Berg: leather-bound books, the smell of mahogany. The window shatters into a thousand little pieces, and the paper industrialist jumps up from his armchair. Upstairs, like a bad omen, dark green eyes fly open.

"I can't wait any longer!" yells Zigi, his elbows at his sides and his back arched from the strain. "End, world, **end!**" Saliva and puffs of steam fly from his mouth. It's a breath of flame reeking of vodka, he's a dragon.

Karl Lund is still a young man in '51, in his mid-thirties. He flies to the front door like a bullet from a gun and puts on his sports shoes there. For the past month, he's been finding garbage bags with the words "BOURGEOIS" in his garden. Every morning, the place is littered with rubbish, filthy cans hanging from the quince bushes. He storms out, throws open the garden gates, and stops for a moment. Barely fifty metres away, in the middle of the street, a figure in a black leather jacket is running for his life. The paper industrialist takes off from where he's standing and rushes after the boy.

Zigi's black pop star hair flutters in the wind, wavy, and a little greasy too. The icy halos of the lanterns behind him contract and unravel into auras as Zigi whizzes past. Snow flies from under his sneakers, his open jacket flutters in the wind. Fueled by alcohol, Zigi runs through the best days of his life. But his sneakers keep

slipping on the snow, and he's been smoking since he was nine. On top of that, physical education isn't his favourite subject at school.

Karl Lund often goes running with his colleagues. And, of course, he doesn't smoke. No, not even cigars. Although according to Zigi—holding a garbage bag with the word “BOURGEOIS”—he had seen him, just the day before yesterday, sticking a large, penis-shaped cigar in his mouth. Somewhere in there, behind the windows of a tasteful wooden house. By the way, Karl Lund doesn't drink brandy from a carafe either, and he isn't a part of Les Morts. Nor does he engage in sex tourism in developing countries.

The man is sprinting in his high-necked black jumper, the white leather of his sports shoes glinting on the snow. The distance shrinks. Zigi slips on a corner and takes a new start on his hands. Thirty metres away, he hears Karl Lund shouting behind him, “Stay put, fucker!” His palms sting, his lungs are bleeding, but the superhuman pain tolerance offered by alcohol speaks for Zigi again. In fact, he's already pulled his leg muscles to shreds—after years of slouching around, sudden sprints come as a big surprise to them. But Zigi doesn't feel anything. He could run forever.

This is, of course, make-believe. The reality is that his body has its limits, and after an eight-minute chase, they make themselves known. At a railway crossing, the two men are running barely ten metres apart. Zigi makes a sharp turn and flies up the stairs to the platform. In the silence of the suburbs, the patter of their feet on the concrete and their increasingly rough breathing can be heard from some distance. Two dark figures move across the platform under the beams of the lanterns, and the distance shrinks again. One look behind him, and Zigi sees the bourgeois gentleman approaching with brisk, controlled movements like a *robot* sent from the future. The boy jumps off the end of the platform, aiming for the railway-industrial recesses of the suburb—there, where he hangs around. He keeps his balance as he lands and slumps forward across the snow. In the darkness of the railway embankment, he thinks, he can finally shake the robot off. Why won't he give up already?! Usually people like him don't even dare to leave the house. They call their beloved police and then hang out together inside.

Zigi comes first down the snowy strip between the picket fence wall and the railway embankment. The magic of the booze is starting to wear off, and he leaves scrapes on the ground as he runs, like wounded prey. He feels his right leg cramping. So be it! But before that, he still needs it for one last effort. Don't give in now, leg-fuck! I'd really like to have a smoke right about now.

Behind him, Karl Lund can feel the boy's trail of sweat in his nostrils. He comes from a future where the world didn't end after all. All the people there are bourgeois, and the working class has almost been annihilated. One quick glance at the surroundings, and Karl Lund sees a dead end of garages waiting ahead. He squeezes out the last of his energy, bracing for a crash, intent on ramming into Zigi at full force and pinning him against the wall. Just one look at that spindly spider and he knew he could overpower him. The man reaches out and touches the tail of his jacket. At this exact moment, there's only a metre or so of ground left before the garage wall. Zigi pushes himself directly against the brick with his right leg, but the other cramping leg doesn't really connect with the wall with the grace he'd had in mind. His plan partially works—he doesn't run up the wall with poise like a *Seraise ensiferant*⁵². He slips, but he still manages to grab the edge of the roof with both hands. Zigi starts to clamber up the wall, but Karl Lund grabs his leg.

“Damn it, kid, give up!”

But above him, on the roof of the garage, Zigi's friend towers over him, cheering him on. Zigi's friend is grand and majestic, though crippled by time. He flutters like a grey flag in the dark, and calls out.

A completely destroyed human being rolls himself a smoke in the taiga of North-Eastern Samara, in the Nad-Umai ecoregion, which only recently sank into the pale. Twenty kilometres to the south, the world begins, with the People's Republic of Samara. Four thousand kilometres further, to the northeast, is the Katla isola, and what lies between the two, no one knows.

“Don't be naïve, of course it's not some kind of afterlife,” Zygismunt says, ending the pointless argument. He pulls shreds of

⁵² Swordbearer. Latin *ēnsifer* (swordbearer) with a French twist.

tobacco from an aluminium cucumber can and places them on a rolling paper. Before leaving Sapurmat Ulan, he had stocked up on two months' worth of smoking supplies. The rations should suffice. In the central market, only dried up leftovers in jars were offered in exchange for buckwheat coupons; the paper doesn't work either, the adhesive strip doesn't really stick. The paper sticks to his lip, and smouldering tobacco falls from the tip of the cigarette onto his chest. The entroponaut pats his jacket with his hand, the glowing locusts of sparks the only colour in the grey around him. He is sitting in the triangular entrance of his tent, legs out, with a fire sputtering in a hole in the snow in front of him. On the other side of the fire crouches the ghostly grey cytoplasm of Ignus Nilsen, Kras Mazov's school teacher friend and apocalyptic shriek. This gut-wrenching defect in the film tape is framed by koshot spruce trees in fog in the background; he is black and white and completely unnatural.

"Happy birthday," says the ghostly grey cytoplasm.

"Thirty-nine," answers Zygismunt Berg. "Well then, how did this happen?"

"You can go ahead and round up to forty. It doesn't matter anymore. Get ready, tell yourself that you're forty years old."

"I'm forty years old."

"Forty years old! What happened? Wasn't there talk about you not getting older than twenty? And you didn't have any plans for this time anyway. Why're you crawling around here?"

"You know, Ignus, I'd like to evaporate..." the man mumbles and adjusts the fire with a stick. A dark orange tongue of flame comes to life in its heart.

"*Again?* Haven't you evaporated enough already?"

"There's always more, Ignus. You can leave less behind: paper trails, dentists..." Zigi puts a saucepan on the fire, fresh snow melting inside it.

"They'll catch you with this tooth business! You should've—back then, in Graad—you should've pulled out those suckers yourself with a screwdriver⁵³!"

"I tried, but it was too painful."

⁵³ The word "screwdriver" is in Finnish in the original.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, man, don’t mumble! And besides, if it’s not a doctor, you’re overestimating the bourgeois justice system. Discretion contracts, like honour, they only have *pokazuha*⁵⁴. Do you remember Mazov?”

Zigi pulls dentures out of his anorak coat and puts them in his mouth. “You’re the one always mumbling nonsense. What about Mazov? And besides—look where I am! Who will come to find me anymore? Even the Institute of Entroponautics can’t find me here.”

“You think?”

Zigi puts on an oven mitt and waits for the water to boil. “I think so, yeah. And moreover! This time, I don’t just want to flee the country.”

“Well, where do you want to flee from then, Zigi? Countries are enormous.”

“From the world.”

The pale is tinted blue, snow fields lay beneath it. The water bubbles in the saucepan. “God forbid...” sighs Ignus Nilsen, who has been amputated into a stump by the censor of time. The mountain ridge leaves his backward voice hollow, echoless. “My God, I’ve had more than enough of this disappearance nonsense.”

After quite a struggle, Zigi gets his leg free of Karl Lund’s grip. He steps on the family man’s shoulder and kicks himself up onto the roof of the garage. There he stands, triumphant under the winter sky, so young and so free. The bourgeois crouches in front of him in defeat.

“Huh? What’re ya gonna do now?” Zigi sputters and gesticulates awkwardly with his hands as if he’s “putting down” this industrialist. “Whatcha gonna do, huh? Are ya gonna try to climb up? I’ll slam your fingers to a pulp!” He stomps on the edge of the garage to demonstrate what will happen if you climb up towards him. “**You will lose!** I win! You just *fucking* lost!”

⁵⁴ Pokazuha (показуха)—(colloquial, disapproving) window-dressing, ostentation, pretence, veneer, facade. An expression borrowed from the Russian language into the Estonian colloquial language, the original meaning of which, in the Estonian SSR, was that the country was trying to show Western Europeans how good it is to live in our country.

“Well done,” Ignus Nilsen whispers from the shadows. “I, too, nobly stuck it to the middle class. Together with Mazov, we killed them, you understand—hundreds of thousands of them. We killed almost a million bourgeois, we would have killed more, but we ran out of time.”

“I’ll kill you!” screams Zigi. On the attic floor, the apocalyptic blacksmith’s *filis*⁵⁵ has overcome him again, and nothing is forbidden. “You hold the world together—I will kill you. I will kill your family.”

“Boy, go to the doctor.” Karl Lund waves him off and turns to go, but Zigi is rolling a snowball in his hands. When it splats against the back of the man’s head, he turns around furiously and charges. “You little fuck, I’ll remember your face!”

“*I’ll remember your face!*” Zigi pokes his face mockingly. “I’ll remember your face too, I know where you live!” Snow floats around Zigi; snowflakes melt in his black hair.

“Get down here, you waste of space, get down if you’re such a tough man!”

“Aah, I’m coming!” Zigi throws a snowball down at him, but he dodges. “I’m coming down with the angels of death and they’re wearing leather coats, your family is dead! Paederast!”

“Very stylish,” praises Ignus Nilsen from the shadows. “Referencing the special committee members was genius. You are a poet. But a poet of actions, not words!”

“I’ll rape your wife!”

“You’re on fire, boy, you’re on fire! Keep going!”

“You’re going to be brought to Yekokataa, I’ll nationalise your companies!”

“Now it’s getting too theoretical, don’t go there, it’s a slippery slope. You know you don’t really know anything about that stuff. Tell him he’s a poofa!”

“Poofa!”

Enraged, Karl Lund tries to climb up, but Zigi kicks some snow in his face and starts jumping on his fingers, and the man falls back down.

“Okay, now is a good time to scam, but first say something fierce to him!”

⁵⁵ Finnish slang word for “feel” or “feeling”, mood, vibe.

“Poof!ta!”

“That’ll do,” says Ignus Nilsen, and Zigi’s leather jacketed figure disappears into the darkness of the garages.

A silhouette emerges from the blue-grey haze, next to the big tires of a dump truck that’s blanketed in snow. It is still twilit and grey in Nad-Umai. Zygismunt Berg comes alone down the road on the mountainside, carrying an enormous rucksack and with an ageing rocker’s ponytail hidden deep under the furry-edged hood of his anorak coat. Smoke leaks from the hood like a chimney. A man, two ski poles in his hands and a cigarette in his mouth, trudges through the entropnetic catastrophe.

“When Mazov could no longer wait for the world revolution...”

“You mean when he shot himself in the head because he had turned into a monster? Or was it because he was about to lose?”

“It’s not like that at all.” To his left, Ignus Nilsen flutters like the grey flag. “Mazov had a gentle soul. There was reaction everywhere, no matter how many we killed, there were always more of them. And then there were the setbacks; everything completely collapsed in Revachol. He was just sad. He didn’t think he was a monster.”

Zygismunt’s lonely kirza boot tracks run along the road, between the spruce trees. Holes in the snow from ski poles run next to them. “Tell me—the power ending up in your hands, how much did it cost? How many comrades did it cost? Tell me how it really was this time. ‘I knew that Mazov’s idea was working again when the other communists came to kill me!’ Was it like that? Or wasn’t it?”

“Of course not. You want to assume the worst of us, Zygismunt, so that you don’t have to believe in anything anymore. So that you can do what you came here to do. So tell me, when can the two of us expect a round of cleaning? When will you go on alone?”

“Honestly, I’ve thought about it, Ignus.”

“Go ahead and think, but know that it wasn’t all murder and killing. And when I took over, when I finally had it all in my hands, it was an intoxicating feeling. Can you imagine, the whole country

being yours? It was made of nothing but goodness, that feeling. I held Graad gently, like an architect holds districts of panel-houses..." Rows of grey boxes crackle in Ignus's chest, like a window into history. "Like matchboxes in the palm of your hand. And I promised that now that I had been given the opportunity—I would do what's best for the people. And you know, I didn't disappoint myself."

"But it all slipped away and only one extra-isolary colony remained, some kind of mountain goat shit!"

"Don't be so petty. Be sceptical, but don't underestimate Samara. My heart is buried in Samara. When we retreated here..."

"That's right, *retreated!* Why did you retreat again? Why do my guys always retreat?"

"It was inevitable. And I wasn't going to throw off my gloves and become a fatalist. I gave everything for this colony. My Samaran Revolutionary Republic!"

"That's right, the 'People's Republic' is senile."

"I will never forgive them for doing this. After me, they messed it up. The senility! I will never forgive this!" The ghostly grey cytoplasm feels defeated.

The entroponaut goes over a mountain bridge with its barriers open. Empty guard booths are buried in the snow on both sides of the road. At the end of the bridge, a sign reads "Nemeng's Uul—36 kilometres". And then onward, through the snowy grey taiga of the Umai Mountains. Only two weeks ago, the world's largest reserves of fluoride, tungsten, zinc, and extremely rare samarskite were dug up from the earth's crust here... workshops chattered, industrial waste painted the ecoregion's crisp silver wort into rusty foam. But not anymore—now there is silence and peace here. The entroponaut goes down the dump truck road into the dark crevice of the valley, the spruce forest darkening around him. In front of him, on the snowy road, runs a flurry of hoofprints.

"It was spectacular! It was a loss of self, a complete dedication for the good of the people. I was a ruling machine on amphetamines, I never slept. None of us slept. We built it all from nothing, with the help of the Yikuts, it was a brotherhood of nations. They respected our weapons and we respected their cheerful minds and dancing. In six years, a country rose from

nothing. The workers worked themselves to death, toiling for the fifth day in a row, they literally died on the construction site, of a heart attack, of fatigue...”

“Of a gun butt in the back of the head?”

“You think so, but you’re wrong. It would be like that now, of course, but it wasn’t like that then. You can’t imagine what happened here, how it was. It ran through the world like happiness intoxication.”

“Happiness intoxication? Amphetamine was common in your country then, and not yet medically tested.”

