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Superheldinnen**

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“Superheroines” -- A Translation of Barbi Marković's Novel *Superheldinnen*

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Honors College Thesis

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Introduction

Through my studies of German over the years, I have discovered that one of my favorite things about learning another language is being able to read literature from that culture in the original language. Furthermore, I find it interesting to read a German text as well as its English translation and compare how the original and the translation express the same story. As a double major in German and Linguistics, I have learned a lot about the structure of language and crosslinguistic differences that make each language unique. Translation was the perfect way to engage creatively with each language and its unique linguistic features. Moreover, since literary works are not only concerned with linguistic creativity but also reflect the culture of the respective linguistic community, translation is an important facet of cross-cultural communication. Translating works of literature contributes to promoting cultural understanding, and I want to be a part of this chain of cultural communication. My Honors College thesis offered me the perfect opportunity to undertake such an endeavor.

The Importance of Translation

Translation is an important and necessary aspect of cultural communication because it allows speakers of different languages and people from different cultures to connect with one another in a way that does not detract from either group of people or place one above the other. Both are able to access communication in their native language and still learn about the other. With the rise of English as a *lingua franca* in the world, it is important for people to write and speak in their native language, but also be able to reach a wider audience through translation. Translation involves many details and intricacies that require a translator to have a strong knowledge of the source language (SL), in this case German, and a native knowledge of the target language (TL), in this case English. My studies in German and Linguistics have provided me with this foundational understanding of both languages.

Translation involves taking the nuances of both languages into careful consideration in order to best capture the idiosyncratic elements of a text that exist in the SL and put them into the TL, while avoiding major translation loss, though some is inevitable in almost every text. An ideal translation identifies with and facilitates the understanding of the original text by replicating its effect on the audience (Venuti p.66). There have been many translations of major German literary works, such as texts by Goethe and Schiller, but it is increasingly important to

translate contemporary works, as exposure to international literature is of the utmost importance for communication between cultures in the global world we live in. My aim in completing this translation project is to join that exchange of cultural information through literature.

Choosing the Text

My goal was to complete a large-scale translation of a contemporary novel. It was important to find one that had not yet been translated into English, as one of my goals is to be able to provide English-speaking readers a translation of a German novel that they would not otherwise have access to. To do so, my thesis advisor, Helga Schreckenberger, and I looked online and in libraries to find recently published German books and then checked if they had been translated. I stumbled upon a website (<http://www.new-books-in-german.com/>) that provides up-to-date information about recently published books. On this website, I found a few titles that sounded intriguing, and I started requesting copies through interlibrary loan and reading sections of a few different books. I wasn't able to read one of the possible candidates until Summer 2019 when I was in Vienna, Austria, because it wasn't yet available in the United States. My goal was to find a fictional text about a topic that I thought English readers would find interesting and important. After searching and testing out a couple different books, I ultimately decided on *Superheldinnen* by Barbi Marković.

This novel, entitled “Superheroines” in English, deals with a number of topics that I found really important in the global world we live in today. Migration, particularly in the context of the refugee crises of recent years, has brought stories of immigrants to the forefront of news and media. While *Superheldinnen* is a work of fiction and ventures into the realm of magic, it still provides us with an immigrant's perspective. The three main characters are women who have immigrated to Vienna, and while they may have special powers, they are not immune to the cultural alienation and economic difficulties experienced by many immigrants. This alienation is represented throughout the book as the narrator describes each woman's self-doubts and despair about their lack of achievement. In today's global world, where refugee crises force many people to leave their homes involuntarily while many others willingly seek a better life in other countries, this novel works to reflect and validate the stories of immigrants around the