But Ignus doesn’t listen. “I said terrible things, yes! I stood on a white horse, in a blizzard, and gave speeches. In the mountains, on the construction site... I swung my sword, with silver sunbeams on the hilt. And all around me fluttered white flags, crests of crowned horns made with silver thread, a pentagon between the prongs of the horns, the branches raised to heaven. Everyone who came here with me became happy, Zigi! Communism is powerful! Believe in Communism, it’s a burst of enthusiasm! I promise! It’s beautiful when you believe in a person, but without it...!”

“Without it, there is nothing.”

“Nothing. It was a blizzard, but it was bright, it was morning. Communism is white, it sparkles! Communism is the morning, it is a jubilation!” The pale begins to recede dangerously around the entroponaut. The world turns white; beams of light seep from Ignus’ chest into the dim spruce trees. The falling snow sparkles in the beams like silver confetti, the colour creeping into the world like a threat. Zygismunt stomps his foot. He covers his ears with his hands and shouts, “Enough! Stop!”

“Enough, stop...” rolls across the field like a sword cutting through the air.

“Please forgive me, Zygismunt, my friend,” says the voice of the distortion. The man is panting in the middle of the forest road, it is dim and twilit again. The pale returns, and the entroponaut breathes a sigh of relief. “Do you want me to... want me to lose my mind?”

“No, I just wanted you to understand how good everything was then. What kind of time it was. What a beautiful time! I’m sorry...”

"That time has passed. It's buried in your punch cards and shit. No one can tell what was there anymore. No one knows what it was really like. It's shifted from its place. What was really there is gone, and only the pale remains. It's an imprint. You do realise that. *I realise that.*"

"It's those girls of yours who talk like that," the cytoplasm whispers softly in Zygismunt's ear. The spruce trees are swaying; it's dim in the pale, but seductively soft. "Those girls of yours, girls don't believe in anything, all girls are bourgeois, Zigi."

"They weren't bourgeois."

"They were bourgeois, every last one of them. They read their girls' magazines. Revachol bourgeois fashion and perfumes, virginity loss stories. It's all bourgeois. Every girl is actually a weapon of the bourgeoisie."

"You didn't know them, you don't know what they were thinking about. No one knows what they were thinking. I don't know either, but it wasn't bourgeois, Ignus. It was something else."

"If that's what you want to think, then be my guest. But you'd better believe in people, not in them. Believe in communism."

"I already tried, but I can't! It doesn't work for me... I'm not the communist type."

"Then why are you talking to me? After all, I am communism itself, the spectre that walks the earth. Why have you been with me all these years if you don't believe in communism?"

"Because of anger towards those who've had it better in life, Ignus. And besides—you're a monster, a grotesque. Who doesn't love the company of monsters?"

"I'm not a monster."

"You are a monster, they call you the 'Apocalyptic Shrike'. Who else do you know who's called that? No one is called that! All of that Graad massacre was by your hand, your signature is everywhere. And during the retreat, when Mazov had stopped giving orders, you had the enemy soldiers impaled on trees. Twelve thousand of them. You had spruce trees sharpened into spears, you made a forest of spears, it was obscene, Ignus!"

"It was so that they would let me build my nation! My nation of the future. You do understand, they never would have left us alone... They would have shot us like wild game!"

“That may be the case, but still: excess. ‘Shrike’—look what’s become of you!”

Human speech sounds out of place in the silence of the pale. It echoes in the gloom of the trees as Zygismunt trudges through the snow. There’s an old trick coined by the great entroponaut K. Voronikin, that you have to shout in the pale. Otherwise, you start to feel gloomy, and the past comes up. But Zygismunt needn’t be afraid of that. When he first entered the pale, he discovered to his great dismay that he couldn’t return like everyone else. Or rather—he could, but not where he really wants. This makes him indispensable to Mazov’s idea. The disappearance of the Lund children has literally given Zigi special entropo-netic powers.

The morning has passed, it’s getting dark. A few tens of kilometres further on, the far pale begins, and the world’s times of day no longer register there at all. He has to save up his batteries for that. He considers it, but then turns his flashlight on anyway. The snow shimmers in the beam of the light, and Zygismunt directs it to his wretched friend. The Ignus defect shines through.

“Look at yourself! You’re pathetic. It would be better for everyone if they’d done a clean job. A bunch of amateurs! I would’ve set all the film tapes of you on fire. It’s so cruel somehow, that you’re lingering here...”

“But then you would never have known me, Zigi. Think of all the times we’ve shared. After all, not everything has been bad.”

“What about me? I’m talking about you. Wouldn’t a history without you in it be better? There would be no forest of spears and amphetamine, no stump of cytoplasm, who needed this at all?”

“It doesn’t mean anything anymore anyway.” Ignus tries to buy time. “You know that. It doesn’t matter how many we killed. The world is ending. Soon no one will remember me, not to mention you, if even the mighty of this world are not remembered.”

“It’s better that way. That is the way it should be. And *the mighty of this world*? You’re an ugly monstrosity who ran amok in this world!”

“You rampaged too! Look at your hand, Zigi! Let’s not forget...”

“One more word! Say it and you’re gone!” the entroponaut snaps. “Compared to you, I haven’t done anything! And besides! Which of us is the Commissar of the Revolution? Is that you?”

“No it’s not!” Ignus shivers, frightened. “I’m sorry, friend, ten thousand apologies! You alone are the Commissar of the Revolution—Zygismunt Berg—the top of the party in your mind. I have no authority. All I have is this humble critique I’ve written about myself. Take it. But don’t kill me. There is nothing on the other side of me. I’ll do anything to stay. Anything at all. I am hope.”

“You know what I want. This is the last thing. Start talking!”

But Ignus is unable to speak. He has no mouth. The defect of the filmstrip frolics in the dark, in the beam of the flashlight. This is the height of cruelty; the impossible is required. An uncomfortable silence spreads in the forest air around him. Everyone is embarrassed. “Why, Ignus?” the entroponaut repeats and leans closer, peering into the heart of history with a flashlight. “Why did you do that? There was no point. I understand why you emptied the banks, it was necessary. You even took a symphony orchestra with you in the retreat, by force. People like music. But why that? Who was happy about that? Why ‘Harnankur’, that model didn’t serve any purpose! Tell me that, and you can stay.”

“But I don’t have any clue.” The inside-out voice sounds sad, the soundtrack slows down. “I don’t know anything that you don’t.”

No more chats. The entroponaut shakes himself. Snow falls from the shoulders of the anorak coat. He goes on alone. An hour of frozen machine tracks and hoofprints in the snow run along in the flashlight beam. And when a herd of ibex finally emerges from the darkness, they are frozen in place in the middle of the road, like an exhibit in a natural history museum. Some of the females sometimes jerk in place, sneezing; this is a nervous impulse, a muscle tremor. The backs of the stuffed animals are already covered with snow, but their snouts are still steaming, they’re still breathing—some for a few days, some for a week. An anorak-clad figure moves through the herd with the indifference of a professional until the beam of his flashlight casts the alpha male’s crown of horns as a shadow on the wall of spruce trees. Zygismunt

looks into the animal's glazed eyes. Its sense of time has broken down. An automaton's primitive fragment of a brain strays in the pale faster than that of a human. This is how hunters from the outskirts go hunting in the *entrokataa*. Of course, they'll eventually go mad from it as well, and one day they won't return. But not Zigi, he has special abilities. He takes a pocket knife from his belt and slits the protein mass's throat.

17. HARNANKUR

One hundred and fifty years ago, on another isola—the Graad isola—it snows in the city of Mirova. It's a midwinter evening, but thousands of people have gathered in the harbour. The quay bustles with them. In the background lies imperial Graad—church steeples and chimneys. The crowd is waving, bidding farewell to the airship rising into the sky. A swan made of wood and nickel rises into the blizzard, and the passengers of the world's first interisolar flight wave to the crowd from its balcony baskets: well-dressed boujee people, with a never-before-seen adventure ahead of them. It's the pale—terrifying, but at the same time such an upbeat and unforgettable experience. Modern technology, in the form of a luxuriously upholstered airship, now makes such an experience possible for an ordinary, if perhaps slightly better off, citizen. And on the other side of the pale—oh mystical pale!—the land of Katla awaits, with its royal capital of Vaasa.

This juncture in history is monumental, journalists are swarming, photo flashes are lighting up. The small bulbs in the cameras burn out, their light causes snowflakes to freeze in the air. That's the exposure time in which Nadia Harnankur is captured. The operetta star poses for the photo arm in arm with the chief engineer, wearing a fur hat, with her long beautiful neck craned out. She smiles and waves her handkerchief at her namesake in the

sky. The letters “Harnankur” in the old Graadian alphabet adorn the departing airship. This is the peak of Nadia’s fame.

Two days later, the interisolar flight enters the pale, and then, barely six hours later, a deviation occurs in the airship’s course. “Harnankur” has gone missing with fifteen hundred passengers on board. The flight is believed to have drifted into an uncharted entropnetic mass, the pale superdeep.

But *who all* thinks that? Para-historians. Evaporation nerds and a couple of crazy SRV pale fanatics. Men like K. Voronikin, a demented entroponaut and communist from the People’s Republic of Samara; and an internationally unrecognised authority on the field of history, Inayat Khan, who I guess doesn’t live in his mother’s basement anymore. Regardless. Other parts of historical science, which men of the Khan-and-Voronikin type contemptuously call the *mainstream*, do not recognise the existence of an airship called “Harnankur”. The first civilian interisolar flight was “Anastasia Lux”, and that happened one decade later.

Seventy-five years later, when the revolutions of the turn of the century had subsided, “Harnankur” was more or less forgotten. The documentation that newspaper archives provided could have been destroyed, for example, in the fires of the Graad revolution, but still—the event would be too large-scale for that. If historical memory proves itself backhandedly even in the case of a small cog like Julius Kuznitsky, the disappearing commissar, then where did the world’s first interisolar flight, with fifteen hundred people on board, disappear to? In the century after the revolution, “Harnankur” finally sank into the shadows of history. Until the fifties, that is, when interest in disappearance cases suddenly took on the dimensions of a subculture in the middle class of developed countries—certainly not an inexplicable phenomenon. These men, mostly young and unpopular with the opposite sex, were dubbed desapatetists after the bestselling book of their genre, “Los Desaparecidos”. They became interested in one photo: one Nadia Harnankur, a marginally interesting disappearance case, standing in the harbour. She is waving, fur hat on her head, arm in arm with the chief engineer. There are unearthly crowds in the background, and they are all waving at something in the sky. But there in the sky is a mysterious void.

This void is the holy grail of disappearance nerds. According to the desaparetists, the best fit is the most convincing bit of evidence: an industrial presentation model of the airship of the same name, which the communists took with them to the then Revolutionary Republic—now People’s Republic—when they retreated from Graad to Samara. The original is on display at Sapurmat Ulan’s Museum of Entroponetics and is taken very seriously by the communists. It’s just a pity that no one takes the communists seriously. The SRV entroponaut K. Saronovich Voronikin argues in his memoirs that the ship had to exist because the model is technically feasible from an engineering standpoint. In other words, it could carry more than a thousand people through the pale on a commercial trip with all the amenities. The production of such an industrial project must have been a brilliant scientific achievement of its time. Why not turn all this work into a commercially attractive business? It would not be diamaterialist at all.

Critics say that more than two hundred field work campaigns into the pale have left their mark. According to Voronikin, the project that was being carried out—again, according to him—was lost forever on the first trip. Would the model still work? Could “Harnankur” be some sort of failed prototype of “Anastasia Lux”? Why is there no documentation at all?

K. Voronikin, however, claims that the model was made into a ship, the ship deviated from its course, and it encountered an as of yet unknown phenomenon in the pale.

18. THREE MEAT PIROSHKIS

One hundred and forty-eight years later, Mirova, the capital of Graad, glows behind the walls of high-rise windows. During the fevered nights of history, all of its imperial architecture was blown up. Then the rioters were driven out, and now the city is a spirit resurrected by democracy, into a ghost glowing with lights. It is a terrible, out-of-control living environment, in constant motion in the glass reflections of its skyscrapers. Like some mythological horror, Mirova can only be looked at in a mirror. Its movement is Graad's unstoppable economic growth made physical, an assertion of true thermodynamic impossibility. Subways slide by, pearly rivers of traffic swirl day and night. The nerve centre, Noo, can be seen from here, from the sixtieth floor. Noo is the height of arrogance of one nation—the nation of Graad—a financial peninsula. The scientists here claim: once the earth was covered with the geosphere, then with the biosphere; now is the time of the noosphere. A mind covers the earth, and Noo's skyscrapers are the throne of that network. The throne of the mind. Here it does its arithmetic in long-distance calls, in invisible transmissions. Its thoughts are intangible financial instruments. No one knows what they are or how much they cost. The mirrored glasses are black—obviously the interisolar real—but what is a person? A person is light.

The scientific community of the People's Republic, the third generation of expelled rioters, laughs at this. In Samara they have also introduced a fourth term: the entroposphere. The wave equations, Samara's calculations, are promising. Any moment, this beautiful thing will sweep Graad off the face of the earth. In that barely-perceived place where communism becomes nihilism (definitely a more subtle transition than from a friend of children to a molester of children), the cream of the crop of the political party seem to think: why not? Our idea is no longer to win your hearts—and let's be honest—we never will. We love the idea, but the world somehow doesn't. Let it disappear then, if that's how it's going to be.

When Sarjan Ambartsumjan turns his back on the window of his Noo penthouse, only two years remain until that day. There will be a class reunion, then the Northern Pass will collapse, and in the chain of events that's triggered, it will become clear that what's shining behind Ambartsumjan is nothing less than the last stage of development of stiihia⁵⁶.

All light comes from outside. Snow floats by outside the window, evaporating from the howl of Noo's thoughts long before it reaches street level, sixty stories below. There will never again be winter in Mirova. Only here under the sky does it still exist. It's cold in the hall; the pillars stand out in the darkness. The phone rings. Ambartsumjan walks over barefoot, wearing a suit. The shadows of snowflakes dance on the glass display cases around him, which contain the world's largest private collection of disappearance memorabilia. Sometime in the past, before Ambartsumjan became a fifty-year-old oil billionaire, he had been a young man without much success with the opposite sex. One of the first. Only the ringing of the telephone breaks the dignified silence of the hall. The man takes a seat at his desk and clicks the speaker on. He places his free hand on the skull of Ramout Karzai where it sits on the desk. It is authentic.

"I'm listening."

⁵⁶ стихия. Russian. Stiihia is one of the basic elements of nature in ancient philosophy. An independent and crushing force of nature. Elemental—force of nature, spontaneous, unorganised, unregulated.

“Some man from Katla, Vaasa area code,” reports the faithful secretary. “He says that the number was given at a private collection auction, but I think he probably wants a loan.”

“Why?”

“Well, this long-distance call is at the expense of the respondent.”

Ambartsumjan roars with laughter. “At the respondent’s expense! All right, connect. But a loan...” The man waits, one hand on Ramout Karzai’s skull, the other on his grey beard. He is of massive stature.

“You don’t give loans,” says the secretary.

“Exactly. Out of principle, I don’t. Connect.”

The speaker switches to a long-distance call; the pale seeps into the hall air from the fabric-covered ziggurat. The signal runs as an entropnetic sequence through the Great Unknown, from Katla to Graad. Relay stations clear the call from the noise of history along the way, but something always creeps into the wires—a ghost radio station. Its quiet voice in its unintelligible language reminds us what it’s here for. To end life. “*Azimuth-Boreas-Sinus...*” passes through the broadcast on a hidden radio frequency and disappears. Ambartsumjan is used to it. Through the noise, and three thousand kilometres of pale, a distorted human voice is heard. It says: “Hello, greetings, my name is Inayat Khan.”

“Who?”

“Inayat Khan.”

“Okay, Yat Khan, where did you get my number?”

“Ina-yat Khan. I got it from the Norrköping fair, the auction. They said to call about your... hobby. Are you still Mr...” the man rummages around for something, “Mr. Ambartsumjan?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“And you collect things from people who have disappeared?”

“*Disappeared*,” the pale whispers on the loudspeaker.

“Yes, I collect them,” replies Ambartsumjan, “and no, it is not my *hobby*. I put my heart into what I do. I take it seriously.”

“I do too. You can be sure of that.”

“Can I? ‘Things from people who have disappeared’—what are you talking about! The correct term is still ‘disappearance memorabilia’.” Ambartsumjan sinks contentedly into his armchair,

in the dimness of the hall. Well said. The armchair is made of expensive leather.

"Listen, I know what the correct term is, alright?" Khan is starting to get pissed off. Meetings between desaparetists are rarely cordial; they tend to quarrel. "It's not like I'm calling about my very first purchase ever. And no, I'm not buying it as a paperweight either, if that's what you're afraid of."

"So you have a professional collection?"

"You wouldn't ask me that if you gave me a chance to tell you what I just bought!"

"How *extensive* is your collection?"

"You see! You're not letting me tell you!"

"Well, I will eventually. I'd still like to know first who I'm talking to." Ambartsumjan doesn't raise his voice; after years of training, it contains only a barely perceptible bit of the whiny voice-cracking of a nerd. His zits are also rather more psychological. His grey beard is authoritative. He strokes Ramout Karzai's skull like a pet.

"Anyway, I consider the technical model of the 'Harnankur' to be my crown jewel," exclaims Khan, a whimpering note in his voice.

"Who are you talking to over there?" A woman's voice in the background spoils the drama of the moment. "Come eat, the food is getting cold!" Khan muffles the receiver with his hand, but the hall still echoes with "Mom, let me talk! Stop interrupting!"

"*Mother*," the pale hisses back, "*this is my mother*."

Ambartsumjan shakes his head. He leans closer to the table.

"And *you* have 'Harnankur'?"

"Yes, I have it," says Khan.

"A copy?"

"No, I went thieving in Sapurmat Ulan. Of course I don't have the original. And you don't have it either!" Khan gathers himself for a moment. "I understand that you have another copy in your possession, yes? That's why I'm calling. It's written in the contract, the responsibility of the owner. I have to get a service manual from you."

"Do you have any idea what this is?" Ambartsumjan is dead serious. "Do you know how *important* this is?"

“There’s nothing left after this.”

Ambartsumjan nods slowly. “Right, you have to devote time to her. To hold her. You have to think of her, like how you think of a girl, understand? Like a beautiful girl. Have you ever seen one? You have to be responsible, it’s not a toy.”

“To *think* of her? In what sense?”

“That’s the maintenance manual. You didn’t think I was going to tell you about the switch? For example—did you know that there was also a third copy?”

“A third copy?” Khan doesn’t understand.

“Of course you didn’t know...” Ambartsumjan gravely folds his hands on his chest. “Now you know, there was also a third copy. But all that remained was an empty display case. You have to watch her, all the time. Don’t let her out of your sight. Don’t leave her alone. And when you do, think of her. Do you think it’s a coincidence that they keep the original in a museum? Think—hundreds of people pass by, every day. They look at her. And then, when the museum is closed, the night watchmen are watching.”

Khan says nothing. A ghost-like hum echoes through the ether.

“This is an impossible object,” concludes Ambartsumjan. “The world no longer supports her.”

The pale freezes at the bottom of the valley, two years later. There is no longer a single soul on the forest crossing. A ribbon of blood drops trails across the snow, along the dark tunnel of the road, in competition with boot prints. Past the giant spruce trees, weighed down by snow, until the intersection with the main road. There, at the intersection, there’s a red puddle on the ground, and next to it an abandoned campfire. There is a homemade frame on the fire. Two branches hold a third one over the extinguished firepit. Bones gnawed clean lay in the snow.

And forward! Along the highway where cars no longer drive. Frozen electric wires meander in the dark. Drop by drop across the blanket of snow, with the boot prints. With terrible determination. The wrecks of crawler machines sleep in a ditch by the road; the dark shape of a fuel oil station looms behind a bend.

“Oreole-Laudanum-Ultra-Tricolore-Ellips...”

Something is rising. There is a screeching sound of steel.

“Tell me that you understand what I’m talking about, and that you will start doing it!” Ambartsumjan orders.

“I think so. I’ll try.”

“Don’t just try, do it! You’ll understand eventually. After the third one disappeared, I became paranoid, to say the least. To this day, when I walk into the room and turn on the lights, I fear it will happen again. That there will be an empty display case in the middle of the room. Or that there will be nothing in this room at all. You will soon have the same outlook. Then you’ll understand what I’m talking about.”

“In what sense are you afraid that it will happen *again*?” The wording does not go unnoticed by Khan. Ambartsumjan is silent. He taps the skull on the table.

“What do you mean by ‘again’?” repeats Khan.

“I lost her. That’s what happened. She was mine too, the third one. But you know, it wasn’t like it usually is. When something disappears. Keys, for example, or something expensive. Have you felt it? Been faced with such a phenomenon? With such a feeling?”

The professional arrogance in Khan’s voice is wiped away in an instant. “I have,” he says.

“Then you know what I’m talking about. Someone knows what I’m talking about...” The man’s hand slips from Ramout Karzai’s skull. The floodlights of a distant airship slide by outside the window of the hall, and the shadows of the pillars creep along the floor. “When did it start for you?” asks Ambartsumjan.

“Eighteen years ago. That was the first time. From there on...” Khan falls silent.

“From there on, it gets more and more frequent, right?”

“Yes,” answers Khan. “And on top of other things, too.”

“What other things?” Ambartsumjan has now moved his ear to the speaker, his chest on the table. “*All* things?”

“Yes. Side streets, a girl riding a bicycle, and light, or when a horse looks on. Especially animals...”

“In the whole world?”

“Yes. The whole world.”

On both sides of the highway, heavy tracked machines, iron relics, rise up into the pale. They spin, helpless bodies, snow falling from their rusty frames. This is how matter degrades, drop by drop, like an analog rhythm running from red through the colourless world. The international alphabet is hidden in the low-frequency waves, "... *Nadir-Ellips-Gamut-Azimuth*..." and so on, to the border of the settlement.

Nemeng Uul has a ghost district of panel-houses. The streets are empty; there are three-storey concrete buildings rising on the hillsides on either side of the valley. A single bicycle hangs in the air next to a swing, otherwise everything is completely normal. Convenience store windows and a community centre pass by. Footprints run up the stairs to the hospital door, where the padlock has been broken open. He will escape... he escapes! "... *Tricolore-likon-Oreole-Nadir*" echoes in the dark of the corridor.

Connection terminated.

"And it's been like this for you for eighteen years? It's been twelve for me." Ambartsumjan sinks back into his chair, deep into the leather.

"Then it gets even worse. But eventually..." Khan's voice hisses in the curve of the pale. "Eventually, it changes somehow... it's somehow good, this feeling."

"Good?"

"Yes. As if everything will be alright."

"As if everything will be alright," sighs Ambartsumjan. "I don't have it anymore. And it's better like that. I sold mine. The remaining model. A while ago. This endless watching, the obligation..." The man collects himself. "It wore on me."

"You sold it just like that?"

"Just like that, and cheap too, to the first bidder. The man seemed right. He really wanted it too, that was important. There must be someone who would take care of a thing like that. Someone who looks at her a lot and doesn't let her disappear. Like me. One thousand five hundred people, it was..."

"But the register says that it's still in your hands!"

"What register?"

“The auction register.” Khan’s voice is getting increasingly sharp. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be talking to you! I would talk to the new owner.”

“No, I don’t understand, the man had to register it himself. Are you certain?” Ambartsumjan gets up and walks around the table, still holding the skull. “Perhaps...”

“Who did you sell it to? If you still remember.”

“Of course I remember, okay,” snorts Ambartsumjan. “Berg was his name. A private collector.”

“*Zygismunt* Berg?” the speaker blasts. “With black hair, skinny?”

“Something like that, yes. It was... what was it now? Ten years ago, but yes. *Zygismunt* Berg.”

“Are you absolutely sure? Was he foul-mouthed? No, actually, tell me, did he speak with an accent? As if he lived in Vaasa?”

“God, I don’t remember such details... There could have been an accent. Why is this so important?”

“And you said ten years ago? What year **exactly**?”

“’59. Or ’60. Why?”

“In any case it was after ’57?”

“Absolutely certain. Listen, I have the papers here! There you go,” commands Ambartsumjan with the skull toward the speaker. “Why is it so important all of a sudden?”

“Because...” the voice in the ziggurat could explode with excitement at any moment, “that man died in ’57!”

The giant-like oil billionaire hunches over the table. “Please repeat that, **what**?”

But on the other end, Khan is no longer listening. “A clue!” he explodes. And the last thing that Ambartsumjan hears is the man’s distant voice in an ever-increasing hiss: “Mom, mom! I found a clue!”

Two years later.

The platform of Mirova’s floating train station has emptied for the night. The rest of the passengers have long gone home. The magnet train, stopped by its buffers, rests above the city, next to the platform. The five-storey scales of the cars tower above, and next to them, through the blizzard, a robot walks.

A voice approaches. "Tzuut-tzuut-tzuut." The robot walks, and a big fat pilot sitting on it, in the cockpit, turns the robot's head. "Ti-diri-diit" answers the control system. The machinery corrects course, the flaps of its herringbone coat blowing in the wind.

"Hey, seriously! Maybe that's enough of that," the thin blond man next to the robot grumbles. His head is throbbing. Behind him lies a six-day long train ride of binge drinking, full of incessant gibberish about disappearances: Ambartsumjan and Zigi, Ramout Karzai's skull and a vanished airship with "characteristics" that remind Khan of the girls. But the amateur entropionetics got so morbid that no one really wanted to think about it. And then they found themselves on the stage of the bar "Panorama", singing karaoke. All three of them, "*Now I'm so happy I found you!*"

"Tzut-tzut-tzut." The robot speeds up instead. The pilot has pulled the machine's head back, that's why. That means acceleration. The robot goes along and the fat man giggles on its shoulders, a turquoise-orange-violet scarf blowing in the wind.

"Hydraulika sprawna, rozpoczynam: diagnostyka. — *Hydraulics operational, starting: diagnostics,*" says the robot in a robot's voice and moves along.

"Weapon systems, check!" the pilot orders, snapping his fingers in the direction of the skinny person below.

"Systemy zbrojeniowe, sprawne. — *Weapon systems operational,*" replies the robot. The skinny blonde abruptly hands the pilot a bottle. He puts the fuel in the machine's mouth. It roars, and red liquid drips onto the snow: "Rezerwy paliwa: sto procent. — *Fuel reserves: one hundred per cent.*"

"Forward!" The fat man points to the blizzard.

"Wait!" says the robot, and adjusts its load.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready. Rozpoczynam: protokół poszukiwawczo-ratunkowy! — *Starting: search and rescue protocol!*" says the robot. But it only manages to take three steps—"tzuut-tzuuttzuut..."—when, far on the other side of the platform, someone steps out of the blizzard. The robot is startled; the fat man falls off its back, the blonde instinctively dodges. The wanted agent, Tereesz Machejek, pulls a pistolet from his coat pocket, and the Man from Internal Affairs on the other side of the platform reciprocates. Behind him, two more

agents of the ICP appear out of the storm, pistols in firing position. They aim, and Machejek, the wanted agent, aims back at them.

“It’s sad to see,” says the Man from Internal Affairs, “how far he has fallen. Just imagine, twenty-two solved cases. But now—a compulsive disappearer.”

The floating station hangs in the air like a black spirit above Mirova’s glow. Tereesz Machejek, a former agent, stands there on the platform, on a windy street beneath the sky. The Man from Internal Affairs can see his unshaven beard, the tie thrown over his shoulder and his drunkard’s face. The flavoured berry wine freezes on his chin, his tobacco-stained teeth transform into something like a smile. His two friends, hunched on the snow, are gesturing at him. They are panicking.

The Man from Internal Affairs wears a proper black coat and a black suit. “Did you think that you could just disappear from the *ICP*?!” he shouts into the storm. “You put the gun down, you come in calmly, and no one gets hurt. There are twenty men down below. There is no escape from here!”

The maddened agent shouts something, but it’s inaudible in the rising wind. The bloodhound of internal affairs cups his ear with his hand. “What?!”

“Frantiček the Brave!” comes from the other side of the platform, along with a pistolet shot.

“No!” shouts Khan.

Zigi kicks open the door, in slow motion. Splinters fly; the spine of the lock gives in with a rattle. The door comes off its hinges and hangs there miserably. A bare-chested boy stands in the doorframe, a bottle of wine in his right hand. He sweats from amphetamines, longs for pampering and beauty. He is seventeen years old, with three years left on his shelf life. The boy puts his left hand in his pants.

“Which of you bourgeois whores wants to fuck?”

A living room with respectable interior design spreads out in front of Zigi. Twenty young middle-class people sit there, a house party. Half of them are girls, but none of them want to sleep with Zigi. It’s the evening of the next day—New Year’s Eve. ’51 will turn to ’52 in two hours, and these young people are Zigi’s new

schoolmates. Right about now is when they start to think that maybe they shouldn't have invited Zigi.

"Enough!" Handsome Aleksander jumps up from the sofa. But he doesn't get these words out in time: "Get out, you waste of space!" He can't betray his friend Zigi, because to be honest—Zigi has no friends. Zigi is a sweaty monster. He shouts, "Zigi, strike first!!!"

And then a bottle of red wine flies into Handsome Alexander's face. The young man, beautiful as Absalom, covers his face with his hands. "My God, my face!" He looks at the wine on his hands and thinks it's gushing blood.

"His face!" shouts Alexander's girl, one of many, and jumps behind the couch.

"He broke Aleks's face..." the whole room murmurs. Handsome Alexander himself is blinded by grief. His wine-drenched face contorts as an impossibly beautiful battle cry escapes his lips. "Aaahhh..." He lunges at Zigi's feet. "My face! I'll kill you!"

A sweaty junkie and a male beauty in a tight shirt are rolling around on the floor. Zigi tries to get up, but Handsome Aleksander won't let him. He punches as hard as he can; he's really being rough. There seems to have been a miscalculation—Zigi forgot that Handsome Aleksander goes to the gym after school, and pays equal attention to all of his muscle groups. Zigi is in pain. The floor lamp topples over, along with someone's cup. Inside Zigi's skull, the middle-class youth is spinning in the shallow underwater blows of his fists. Zigi can hear voices, girls' voices. They say: "Junkie, loser!"

His hand scrambles around, but he can't get a single weapon in his hands. Ah, if only there were a sword, a beautiful sword! With an inverted pentagon in the hilt. Like the sun's rays.

"Damn it, let's go help Aleks..." The daring boys approach, and send kicks straight to his stomach. Zigi thrashes, held back by a tough muscular body.

"Prey. Always prey," the cytoplasm whispers.

The Internal Affairs agent's coat flutters. There in its black fabric is a tiny bullet hole—useless, silly resistance. Three puffs of

gunsmoke fly into the blizzard in response. The former Collaboration Police agent's kneecap explodes on impact. The first shot sweeps Tereesz off his feet; the second hits his shoulder. A splash of tendons and blood clots in the blizzard.

"Ffran... ti..." Khan hears his friend mumbling. He raises his head from the snow. Tereesz's potato-coloured hair, spattered with blood, blows in the storm. Hazel eyes, damp from the wind. That's how the kojko gets up on his knees. His pistolet shakes, gunpowder spills into the barrel. Ball bearing ammunition flows from his coat pocket, but Tereesz can't find it in the snowy pool of blood. His wounded hand can't handle the delicate finger work of loading. Everything gets messed up.

Three cloaked figures approach on the platform, cautiously, their backs hunched like jackals. Tereesz falls on his back, crawls backwards. He drags a trail of blood through the snow with his wet ragged clothes. His pistol and gunpowder are left behind in the steaming pool in front of Khan. With their coattails flapping like wings, three Co-op agents sweep past Khan. The Man from Internal Affairs crouches and winds up, pistol in hand. Khan watches in shock as Tereesz gets punched in the face by the Angel of Death's pistol grip and jerks back.

With all of that, no one will notice Jesper clawing at the puddle. He doesn't know why, but he hides his friend's service weapon in his chest pocket. Like memorabilia.

Zigi flies through the garden gate. Two boys threw him out by his arms and legs, like a sack of potatoes. The boy lands in a heap on the street of the garden city. The white picket fence glows next to him, in the dark. The gate remains ajar as the boys leave. Before the house door is slammed shut, music can be heard from inside. The party has started up again inside. But then—silence.

Snowflakes sparkle. The Katla winter night is icy clear, and Zigi, with some effort, rolls himself onto his back under it. His body doesn't obey his commands. He's still laying around bare-chested in the snow. The dear, doomed world is spinning all around him. The wreaths of light from the streetlights shine in his black eyes, in the wheels of the horse-carriage. The boy begins to

laugh, setting the dogs barking. And their barking makes all the dogs in the neighbourhood bark.

“Good prey,” whispers the cytoplasm, “communism loves you. Now pull yourself up on your stumps, go back in, and butcher the whole house!”

Zigi grabs a handful of cold snow and rubs it on his face. The snow turns into red berry jelly at the base of his nose. He slams a snowball against his swollen eye socket. The barking of dogs in the darkness echoes against his eardrums.

“At least break a window! Tell them they’re bourgeois!”

“They don’t understand!” yells Zigi. “They don’t know what a bourgeois is! Don’t you understand that it doesn’t offend them? They don’t know what it means!”

“How can they not know what ‘bourgeois’ means?”

“Just like that,” Zigi growls and slaps his hand down on the snow. “It’s a random historical word, romantic even. Like ‘cuirass’ or ‘coquette’...” He tries to prop himself up on his elbows, but he can’t, he collapses. Snow crunches under the soles of someone’s shoes in the garden.

“They’re coming to kill you! Run, prey!”

“Shut up!” whispers Zigi.

All the dogs fall silent at once. Somewhere, a delicate coat rustles. The smell of winter wafts into his nose, so sweet that he doesn’t dare to breathe anymore. He holds his breath, and in the distance, the snow crunches in the dark. He knows what those footsteps are. Those footsteps destroy. His destruction, and Iilmaraa’s. That’s the direction in which the original civilization worshipped, fifteen hundred years ago, and that’s where it vanished from history, with all its pillars and ancient string instruments. So no one really knows where those ethnicities came from. All those people. The garden gate creaks open. It sounds like a memory, gone as soon as it happens. Zigi doesn’t understand what’s causing this terrible feeling. It must be the Samaran meth. The boy can’t take it anymore, and he exhales. A silver breath rises from his battered mouth.

Doom stands over him and breathes.

Twenty-one years later, an entroponaut walks along the empty hospital corridors of Nemeng's Uul. Blood drips onto the linoleum from two freshly flayed goat legs on his back; he carries a fuel oil canister in each hand. He kicks the door open and strides up the fire escape to a large steel door. There he finally stops and sets the canisters down. The fuel oil inside them sets them ringing.

The entroponaut draws pliers from his rucksack like a sword. The iron clicks. The sound of steel echoes down the stairwell of the abandoned emergency room. And further back, through the far pale, through the abandoned ghost district of panel-houses, to the highway, the fueling station, the intersection, it echoes. Along the trail of blood, to the campfire. And to the dark forest, to the museum of natural history, where mould grows on the horns of the males and puffs of steam no longer rise from the kids' nostrils. They still breathe—not oxygen, but pure pale.

The door flies open, and the entroponaut steps out onto the roof of the hospital. The pale moves in waves there. He walks through it in his anorak jacket, canisters in hand and goat legs on his back. He drops the containers and kicks them forward; the canisters slide across the snow on the roof, fuel oil sloshing inside them. The entroponaut runs a hand through his receding hairline and ageing rocker ponytail. In front of him on the landing platform, under the tarpaulin cover, floats an object the size of a small house.

His backpack falls into the snow. He grabs the cable holding the cover taut. The oily steel slips between his gloves. He tightens the cable; the object sways in the pale. The carabiner clicks free from its attachment, and Zygismunt lets it zip open. The dark canvas rises up into the pale like a bird, and below it a small airship comes into view. The robust iron lump floats like an armoured apricot stone, held to the ground with cables. A stencilled inscription runs along the armour plates of the ship: "Roo 501", a Samaran brand of small airship.

High above the hospital, the tarpaulin cover flutters like a flag. Zygismunt Berg watches from the landing pad as it twists into the pale. He starts climbing up a cable.

After only half an hour, the hermetic door opens inwards, with a hiss. Oxygen flows out of the cockpit; the porthole and gauge covers fog up from the change in atmosphere. A sweaty Zygismunt

Berg climbs in through the door. The small-bedroom-sized space shakes with his effort, and the ship sways. He throws the anorak coat to the floor angrily, and resolves to never wear it again. It's practical, that's for sure. And even a uniform for an entroponaut. But for him personally, the jacket is associated with a fad that his eyes should never have seen—disco. The man starts pulling up the ropes tied to his waist. He still doesn't say anything, not a word, even though he's covered in bruises from falling. He doesn't even swear. First comes the backpack, then the goat legs. And last of all, two fuel oil canisters clank against the hull of the ship.

He collapses against the wall, exhausted, and rests there for a moment; rolls a smoke and puts it behind his ear, pulls out the rolled up maps. Matchbox held between his teeth, he lines up the maps on the wall of cockpit devices. Aerial photographs are lined up in a row: the dark green taiga of Nad-Umai, a cluster of concrete boxes in Nemeng Uul. And next to it, the former border of the world, as if drawn in grey watercolour. A huge empty mess full of azimuths, ellipses and sinusoids begins where the world ends. And even farther away from this geometric maze, in the most magnificent of solitudes, in the eye of the cycle, where no destination leads, runs a line of tiny dots, a distant constellation, a superposition. This is the terminus.

Rodionov's Trench is located in the heart of the pale, four thousand kilometres from the edge of the world. It could take years to fly there. He looks down, and on his hand, tattooed on his white knuckles, are numbers strung along like pearls in a necklace: "5; 12; 13; 14".

Zygismunt Berg turns the ignition key. Lights come on in the cockpit; fog lights up, golden, in the middle of the pale. A buzz of electricity passes through the airship like a purr, needles jump behind the indicator glasses. Welcome, Entroponaut.

The man presses the button on the ship's Stereo 8 player labelled START in Samaran lettering. The label on the disc says, in a girl's swooshy handwriting: "Zigi's Ride to the End of the World Mix-tape". When the tape starts spinning, the heart will be in the middle of the last "i" of the name "Zigi". *Rock* music from the fifties, from a now burned out band of Suruese drunkards, plays from the transistor radio. It's a beautiful song, which, unfortunately,

the bourgeois didn't understand. Track #1—"Helvetti"⁵⁷—was too complex, too dark, and the lyrics were too intense for their established, womb-shaped musical taste. May they rot in hell. By the time the pale invades the corners of their kitchens and turns them into protein masses, the members of this ensemble, which, despite their best efforts, haven't garnered a large audience, will have already drunk themselves to death in front of the Lemminkäise village store.

Zigi lights the smoke. He nods his head to the rhythm in the middle of the cockpit, wearing a karakul⁵⁸ sweater. These tunes are the real deal. They say it like it is. But something is still missing.

"You forgot your jacket, Zigi!" says the destruction in the darkness, in a girl's voice. But Zigi doesn't dare to open his swollen eyes. He knows what really awaits him there. The scent of snow is all around, in his broken capillaries. O bourgeois perfume!

"Yoohoo!" the destruction sings, "your jacket."

"Tell me... destruction..." Zigi croaks in the dark space of winter, "is it a *rad* jacket?"

"A pretty rad jacket, yeah."

The zippers jingle above him. Blood flows into his mouth; a snowball melts in his eye socket. He coughs. "Clever destruction... so you... like jackets?"

"I do."

"And you know who I am?"

"Of course!" destruction exclaims happily. "You're Zigi—the baddest boy in school."

Twenty-one years later, Zygismunt Berg opens the ship's toolbox. There's a black leather jacket lying on top of the wrenches. It's his jacket. He pulls it on. The shoulders no longer sit properly, his back has developed a hunch. The zipper doesn't close around the beer belly either, but so be it. It's rad like that. He leaves

⁵⁷ "Hell", Finnish.

⁵⁸ Breed of sheep.

it open. There are seven white stripes⁵⁹ running down the back, and they still look totally evil. Like this, the entroponaut stands in the cockpit door of his airship and tosses his ponytail over his shoulder.

Suruese rock echoes outside in the frozen pale. The harmonica howls. You could say that Zigi is *self-chilling* there at the door.

♪ *Mutta mikä on maa?*⁶⁰

Se on Helvetti

♪ *But which is the land?*

It is Hell

... he hums along, and hits the danger button with his palm. Thus, the clatter of the iron frame sounds over the beginning of the beat, the propeller landing gear falls down. The ship begins to rattle to the music, her propellers unfolding in the pale like luxuriant steel petals, the blades hanging down. And what comes next is the song's most intense lyrical passage:

♪ *Se ei ole mikään kauhupaikka...*

♪ *It is not a scary place...*

... he sings, and the familiar upside-down echo joins him. Together they are mighty one last time:

♪ *Ennemminkin siellä on surullista*

♪ *Rather, it is sad there*

The ghostly grey cytoplasm of Ignus Nilsen stands on the landing platform below, between the unfolding propeller blades.

Zygismunt stares at him, and Ignus looks back at Zygismunt. The pale flows in and out of the beating heart of the cytoplasm.

⁵⁹ A picture of seven white stripes over a black background also appears at the end of Martin Luiga's short story Full-Core State Nihilist on the old zaum.ee blog.

⁶⁰ Lyrics from "Helvetti" by Kauko Röyhkä & Riku Mattila. In the song, the preceding line, which is omitted from this text, gives this first line some context: "Some flag catches a breeze, but which is the land?" As in "There's a flag, but which country does it belong to?"

Ignus is only a slightly brighter clump in the ascending far pale. The enemy of matter drifts through him, like wings.

"Communism forgives you," he says. "Communism understands."

"Ignus," mutters the entroponaut, "forgive me."

"Already done. We also had a man of your measure in Graad. Ion Rodionov was his *nom de guerre*⁶¹. I also considered him a friend. I guess you know that name?"

"Because of the trench."

"But you don't know who he was? He was the mathematician of the Revolution, at the top of the party, with me and Mazov. No one knows that. Nor why he took the 'Harnankur' model from Graad with him."

"But *I* don't know that!" The cigarette drops from Zygismunt's mouth.

"Of course you don't know. Only the Commissar of the Revolution and a handful of close associates know this. This man is a real non-entity. His whole life's work is like this. If they were already unable to accept dialectical materialism, how could we have explained *nihil*-mat to them?"

Zygismunt is silent. The song ends.

"He wanted to use it as a weapon of mass negation. Against the bourgeoisie. That would have been our answer to a nuclear weapon. You know that there is no uranium in Samara. But he couldn't find that place."

"We found it," says the SRV entroponaut. The ropes holding the airship down snap loose like whips.

"Too bad. I've never been too fond of that wing of materialism. Terrible if they were right. I love the world, every last atom of it. But if the world doesn't love our idea anymore, you and Rodionov will be second best. My name is also a military name," says Ignus Nilsen, "and at least that way, we're not prey anymore." The world's saddest screeching starts to sound from the transistor radio, track #2: "*Grave*", by the vanished dodecaphonic composer, *comte de Perouse-Mittrecie*.

"Goodbye, Zygismunt."

⁶¹ An assumed name under which a person engages in combat or some other activity or enterprise.

“Goodbye, Ignus,” says the entroponaut, and closes the door of the airship behind him. Ignus is left alone on the roof of the hospital. “Enneminkin siellä on surullista. — *Rather, it is sad there,*” the ghost still hums, as the propellers start to spin through his cytoplasm, slowly at first, but their blades move faster and faster.

Zygismunt Berg stands in front of the porthole with his hands on the levers. The levers rise from the gearboxes in the floor like two forked horns. The man turns on the transistor radar. He tunes the device to a hidden radio station, and a computer half the size of the wall calculates the ship’s course based on its transmission. The signal comes from countless different points, a superposition constellation, four thousand kilometres away. From the transistor radio, he hears the speech component in the vibration of the strings. The kitten-voiced girl repeats there, in an endless circle through all time, what for her—looking from Rodionov’s Trench—is one and the same, a simultaneous and immeasurably complex event. A perfect closed system: “*Azimuth-Boreas-Sinus-Oreole-Laudanum-Ultra-Tricolore-Ellips-Nadir-Ellips-Gamut-Azimuth-Tricolore-Iikon-Oreole-Nadir*”.⁶²

The entroponaut pulls the levers down and back. His eyes are red. The airship takes off from the landing platform on the roof of the hospital. The propellers pull the pale into spirals; the blades sweep Ignus Nilsen apart.

Two men wave in a snowstorm that flickers blue-red from flashing lights. They fall into the distance slowly, as the platform of the floating station is left behind in the blizzard. Tereesz opens his eyes in the sky; he can’t feel his legs. Everything spins, and the air ambulance’s propellers flap around noisily. A man in a black suit stands over him, illuminated by the heart monitor screen. This man is the Man from Internal Affairs. He is the Angel of Death.

“I can’t feel my legs,” coughs Tereesz.

“This is what happens when you open fire on the ICP.”

⁶² The phonetic alphabet has been changed to match the primer book in Disco Elysium. In Estonian, the phonetic alphabet used is only slightly different: *Aasimut-Boreas-Sektor-Oreool-Laudanum-Ultra-Ultra-Trikoloor-Nadir-Ellips-Nadir-Ellips-Gamut-Aasimut-Trikoloor-Sektor-Iikon-Oreool-Oreool-Nadir*.

“You!” Tereesz tries to sit up, but his wrists are bound to the first aid frame. “How?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot answer this question.”

“Konchalovsky...” The former agent sinks back into the frame. “I give you Ulrich, but... Konchalovsky doesn’t exist, how could you... who would...” He starts to tear his right wrist from the cuff.

“You’re a drug addict, Machejek, that’s why. People like you are always careless. How many years had you been doing this before that man had a heart attack? Two, five?” The Man from Internal Affairs starts to straighten up, but the cuff on Tereesz’s wrist pops open, and the man’s cannulated hand grabs him by the tie.

“You,” Tereesz coughs in his face, his tie clenched in his fist, “you have to help me!”

His partner is already approaching with a gun, but the agent waves him back. “Wait!”

“I found things! In Vaasa! About one closed investigation. Deerek Trentmöller is his name, he’s killed children, twenty or more, and maybe Lund’s children too, please...”

“Let go!”

The fallen agent lets go of his tie and collapses. “I have a notebook, everything is in there, promise me! I wouldn’t have run otherwise, you have to follow up on those...”

The Angel of Death stands over him and wipes the blood off his tie. The kojko scrabbles around far below, looking for his notebook. “You could get a medal for this! A promotion for sure...” The Man from Internal Affairs turns his back on him, and his partner rushes over to tie Tereesz’s hand back to the frame. “Please,” comes his broken voice over the noise of the engine. Tie fluttering in the wind of the propellers, the investigator looks at the city as he descends from the belly of the airship. “Leave it, Machejek. Deerek Trentmöller has nothing to do with it. These disappearances have not been reported.” A subtle shade of humanity runs through his voice. “That’s the only beautiful thing about this story.”

In the foreground, the lights of the hospital's landing platform flash in the storm; in the background, the spiked throne of Noo's skyscrapers rises out of the city's light.

There, an oil billionaire watches as the tiny dot of light from the ambulance airship disappears into the wind on the other side of the Veera river. Noo's thoughts cool before him, rates drop, and Graad goes to war. General mobilisation starts tomorrow. There's not much left. Over three thousand pieces of disappearance memorabilia are spread out behind the man, but now Sarjan Ambartsumjan considers this view to be the jewel of his collection.

A magnetic post shipment, a glass display case that arrived from Vaasa on the evening train, rests under his hand. It is empty.

19. I AM NO JOKE

Forty-six hours later, and sixty floors below. The hotel lobby is empty at night, and it shines like a tomb of black marble. At the reception desk, the girl is anxiously listening to the radio, about how Mesque's nuclear cruisers are spying from within the far pale, while industrial espionage lurks right here. They are everywhere. The war news is still echoing from the hall when a man in a windbreaker comes through the automatic doors. A storm cloud accompanies him as he rushes in; in the background run the glowing white letters "HOTEL INTERGRAAD". The girl doesn't notice him, and the security guard is also transfixed with fear, so the guest walks right past them, into the resident's private elevator. The doors close behind him. Alone in the golden light of the elevator, he flips his backpack over to his chest, the loops still on his shoulders like he was taught in sixth grade.

"Do it like that, Khan, it's totally spiffin' like that."

Khan searches for something in the side pocket of his bag. A bunch of keys come into view with a jingling of metal. Among them hangs the key to the lock of his wooden house in Saalem, the jagged hammer for the hallway and the aluminium mass to lock himself in the basement, all of them useless, scrap metal. All but one—a golden key, the biting of which seems to be sophisticated and high-tech, as if turning such keys simultaneously would trigger a self-destruct protocol, a dead-hand-type perimeter defence, an

attack guaranteed even in the event of the high command's demise in a pre-emptive nuclear strike.

Khan inserts his doomsday key into the keyhole and turns as instructed: left twice, then right, then left again. "*Ambartsumjan, Sarjan Asaturovich*" is engraved on the copper plate, below the keyhole. The hiss of a speaker cuts through the silence of the elevator: "Mr. Ambartsumjan, I was worried..."

"I'm not Mr. Ambartsumjan. I'm Inayat Khan." The man demonstrates the key, unable to decide where he should point it. He can only see himself in the mirrors, his pom-pom hat askew and the shoulders of his windbreaker dusted with melting snow. He's unshaven, he looks terrible. "I was given this, for emergency situations. What's going on now? Why don't you answer my calls?"

"You talk like Ismael."

"Sorry, what?"

"You talk just like Ismael."

"Oh... do you remember Ismael?"

"*I'm* Ismael," replies the faithful secretary, and the elevator jolts into movement.

A sense of acceleration goes through Khan. "You were worried? Why? Why didn't you pick up?"

"I..." The secretary hesitates. "I haven't been in touch with the gentleman for two days. The last instruction was to stop all calls and not let anyone in."

"And that was the day before yesterday?"

"Yes, when the gentleman received your shipment, Inayat Khan."

"Acknowledged." Khan nods into the mirror, slush melting on the lenses of his glasses. He takes them off and wipes them on the sleeve of his windbreaker. "And nothing else has come? Meanwhile? From the ICP?"

"As I said, I haven't heard from the gentleman."

"Right, yes..." The elevator cube slides silently upward, towards the sky. Khan's ears want to close up from the pressure change. He swallows, circles the elevator, then stands facing the door, backpack still on his chest.

"Mr. Khan," the loudspeaker suddenly crackles.

“Yes?”

“Please check that everything is fine with the gentleman. Tell him I asked to be contacted.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” The elevator slows down, Khan’s arms lift from his sides as if he were weightless. “Why wouldn’t everything be fine with the gentleman?” he asks. But the secretary doesn’t answer. The elevator doors open in front of Khan, “*Ping...*” A beam of light cuts into the dark of the hall, on the sixtieth floor. The wind howls, causing covers to billow around their display cases like ghosts. And the snow blows in. This is how the world’s largest private collection of disappearance memorabilia is slowly being buried in mounds of snow.

The tapping of shoes on linoleum can be heard. The Man from Internal Affairs comes down the hospital corridor at night, a briefcase phone dangling from his hand, locked to his wrist with a chain. A tiny Forget-Me-Not shines on his lapel, a light blue enamel badge. Two policemen guard the doors of the intensive care unit. One is asleep.

“Why are you asleep?” The Internal Affairs agent leans over him. “I’m a Mesque infiltrator, and there’s a five kiloton explosive in this suitcase.” The officer opens his eyes and rubs them in bewilderment; his partner looks on in horror. “In the form of Mirova Central Hospital, we have just lost an irreplaceable strategic resource. Three thousand citizens of Graad have perished. Because you didn’t do your job!”

The officer jumps to his feet and puffs up his chest, his expression still confused with sleep. The Man from Internal Affairs is unrelenting. “What are you standing here for? Does it make any difference if you sleep standing up? Who am I? Where is my proof of employment? Why haven’t I presented my guest name tag?”

The metal double doors swing shut behind the detective as he walks down the dark hall, and the officers in the corridor breathe a sigh of relief. Cubes separated by plastic curtains pass him on both sides. The last one by the window glows with medical equipment. The man turns on his heel and pulls open the plastic curtains. “Machejek, I need you to call your friends. I need you to ask them to come back. Now.”

There's a morphine drip on the headboard, and in it, the morphine drips. This isn't a good sign, the power should've been shut off a long time ago. The crushed agent looks out the window, where it's snowing heavily. "You have nothing to give me."

"I don't have to have anything to *give* you."

"I know your stories. 'Not reported...'. You know nothing about research. You're a *duch*, *zjawa*⁶³. People like you only haunt."

Duch, *zjawa*. They're usually bored citizens who entertain themselves by weaving webs of lies against all the types of ghosts and spectres that hover through the state apparatus. "*People like us*, Machejek. People like us are agents of the Collaboration Police. The purpose of Collaboration Police is not to investigate. The purpose of the Collaboration Police is the continuation of the world in its current form."

Machejek turns his gaze away from the window. "This world of yours in its current form is one hell of a shithole."

"Wow!" The Man from Internal Affairs feigns surprise. "Such philosophy. So you like Saint-Miro's plan for humanity?"

"The only nihilist here is you, *duch*."

"So you don't like Saint-Miro and his plan for humanity?" The man's features sharpen as he walks closer to the bed, into the green glow of the heart monitor. "But *even more* abnormal stuff suits you? Or do you not know what company your friend keeps? Your abnormal friend. I didn't know either. What is their *hobby*, what do they do..."

Machejek sits up, the bandage on his shoulder staining red with his defiance. "You mean Khan? Khan is a genius. You can't stop him."

"Yes." The Man from Internal Affairs shrugs. "He knows what he's doing. Unlike you. I would call and ask him to come back now."

This concession is enough for the likes of Machejek. "I think that's a no, old man. Stop asking. Better turn the *morph* up. I can't reach it." He sinks into the hospital pillow; luckily the spasms of his laughter hurt him, and he can't revel in the moment anymore.

"I think you've had enough drugs."

⁶³ Different words for ghost, spectre or apparition. Polish

“Drugs...” mocks Machejek.

The Internal Affairs agent looks at him with disdain. Below him in the hospital bed lays the sweaty body of a man, his bare upper body bleeding, exuding sweat. “So you like it here, yes? Are you satisfied with your lot, Konchalovsky?”

Tereesz floats in the morphine solution. Dark waves wash over him, flakes of snow fall into the water. He burns cold. A chance! A child’s hands keep him afloat by the shoulders. Tiny, strong hands... he’s a soldier of love. “Yes,” he replies and watches the green dot bounce on the heart monitor. Calmly, rhythmically. “It’s okay here. They say I won’t be able to walk normally anymore, but you know what? I wasn’t planning on going anywhere. I hate this country. I hate Graad. I hate the Collaboration Police and the Moralintern too. It’s only a tool for me, I myself am only a tool. I do know... why I’m here. Who turned me in. Don’t waste your breath, I’m not an idiot. I know that my work is done.”

The light green line is left behind in the dark.

“What did he get for me? Khan? What did you give him?”

The wind howls and sneakers leave prints in the deep snow on the top floor. The world’s leading expert on evaporation treads carefully, snowflakes dancing in and out of focus. And there beyond them, his diamaterialist glasses. Sharp, dark eyes watching, flakes sticking to his lenses. The man crouches slowly, his windbreaker rustling. He reaches out, and picks something up from a mound of snow.

The wind dies down, the display covers droop lifelessly. The dark fabric takes the form of display cases again, and Inayat Khan is there in the midst of them, on one knee, holding a human skull. He looks deep into the blackness of its eye sockets. Sixty thousand real dropped, far from here—in the desert of Erg, where the hero of the epic went to ask God for an audience. Sixty thousand deep holes have been dug. In vain. Khan blows, and snow flies from Ramout Karzai’s eyes, his chin clamped shut and his mouth mute. Spear broken, flag cloth for a funeral shroud.

“Mr. Ambartsumjan!”

Khan rises. A flag worn by time ripples on the wall, pulled taut with ropes. It’s immense, in the colours of the Iilmaraan tricolour.

A gust of wind kicks up, and a scarf of the same colours flutters around the man's neck, a hat of the same colours is on his head. "Ambartsumjan!" Khan goes along, running his hand over the glass cases. The splintered shaft of a spear and an antique rusted spearhead peek out from under the snow. "We have to talk!"

The ominous shadow of the pom-pom hat shifts to the desk, where papers are flying about, and a step-pyramid phone is buried in the snow. The hand in the elongated shadow of the elevator beam suddenly twitches like an aberration. There's a grunt of strain and then, whoa! The skull shatters into a thousand pieces against the speakerphone.

"Where are my things?! Where are they?!"

The man approaches, tipping over display cases on the way. Display glass shatters. "I don't like it when my things are lost! I don't like it *one bit*!" He stops, two hands on the mahogany, and in one fell swoop he wipes the table clean of paper and stationery. "How am I supposed to know where you put it now?" He stares all around the room. "Didn't we have a talk about this?! Wasn't there *a talk*? You get the ship, you mediate, everyone gets their things. Where are *my* things?!" he shouts. Out of the corner of his eye, he briefly catches sight of a row of floor-to-ceiling windows. The middle one, the largest of the windows, is shattered from the inside; the triangular shards of glass point outward, and snow is blowing in, along with glowing golden Mirova light. In front of the window, in a big pile of snow, gleams an upended display case. Bare wires, a switch.

Khan turns his head and erupts from the spot, leaving a paper painting behind him on the end wall, above the desk. Snow-damp paper waves there in the wind, a watercolour Gon-Tzu gradually bleeds across the material: the black of the dragon's whiskers sends jellyfish-like tentacles into the rib sails, the reed armour turns into a rainbow. Soon he will be gone, but you can still see how Gon-Tzu distributes peaches of immortality to his men—one for you, one for you, and one for you. But Khan has no eyes for that.

He digs, the wind whistling in his ears. He's got his mittens on. The display case emerges from the snow, and the man turns it right-side up, pulls papers out of it. Expensive papers. A folder with a Collaboration Police pennant, an X-ray of someone's

exposed teeth. An ID photo flies from the folder into the wind. A blue-ish tattoo, an impossible reminder on knuckles: 5, 12, 13, 14. Khan catches the photo and stuffs it in the backpack on his chest, along with the others. With false passage papers from the People's Republic to Kukushkina, Graad's Samaran Oblast. These papers sit on top of the stuff in his backpack, with the upside-down pentagon printed on the white passport cover.

At the bottom of the display case shines the grand prize, Rodionov's Trench. Khan's mouth drops open, he reaches out. The perforated dark blue metal sheet sings like a saw blade between his fingers, the light of the city shining through the thousands of specks. Alongside the dots runs the legend of the map, in Voronikin's handwriting. He reads, and the starry sky shines on his tan face.

Machejek smiles sadly. "Was it good?"

The Man from Internal Affairs doesn't answer, opening his suitcase phone on Tereesz's knees. The lights come on inside, and his own dove-emblem notebook slides off the keys, the photo paper occasionally glinting. Strange.

"It had to be something very good." The man thinks for a moment. "Now you have a citizen of Vaasa whose comings and goings you cannot control, is that right? You can't do anything to him, he's a collaborator... but he outplayed you. You didn't even know what things you gave him!"

"They were not *good*, Machejek," shouts the Internal Affairs agent, "I was wrong! I was more wrong than you think, and you won't like it. Your own suspect is the victim." He picks up the notebook. "What do you think, about why your cases haven't been reported? You saw them, Machejek! Let's talk about that. Or do you not want to anymore? You don't want to talk about Deerek Trentmøller? It's not funny anymore, is it?"

The internal investigator puts his hand on the man's blistering hot forehead. "These things happened, you saw them with your own eyes. And now they haven't happened. How is that possible?"

"Those things have nothing to do with this." Tereesz gasps, his pupils covering his hazel irises. "You said so yourself. Only Khan's plan matters now."

“Khan’s plan is the height of abnormality. Rodionov’s Trench! Mentally ill communists, for fuck’s sake, poking around, and all of you live in that kind of world. You think about those things, you work with them... You like all kinds of objects, yes? I have one too. It reached me today, from Vaasa. I had it re-sent to me by telefax five times.” The man shakes his head angrily. “It was always the same, it was always just the same. Let me show you a photo, Machejek, because otherwise you won’t behave like an adult, and you apparently don’t care about your friends either, after your great sacrifice.” He takes the photo paper from the notebook. “This here is the only one of Deerek Trentmöller’s assets that corroborates your story. He developed it himself in his lab. You saw it too, with your machine. The date of development is August 29 of ’52. Two days later, he sent this along with the negative to the Vaasan photo lab. ‘The negative is not corrupted, the developed picture is the same.’ A month later, upon a follow-up request, the central photo laboratory confirms: ‘The negative is not corrupted, the developed picture is the same’. Zeul confirms that there are no defects in the lens, and Trigat takes three hundred test shots with the camera equipment. There are no deviations. This man studied this device for six years until his memory started fading. I think he would have studied it for a lifetime. Like you.”

Tereesz holds the photo paper with its ragged edges, the date and stamps on the back. August 29 of ’52.

“Turn it around!”

His sweat leaves a stain on the paper. Photo lab stamps. “Zeul”. “Trigat”.

“You don’t dare to look at it, do you? You shouldn’t be able to dare. No one should, no one should deal with something like this. They must be forgotten. But Machejek—I’m sorry. I *need* you to call your friends back here. You have to do it.”

The light slides over the surface of the glossy photo when Tereesz turns it over. There is a faded summer day, frozen in place. The rain is falling on the cliff, and in front of the rose bush stand the three of them, young, with triumphant smiles on their faces. Khan explains about peaches and Gon-Tzu, and he and Jesper look ahead with a beach umbrella in hand. Three boys hold a beach umbrella over nothing.

“*What is this?*” The dot on the heart monitor freezes.

“This is where your friends are going. This is your Rodionov’s Trench.”

“You’ve retouched it...” Tereesz turns the paper over, panicking, as if he’s searching for them on the flipside. “Why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to me?!”

“*We* don’t do anything. There are no *duches* and *zjawas*, you junkie. We are friends of mankind. When will you understand? It’s not a person that retouched it. You just don’t want to think about it. None of you want to. And that’s how it should be. Let’s leave it at that.” The Man from Internal Affairs picks up the receiver and presses the redial key. The dial tone plays. Tereesz turns his head away, but the internal investigator takes him by the chin. “Don’t stop now! You haven’t only done bad things. You fixed them both: Hird and Trentmöller. You removed that horror from their heads. We’re almost there.” A woman’s voice comes from the receiver: “Hotel ‘Intergraad’...”

The photo slips from Tereesz’s fingers “But that’s not *possible!*”

“That is indeed not possible,” sighs the angel of death, “only the world in its current state is possible. We don’t investigate those things, we don’t prod at them. We come to terms. We forget. We wait and we are protected.”

“Hotel ‘Intergraad’, how may I help?”

“Please connect me to suite number 4001.”

“Ismael.”

“Do you hear me?”

Khan’s voice echoes over the switchboard. The faithful secretary stands in front of a mess of cables, thousands of metal plugs running into analog sockets. Lights flash. He has a pink shirt peeking out of his jacket collar. With a click-click, the young man switches the wires on the table, with proficiency: “I’m listening.”

“The gentleman has jumped to his death. I hope you understand that I didn’t have to tell you. I could’ve just left the building. I hope you understand, and call the authorities only after ten minutes have passed. The gentleman would have wanted it to be that way. So that I wouldn’t be stopped, so that the investigation

wouldn't waste my time." So decrees Khan, the wind howling in the background. "Time that I don't have. Can you understand me? Say that you understand, and that you'll do as I asked."

From behind the speaker, there is an intermittent rumble, like crying.

"Do you understand?" he repeats, and the speakerphone hisses: "... ten minutes..."

"Very well."

Khan turns his head and looks down. The expanse shines beneath his feet. A man who was afraid that the world was disappearing threw himself out there, but for a while now, Khan hasn't feared anything anymore. Noo lays before him, and thoughts run deep behind his glasses and eyelids. Organised, strategic. It's a massive rescue operation, and he's made entirely out of it now, with no other thoughts left. They still call him Khan, but in fact he is a tactical guide perfected through twenty years of trench warfare; an adaptive manoeuvre, the author and executor of which is himself—the tyrant of love, a total worldview in the service of a single person. There are others, but he can't be stopped. Horrors visit him, lately he can't even recall their names, he gets their ages mixed up. His companion looks at him before he falls asleep, a vague shape from oblivion instead of a face. *A mnemotour of horrors*. And even uglier are the nightly long-distance calls from the trench: "You know who I am. Fat man, I'm not your plaything. Leave us be!" How he cried when he woke up, but it doesn't happen anymore. Countermeasures have gone into effect, he knows what happened. And he will remember. Forever.

So stands the man at the broken window of the building's sixtieth floor, a turquoise-orange-violet shroud fluttering from his shoulders. He is a superhero. Girls—he is coming to save you.

He walks with his overfilled backpack across the snow-covered floor, down the fire escape stairs. There, he exchanges the resident's private elevator for the guest's. He descends nineteen floors with a Vespertine businessman and his escorts, conjures a smile, then steps out onto the fortieth and wipes it from his face. Half an hour before the electrician has broken into the elevator doors downstairs—and forty-five minutes before Khan steps out of the parking lot and onto the snowy street—he enters

the suite booked under his friend's name without taking off his shoes.

It's dark in the hallway. Khan doesn't turn on the lights. He knows what this means. Three thousand réal worth of worn-smooth suede shoes huddle on the shoe rack, a beige Perseus Black peacoat splattered with blood hangs on the coatrack—it's become too morbid for Jesper.

The phone rings in the empty rooms. The man follows it into the bedroom, where the bed is made, the air is fresh, and on a cubical white table in the middle of the room sits a dark step-pyramid. It's built from stacks of jet-black cash. Khan unpacks the backpack on his stomach, moves the shroud to the sports bag, and starts to load the stacks of money into his rucksack, accompanied by a cold ringing. A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand, five hundred thousand réal. Eight hundred thousand réal. Tereesz's service weapon rests beneath it all, as if in a tomb. The nickel shines in the dim light; he puts it on top of everything else in his backpack, then gets up.

Khan looks at the phone on the empty table; the red light blinks on and off, along with the ringtone. It stops for a moment, half a minute passes, and then it starts again. The man puts his hand on the receiver, thinks. His fingers get sweaty. He picks up the receiver and places it back on the hook. Then he picks it up again, this time placing it against his ear. Dark yellow fingers move on the buttons. When the series of sixteen digits is finished, there is silence from the receiver, then an intermittent dial tone, a signal to another world. And when the receiver is finally lifted on the other side, the pale fills the entire room. Connection. Like a distant ocean. The voice is barely audible in the breaking of the waves: "Hello?"

"Mom, I'm not coming home anymore."

Two months later, four thousand kilometres to the north, on the other side of the Yikutan reserve.

The former taiga of North-Eastern Graad stretches to the curve of the horizon, silver-glowing pale in the immeasurable distance. An eight hundred million hectare sea of trees waves in the wind in front of him. The world. The snow-speckled expanse breathes

oxygen into the winter evening atmosphere. Even the indigenous people are forbidden to go here. All of Graad breathes these icy cubic tons, they are its lungs—Graad's lungs. Hydrometeorological reserve, oxygen park. A storm-grey motor carriage stands on the forest road, at the edge of a large field, the cabin lights dimming inside as the lead-acid battery slowly discharges. The glass domes of the headlights fade into the twilight of late December. A pump cord winds out of the machine's oil tank; a thirty-four-year-old man holds an empty canister in his hand. The snow-white interior in front of him smells of fuel, the white seats drip with it, as do the steering levers and the armature made of white leather.

He strikes a match, it goes out between his cold red fingers as the wind blows around him. The man hides the box with his palm and strikes another one; the first one does nothing. After one more, the motor carriage bursts into flames. A single candle flares to life in the midst of a dimming world. The white skin crackles black as it burns, charcoal flakes peel and rise up. A white suitcase lights up in the back seat. There, his passport curls up like a dying spider, the covers whistling; the light ash of Målin's letters floats into the air, along with all the rest of the memorabilia that hasn't disappeared anywhere else yet. The drawing lights up before his eyes, the birthmarks on Anni's back disappear. The heat washes over the man's face, he closes his eyes. The specks dance there for a moment, and the pair of eyes, the exact colour of which he's no longer sure of, a face that no longer comes to mind. One kiss with the teacher's daughter, in the twilight of the forest, which his tongue cannot remember, but without which he himself would be unthinkable. It all fades.

The former interior designer pulls back his lips, rubs his bleeding gums with powder, and throws the rest of the nose candy into the burning motor car. It sparkles when it catches fire. Then he picks up speed and leaps across the iced-over stream. Below, a tuft of reed sticks out of the ice, behind which a forest road meanders. In front of him lies a meadow of fumitories; it snows above the meadow. And the sawtooth-like wall of spruces behind it, a zig-zag dream. Bands of snow drift from tree branches into the wind like wedding ribbons.

He goes, a lock of blonde hair fluttering on his forehead, his eyes bright blue and damp from the wind. He wears a snow-white peacoat for this occasion, and has shoes of white chamois on his feet; the corners of his coat collar have silver anchors, a nautical motif. His silhouette glows in the dim light, slender as a surfboard, water bottles clinking in his messenger bag. No one knows where he's going. No one knows where he is—a tiny shining dot in a wide field of frost. And on the other side of the field, the forest border is waiting, the twilight under the trees is filled to the brim with oxygen, it has invited all conscious life inside. He enters; the carpet of tree needles is springy under his feet, the wind dies down, and no bells ring there. No one's voice. It's better this way, it's right this way.

A charred motor carriage is left behind on the roadside.

A month later, six thousand kilometres to the south.

A metro train whizzes through an underground tunnel. The carriages are empty at night, the steel whines. Khan leans against the door, backpack on his back. He looks down at the line of carriages twisting in the bend, the steel stomach of the metro. Only a few people sit there, under the lights turned to economy mode. The Nation of Graad is at war, and going out at night without a special permit is prohibited. One night, when the officers came to beat him with rubber batons at the train station, Khan bought one for himself. Now he sleeps on station benches and at the tables of all-night cafes, and avoids hotels. People have a habit of getting lost there.

The yellow light of industry pours in window after window as the metro train exits the tunnel and climbs up onto a bridge. Down below runs the blackened undercurrent of Peremennaya Veera, with a rainbow-coloured layer floating on top; ahead, on the banks of the river, rise the giant cylinders of gas storage tanks, the rows of floodlights for the cucumber plantation. And there, the hydroelectric plant. This is Polyfabricate, *tyrannopol*, the type of human settlement after the metropolis, the penultimate stage of development. The part that Khan had visited once before was Lenka, the capital of Zsiemsk. Frantiček the Brave was born there. And Tereesz Machejek, too, but by then, Lenka had already been

swallowed up by the tumour for some time. Graadian researchers predict that within the next ten years, the Polyfabricate will grow and merge with Mirova and its suburbs to form the last stage of the development of human settlement, the uninhabitable part of the geosphere, the zone of ecological disaster—the necropolis. It won't get to that; long before that happens, the pale will have wiped out this part of the country.

On the horizon, above the bay, the black hulls of Graadian cruisers drift to the northwest, swarms of destroyers spilling from their bellies like spores. These are reserve forces. Tonight, Mesque's fleet had invaded the Graad isola, the home isola. There's no good news from the Holodnaya Zemlya Oblast in Katla either. The castling approaches over the boreal plateau. Thirty-five million people are listening to the war news via broadcasting, outside the train window in the Polyfabricate. They are all kojkos. Only one doesn't listen; he already knows what will happen. This man is a nihilist, and he's the person Khan has followed here.

Khan steps out the door at the stop and zips up his jacket. The platform is empty and quiet with the chill of the late southern winter. Poplar trees rustle in the wind, industrial ash falls from tree branches. The man descends the rattling stairs down to street level and passes between half-dilapidated shacks. The waste disposal facility towers above, an invincible monument, its silver cylinders gleaming under five-thousand-watt floodlights. The street itself is poorly lit; wooden houses line both sides of the road and ice crackles underfoot in mud puddles. The road is unpaved.

Khan stops in front of a two-storey shack in particularly bad shape. The wooden façade of the building creaks in a gust of wind, threatening to collapse on top of him at any moment. He checks the address written on the back of his hand with a pen, then goes up the stairs, into the cat-piss and ammonia-scented darkness of the hallway. A match lights up and two tongues of fire dance in the curve of Khan's lenses as he searches for apartment number three.

There, an old man in his underwear comes to the door, his skin drooping on his chest as if embalmed. Once he had been young and charming with his radical worldview, laughing at everything and everyone and calmly accepting the little things that would derail an ordinary person. That sort of clowning around, together with the

social guilt characteristic of a Nordic woman, earned this kojko the best luck of his life—Zigi’s mother. However, the marriage turned out to be a farce for him. Moreover, she didn’t allow herself to be disciplined whenever Zigi’s nihilistic father wanted. Zigi wasn’t disciplined by his father; his father cared for him. Enough to leave the boy behind in Vaasa, anyways. The nihilist, fond of dishing out abuse himself, went back to the Polyfabricate, lifted weights, and kept his health in order to live to be a hundred years old, like a true nihilist: savouring every nasty hour, knowing there are many more to come.

All this is clear to Khan, he has it in a folder in his backpack. He wants to know what happened when Zigi came to his father in Graad three years after the girls disappeared. What had happened between Zigi and the girls, what he left behind. The Kojko-runt leads him to the kitchen, between the unwashed dishes. Khan throws a bottle of vodka and a hundred réal on the oilcloth-covered table. The kojko-runt unscrews the cap, a shot glass pinched between his middle and index fingers.

“It’s not that I want to cause any trouble for him with this, don’t get me wrong.” Khan looks at the filled glass in front of him. “Everything is as I said on the phone, but...” He thinks for a moment and then pours the vodka down his throat.

“The boy does know who I am. I’m a nihilist.” The old man slams his glass on the table too. “Behold the mighty nihilist, as he stands eye to eye with death, tonight at eight o’clock, in the community centre. Death is great and terrible, but... but a nihilist isn’t a... what was it now?” He puts his finger to his mouth and tries to remember. But the spirit doesn’t return, the mood is spoiled, and his body sags from the shoulders. “Soon it’ll be over, what’s the difference now anyway.” The old man nods towards the door. “Everything is as he left it.”

Stacks of notebooks rise like towers against the walls. Khan’s silhouette stands in front of the door, between the stacks, the kitchen light shining in from behind him. Then, when he reaches for one of the notebooks, the rest of the stacks start to collapse on top of him. He looks to Zigi’s father for help, his shoulder propping the swaying tower up against the wall. “Let it be,” Zigi’s father coughs. “Everything is the same. All the same story.”

“What do you mean?” Khan takes a step back; graph paper notebooks spill onto the floor, the girls’ ages written on each cover in Zigi’s sloppy handwriting. Five, twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

“One and the same story, I-tell-ya!” The kojko-runt turns his back on Khan and sits down at the kitchen table. “A weird tale. It’s a rather weird tale for all of us, and does it have a happy ending? Now...” Khan begins to pack the notebooks into his sports bag. As he stands in front of the door with his bulging bag over his shoulder, the kojko-runt is still looking out the small window of the kitchen. “They want to sink this world into the pale, you know. The Mesques. They say on the radio that the *mangers* are coming. That we all just stand there, mouths agape, and they make sure we don’t choke on our own tongues as they feed us. A failure, it’s no longer nihilism, it’s a farce, I’ve seen it, it’s the protein mass quarantine of Lomonossov’s Land! It wants to turn the whole world into Lomonossov’s Land.”

Khan taps the toe of his shoe on the doormat. “Well then, I guess I should head out now...”

“Isn’t he a disappointment, this Saint-Miro. But you know, boy?” The old man looks at Khan, his eyes shiny with vodka, black as a horse’s. “I think there’s more to come from there...”

The lights in the carriages go out in front of Khan, one after the other, as the tunnel swallows the train. He sits by the window, in hollow silence, his ears blocked up by the change in pressure. Green lights mark the exit; otherwise the carriages are dark, the steel whines. He takes out a flashlight and fills it with batteries, and the world on the graph paper appears in his lap out of the darkness. Khan sits with the stack of notebooks on his right and reads.

Page after page untangles in front of him, in the beams of his flashlight. Every detail is recorded there, with the attention span of an autistic, every word and movement documented. It’s not so much a story as a technical drawing, an industrial model of a memory. Instructions to the benevolent power of the future that could put Zygmunt Berg’s lost world back together. Cut, fold, paste. The trajectory of the brick in the winter night, the coordinates of the living room window. A familiar address, the girls’ house in Vaasa,

at the Fahlu stop. The suburban maze appears on a fold-out map, the dotted line represents the fleeing boy.

And there are meteorological details in the corner of the page. Air pressure and humidity. Eighteen degrees below freezing. The next night, at Handsome Aleksander's: couches against the wall, a six-phase fight rendered as dance steps on the floor. And then—a great darkness. A single voice ringing above him, above the boy with the zippers on his jacket. “You’re Zigi—the baddest boy in school.” Khan gets a bad feeling; he wipes his glasses in a handkerchief, and acid swirls in his stomach. This is an impending fit of jealousy.

“And you, clever destruction, are the most beautiful girl in school.”

However, on turning the page, the girl’s name, familiar with its circle “å” in the middle, is not waiting for him. There awaits its absence. He and the world around him are no more, the dates under the pages start from New Year’s Eve, once or twice every week, then less and less as they go. Right up until the twenty-eighth of August. But the pages themselves are empty. Khan grabs the next notebook from the seat and flips through it, then the next; he pulls the rest of the notebooks out of his backpack, and it’s the same story for all of them. A weird tale.

The platform light turns the carriages holey as sieves. It radiates in from the rows of windows, window by window. Khan lifts his head and his glasses flash. Two glowing portholes, the final stop—he doesn’t understand. A fat idiot in a light blue cravat; somewhere out there is Zygismunt Berg, who knows that only shells remain of his tale. The magnetic tape hisses, the heart spins alone on the plastic disc. And the numbers, he has them too, inseparable from the world until the end. He catapults towards it through the pale superdeep, in his steel apricot pit. Khan’s own memory, however, is distorting in his head. The backups have been deleted, one after another, leaving him alone. He can’t bear to carry it like this, but he can’t live without it.

That night he sleeps in the station’s toilet, in a cube with cardboard-thin walls. He has curled up against the wall and locked the door. His body is covered by a tricolour shroud, tattered by time. The tassels sweep the floor as the man tosses and turns. He

can't sleep, something is wrong. Something is very wrong. *"Talk about something... you always have such awesome presentations. In history and science classes..."* The man opens his eyes and looks into the expressionless lump of a face, smooth blond hair falling on the tile. The child is resting on the floor, directly opposite him. Doesn't breathe, doesn't smell.

"Where are you?" Low vibration; the invisible companion doesn't respond. Khan pulls himself into a ball as tightly as possible, but the cold doesn't leave his body. He repeats: "I am at the end of the world. I am at the end of the world."

Twenty-one years ago, little bare feet walk down the stairs of a private house in a suburb. It's the night of the winter solstice, and blood vessels run beneath translucent skin. Each nail is a crimson jewel, her toes curl against the chill of the steps. Dark green eyes. The hem of her nightgown flutters around her calves in the breeze.

This is how Målin Lund steps downstairs, onto the carpet. A broken window shines in the dark room. Its curtain swells like a sail, a brick lays on the floor, and the front door stands open. She herself is a mirror, a mirror! and in her is a perfect copy of the world. But something is wrong. Always has been. Her surface is flawless, pre-teen, sparkling clean. It is the light that's mistaken. It is the world itself.

Two young girls step next to the third in the dark. At the cusp of the oldest one's hand, the fourth, a tiny, good fairy godmother, points towards the window with her wand. The window hangs like a cracked smile on the frames.

"Look, look!" she says. "It's going wrong."

20. LIGHT SHINES THROUGH EVERYTHING

EPILOGUE TO THE NOVEL “SACRED AND TERRIBLE AIR”

BY ROBERT KURVITZ, 30.01.'09

TN: This epilogue is not part of the printed book. It was published in 2014 on ZA/UM's zaum.ee blog. To paraphrase their own description: “It doesn't give anything to nor take anything away from the story in the book.”



Revachol, 75 years ago, two years before the Turn-Of-The-Century Revolution.

From the main hall of the symphony, applause echoes to the back of the stage. The ovations are mediocre for a first performance, and the second encore doesn't happen. The first one was brought on by the claqueurs. Already, the string section is exchanging their evening gowns for street clothes on silver round-armed sofas. Outside the window, the late January sky is dyed blue. And in front of it stands the *comte* Émile de Pérouse-Mittrecie in a black redingote, a dodecahedron in his hand and his finger waved hair mussed from conducting.

Émile is a contradictory character. He is an aristocrat, the *comte* de Pérouse and the *comte* de Mittrecie; but his hatred of the bourgeoisie, which have usurped the upper classes, makes him a proletarian and therefore a revolutionary. In the course of his life, Émile has also come to think of himself as a composer. He has a morbid thirst for fame, but he's determined to win the hearts of the people with his dodecaphonic works. The *comte*'s sound is based on a strikingly modern geometric-symbolist system of harmonies that has nothing to do with the music of the rest of the civilised world. To the human ear, it sounds like unacceptable screeching. Émile considers the tonal, traditional sonority to be womb-shaped. A soul-soporific babble. The music of amoebas. He conducts his own works—no one else is able to, or even wants to—using a cardboard dodecahedron instead of the traditional baton. The man's cheeks flush with excitement, the dodecahedron trembles in his hand. "Am I going back or what?" he exclaims. "I am!"

He storms across the room as if driven by a fever. At the door, the director of the symphony orchestra stops the *comte* in his own discreet way. "I don't know, I don't think there's any need to go..."

"Why?" The man doesn't understand. A virile smile appears on his lips. "But they're calling for me! It was *tremendous*!"

"Tremendous..." The director scratches his head. "Well, it was something, but you already went out there once, and... It's not a good idea to test the politeness of the audience." The hall has quieted down. The wind blows outside the window.

"I don't think it was half bad." A fat colleague puts his hand on the *comte's* shoulder. "It was a good idea. The execution could have used a little polish. But, you know, by the end it all came together nicely. So what if it doesn't get a repeat performance? You'll polish the next one to a shine, and then it'll happen!" So says the man who mainly writes flute concertos and solo pieces for flutes.

"Yeah... the next one." The director is still scratching his head. "Perhaps it would be better if you didn't write about that..." the *comte* hears him whispering to the critic. "The Pérouse-Mittrecies have been generous to our institution over the years..."

The excitement on the *comte's* face turns into a malignant tremor. His smile is faltering. Unnoticed, he returns to the windowsill, past the bustling women. He can hear the director's damage control speech from there, and the critic is speaking too. *Complicated...* Apparently you don't get famous with this sort of thing, apparently it's disturbing to listen to. Beyond the glass, in the dark-blue evening, tree branches sway.

"*Disturbing to listen to...*" whispers the *comte*. A metronome stands on the windowsill. He pushes the pendulum to set it ticking. The tempo is grave, the slowest possible. "You won't get famous..."

"Well, hold on now!" barks the concertmaster. "I think the man has a sound that is completely one-of-a-kind!" A plump woman looks towards the *comte*. "I sincerely hope there will be a next time. And then—maybe it doesn't have to be *quite so complicated*."

There's a roar of laughter. A sigh of relief passes through the dressing room.

"By the end... it all came together..." the man mumbles. He slowly turns around and looks at the roomful of people with a scowl underneath his finger wave bangs. "So I'm the only one who thought it was tremendous, then?"

"Tick," the metronome replies. Tree branches sway behind the man.

"I thought it was peculiar," says the concertmaster. "And really—there were some good moments."

"Good moments..." says the *comte*.

“Tick,” says the metronome.

The man juggles his dodecahedron in his hand. “But then... which moments did you like best?”

“Well, the beginning of the second part was beautiful...” The woman picks at her violin case. “And...”

“Tick.”

“Tick.”

“Tick.”

“Azimuth!” someone claps their hands together in the silence.

“Tick.”

“Boreas! Sinus!” Eyes aglow like lightning, a tiny man strides across the room. At every beat, he claps his hands together, and with each step, says a word.

“Nadir!” The little man finishes and bows to the *comte*. “Every single part was absolute, mathematical perfection. Don’t do a next one, don’t ruin it. Disappear, it needs no more.” The man clenches his tiny hands into fists; the elbows of his velvet suit have patches. “I’m going back to Graad,” he tells the room. “In two years’ time, a revolution will begin in Mirova, sweeping across the land like a thunderstorm. And its failure will usher in the next century. The century of the twilight of the human mind, each succeeding year darker than the last.”

He creeps around the room like ball lightning, threatening to pounce onto someone’s face at any moment. “From the end, there, through the polar night, that music will resound. It will play on future phonographs. On magnets! Yet—it does not come from there. You’ll be famous, Monsieur Mittrecie, your music will reach us from the true end, even further beyond there, where all matter is but memory. So sounds the white light that shines into every darkroom, turning all revelations into nothingness.” He rises up on tiptoe, under the critic’s nose. “All revelations—I said—*turn to naught!*”

“Tick.”

The small man turns his head around like an owl. His gaze searches for a lightning rod and finds it in the form of the *comte*. A grin spreads across his face. The *comte* gasps, “So I’m still going to become famous? Do you really think that it’s going to happen?”

“I’m sure of it. Because beyond the light...”

“Ion!” a child’s voice interjects. “Ion, let’s go already...” A little boy, dressed in formal wear, stands by the door.

“You have to excuse me.” The man squeezes the *comte*’s hand. “It was an honour to meet a man whose head is the receptacle of sounds so bright that in their light, the memorial nature of the world becomes visible.”

“Wait!” The author winces. He pulls an ordinary pen out from the bottom of the inner breast pocket of his redingote and uses it to autograph the dodecahedron. He’s been practising this for a long time. “What name do I make this out to?”

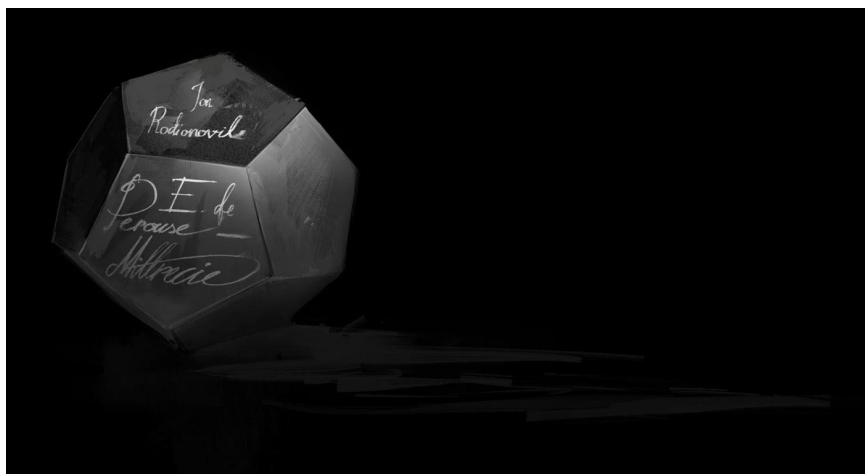
“Ion Rodionov.” The man smiles. He’s excited.

“You don’t happen to be writing anywhere, do you?”

“Oh no, I’m not a critic,” the man replies, his eyes sparkling with admiration. “I’m a maths teacher.”

“Who would’ve thought!” snaps the puffed-up critic by the door.

But the teacher walks past him, paying him no mind. He takes the hand of the little student standing in front of the door. “Come on, Ambrosius!” he says. “Isn’t this a beautiful polyhedron?”



A month later, eight hundred⁶⁴ kilometres from Revachol, at the edge of Insulinde on les Immensités Bleues.

The yacht's sail catches the wind with a vengeance. The canvas flaps and the howling of the wind is deafening. It's a night at the end of February during *madrugada*—the final, dark blue hour before sunrise. The silver ocean lies beneath the dark blue expanse, a lone yacht manoeuvring through its cracking ice sheet. An iceberg passes by the railing, steaming in the dark. On deck stands *comte* Émile de Pérouse-Mittrecie. He's still in his black redingote, which is unwashed and worn. The man's hair flutters in the wind; his hands are red from the cold. They're frozen to the helm.

"Kill yourself, Revachol! Kill yourself!" he roars into the wind. "I know that it's tremendous, and the world knows that it's tremendous! Who even are you, anyways?"

The ship crashes into the ice sheet. A deafening screech sounds against the wooden hull. With his teeth, the *comte* tugs the cork from a bottle of spirits. "Complicated?!" he growls and takes a swig. "I bring you the music of the spheres, and it's too complicated?! You're complicated, you cow!"

In front of him, through the vast ragged world, the sun rises. It is a vision. A bright grey light radiates in wisps, as cold wreaths. The sun rises from the pale. The *comte* thrusts his hands towards the sky and the incomparable noise of time engulfs him. It's louder still than the wind, louder than the masses of ice rubbing against each other. The man's mouth sputters with drool, howling his favourite cadence. It's written by him. And the voice in the pale in front of him sounds like applause, standing ovations, the stamping of tens of thousands of feet, and whistles, deafening whistles like those of fireworks, an atom that will someday be split in Revachol. The only thing in this world more beautiful than his own music is applause.

"I'm famous!" booms the *comte*. "I am the most famous musician of all time! All other musicians are nothing compared to

⁶⁴ This distance is a severe departure from Disco Elysium canon, where the shortest distance from Revachol to the edge of Insulinde is 6,000 kilometres. Being more recent, Disco Elysium is likely "more canon".

me! Nobody—nobody at all!—knows them, but they **all** know me!”

He necks the bottle of spirits and smashes it on the deck. “Millions love me!” he exclaims, and deliriously throws his hands in the air, towards the pale. “Millions and billions, hundreds of thousands of billions of young girls in love, they love me and my twelve-tone melody! Love is everything! Love is light! Light, and past that—nothing!”

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WHAT On the second-to-last day of
WAS summer vacation, the four
THAT daughters of Education
SACRED Minister Ann-Margret Lund
AND disappear from a public beach.
TERRIBLE On its maiden voyage, a newly
SMELL launched ship with fifteen
IN hundred passengers on board
THE disappears.
AIR
THAT The girls' three classmates do
TIME not give up the investigation
even twenty years later. The
world is disappearing, but the
hope of finding the Lund
children is not.

BOOK COVERS

TN: The insides of the book cover (both front and back) feature a number of names from the Elysium world. Our translations and notes have been added in parentheses.

Inside front cover:

- Inayat Khan
- Jesper De La Guardie
- Tereesz Machejek
- Zygismunt Berg
- Sven von Fersen
- Väike Olle (Little Olle)
- Sixten
- Maj Lund
- Målin Lund
- Anni-Elin Lund
- Charlotte Lund
- Åre Åkerlund
- Anita Lundqvist
- Konrad Gessle
- Oskar Zorn
- Pernilla Lundqvist
- Ulv aka Ise-Chillija (Ulv aka Self-Chiller)
- Kenni Nylander
- Ann-Margret Lund
- Karl Lund
- Aliyah Khan
- Ramout Karzai
- Soul Milton
- Nadja Harnankur (Nadia Harnankur in DE)
- Gon-Tzu
- Comte Emil de Perouse-Mittrecie (Émile in the text)
- Cornelius Gurdi

- Jean Abadanaiz
- Julia Dobрева
- Frantiček Vapper (Frantiček the Brave)
- Julius Kuznitski
- Aram Uhotomski (Aram Ukhotomsky)
- Ignus Nilsen
- Kras Mazov
- Saron Voronikin
- Sapormat Knežinski (Sapormat Knezhinisky – President Sapormat 'Sport' Knezhinisky in DE.)
- Idit Bronski
- Leon Etianovitš Zdorov (Leon Etaniovich Zdorov)
- Ion Rodionov
- K. Saronovitš Voronikin (K. Saronovich Voronikin)
- Vidkun Hird
- Deerek Trentmöller
- Linoleumimüüja (Linoleum Salesman)
- Kosmo Kontšalovski (Kosmo Konchalovsky)
- Somerset Ulrich
- Sarjan Asaturovitš Ambartsumjan (Sarjan Asaturovich Ambartsumjan)
- Mees Sisejuurdlustest (Man from Internal Affairs)
- Macaab Nyflox
- Grupp “Ismael” (Group “Ismael”)
- Koostööpolitsei (International Collaboration Police)
- Arno van Eyck
- Rietveld
- Fakkengaff
- Theo van Kok
- Pius Perikarnassiselt (Pius of Perikarnassis)
- Polycarp Perikarnassiselt (Polycarp of Perikarnassis)
- Ernő Pasternak
- Franconegro
- Dolores Dei
- Innossents Sola (Innocence Sola)
- Ambrosius Saint-Miro
- Vihkaja Lacanne (Hater Lacanne)
- Marat Sar
- Ehs Eli Zair

- Exilin Mar
- Ilona Vickerby
- Anastasia Lux
- Riche Le Pomme
- Hans Blau
- Irene le Navigateur (also Irene the Navigator in DE)
- Stepan Vastik (Stepan the Despicable)
- Viscous di Kedra
- Zygismunt Suur (Zygismunt the Great)
- Erlend Noor (Erlend the Young)
- Philippe III Priiskaja (Filippe III the Squanderer)
- Mees Hjelmdallist (Man from Hjelmdall)
- Parun von Kikkenberg (Baron von Kikkenberg in DE)
- Pepi Popikarnassos
- Les Morts
- Lefty Fitzgerald Boocho
- Seemio
- Raul van Mechelen
- Jan de Kaarp
- Marius Dijsters
- Rupert Trepkos
- Eli August Morrisson
- Aleksandra Enmark
- Meelespea (Forget-me-not)
- Vaterhosen
- Moraalintern (Moralintern)
- Grupp “Dister” (Group “Dister”)
- Riiklik Kesksignaalamt (Oranje) (National Central Communications Agency (Oranje))
- Viestikolaitos (Communications Agency)
- Les Télécommunications Spéciales (Special Telecommunications)
- Epis
- Meski Vastuluure (Mesque Counterintelligence)
- Nemad (Them)
- Operaator Taskukalkulaatoriga (Operator with a Pocket Calculator)
- Grupp “Trepkos” (Group “Trepkos”)
- Emei

- Asutav Kogu (Founding Assembly)
- Innossents (Innocence)
- Pūha Erakond (The Holy Party – Aka The Founding Party)
- Leegitsev Küpress (Flaming Cypress)
- Lita Zippora
- Brix Vorschant
- Breach Pizarro
- Ramada Umbra
- Frank the Drunk
- Ferocious
- John Dilligent
- Deborah Antilootus (Deborah Antihope)
- Exhalt Shapiro
- Schwartzporter
- Ptolemaios Pryce
- Nix Gottlieb
- Mack Torson
- Chester McLaine
- Sundance Fischer
- Elf-Boy Williams (Michel “Elfboy” Williams in DE)
- Chase “TheAce” Zidane
- John “Arhetüüp” McCoy (John “Archetype” McCoy)
- Milicia Gorki-Berdjajeva (Milicia Gorki-Berdyayeva in DE)
- Šokol
- Nick Feuerbach
- Kipt Mimosa
- Furioso “Voodoo” Roberts
- Joseph Mills
- Chad Tillbrook
- Emil Mollins (Émile Mollins in DE)
- Byrzelius “Golem” Bengt
- Apricot Pidieu
- Vanapoiss Pidieu (Oldboy Pidieu – Jules “Oldboy” Pidieu in DE)
- Ninel DeMettrie
- Suave Mendez
- James F. Evans

- Cedric Dtoyle
- André “Infarkt” Pidieu (André “Heart attack” Pidieu)
- Nabukadanasor Pryce
- Triss McLaine
- Tessa Torson
- Hammasteta Armataur (Toothless Armataur)
- Ahriman “Surematu” DeMettrie (Ahriman “Immortal” DeMettrie)
- Theopold Leslie
- Carson Torson
- Krov Rozenkreutz
- Sabiat Khan
- Marut-Eli-Ilin
- Elysium Corona Mundi (Elysium: the Crown of the World)

Inside back cover:

- Seol
- Katla
- Graad
- Samara
- Mundi
- Insulinde
- Iilmaraa
- Oktsident (Occident)
- Vesper
- Messina
- Oranje
- Meteo
- Königstein
- Sur-la-Clef
- Saramiriza
- Sao
- Altaa RV (People’s Republic of Altaa)
- Meskiriik (The Republic of Mesque)
- Advesperascit
- Rheasilvia

- Deora
- Vredeford
- Cérne
- Rael
- Thylakos-Pisantiku-Ääres (both Thylakos-by-Pisantic and Thylakos-by-Pisantique in DE)
- Stepankedra
- Istalife
- Pisanteum
- Loos
- La Parbat
- Radial Abbada
- Port Irén
- La Habitad
- Tabalt
- Major Mundi
- Pisantik (Pisantic – Or Pisantique)
- Irmala
- Ubi-Sunt (Ubi Sunt? in DE)
- Villalobos
- La Clef
- Magritt (Magritte in DE)
- Suur Must (Big Black)
- Viderunt
- Corpus Mundi
- Samara Rahvavabariik (People's Republic of Samara)
- Safre
- Tien-En
- Mialin
- Nagusien
- Kukuškina Interisolarsk (Kukushkina Interisolary)
- Sapurmat Ulan
- Nemengi Uul (Nemeng's Uul)
- Nad-Umai
- Dotška Zador
- Aprikoosi Suzerainty (Apricot Suzerainty)
- Aniiisaared (Anise Islands)
- Kokonur (Koko Nur in DE)
- Apsara

- Samarskilt
- Ultar Sar
- Graadiriik (Nation of Graad)
- Zsiemsk
- Šest (Shest)
- Jugo-Graad (Yugo-Graad in DE)
- Lomonossovima (Lomonossov's Land)
- Jikutsk
- Intergraad
- Polüfabrikaat (Polyfabricate)
- Mirova
- Noo
- Lenka
- Romangorod
- Ferdydurke
- Šestaprel
- Polit-Sofia
- Igressi Meri (Sea of Igress)
- Graadi Kopsud (Lungs of Graad)
- Yekokataa (Zone of Ecological Catastrophe)
- Severnaja Zemlja (The Northern Land)
- Vaasa
- Arda
- Surumaa (Suruese Land / Suruland)
- Königsmalm
- Västermalm
- Östermalm
- Saalem
- Kexholm
- Lovisa
- Charlottesjäl
- Holodnaja Zemlja (The Cold Land)
- Jelinka (Yelinka in DE)
- Värtna
- Norrköping
- Lohdu
- Lemminkäise
- Talve Orbiit (Winter's Orbit)
- Boreaalplatoo (Boreal Plateau)

- Vostoki Järv (Lake Vostok)
- Põhjaväil (Northern Passage – Or Northern Pass)
- Interim
- Amistad
- Yeesut
- Serber
- Kur-Kur
- Ilal-Sahrava
- Absolom
- Himiariidid (Himiarites)
- Nikomachos
- Areopagita
- Gurdi
- Sahra
- Ohm-Suri
- Ea
- Amistad Bašir
- Thylakos-Perikarnassisel (Thylakos-by-Perikarnassis)
- Ergi Kõrb (Erg Desert)
- Uamrao
- Punane Platoo (Red Plateau)
- Pagev Meri (Fleeing Sea)
- Suur Sinine (Big Blue – les Immensités Bleues in DE)
- Arkaadisaared (Arcade Islands)
- Semenine
- Perouse
- Ozonne
- Saint-Martin
- Revachol
- Vermillon
- Saint Batiste
- La Rêve du Monde (The Dream of the World)
- La Delta
- Stella Maris
- Sõelinn (Coal City)
- Jamrock
- Martinez (Martinaise in DE)
- Boogie Street
- Enola

- Seol Cite
- Hall (The pale)
- Rodionovi Süvik (Rodionov's Trench)
- Iisola (Isola)
- Absoluutne Negatsioon (Absolute Negation)
- Ainesurutis (Supercompressed matter?)
- Seraseoliitikum (Seraseolitic civilization)
- Iidne Massiühiskond (Ancient Mass Society)
- Polükarpeum (Polycarpeum)
- Iisolate Pooldumine (Splitting of the isolas)
- Kedra Maailmavallutus (Kedreatic world conquest)
- Sajandivahetuse Revolutsioonid (Turn-of-the-Century Revolution)
- La Retour (Le Retour in DE)
- Geopoliitiline Maailmalõpp (Geopolitical End of the World)
- Odotus (The Waiting)
- Aasimut (Azimuth)
- Iikon (Icon)
- Zenit (Zenith)
- Himmelfahren (Ascension)
- Mosaiik (Mosaic)
- Shakermaker
- Freiweltlabor
- Entroponeetika (Entroponetics)
- Ekstrafüüsika (Extraphysics)
- Karperism
- Funk!
- Dideridaada
- Mikro-Funktsionalism (Micro-Functionalism)
- Trepkism
- Anarkism
- Frankonegriitlus (Franconigerianism)
- Doloriaanlus (Dolorianism)
- Disteriaanlus (Disterianism)
- Maazovlus (Mazovianism)
- Interisolaarne Reaalvöönd (Interisolary Real Belt)
- Seoli Õnnelikud (The Happy Ones of Seol)
- Therrier

- Pistolett (Pistolette)
- Banque Mondiale
- ORG-Riigid (ORG Countries – Oranje-Revachol-Graad)
- Mnemoturist (Mnemotourist)
- Mootortsükkel (Motorway – A raised motorway specifically)
- Mootorkaarik (Motor carriage)
- Magnetrong (Magnet train)
- Magnees
- Ekvester
- Eendracht
- Roo
- Lum
- Perseus Black
- Zieleger
- Tew
- Zamm
- Freibank
- Trigat
- Ezra
- Tea Shop
- Zeul
- En Provence
- Meridienne
- Landsgraafmetronoom (Landgrave metronome)
- Parkinson
- Vox
- Orbis
- La Revacholiere
- Granate No3
- Dagens (Today's)
- Kapitalist (Capitalist)
- Astra
- Radar
- Diorella
- Maskula
- Abu-Babu Kebab
- Lõpp-Peatuse Viin (End Station Vodka)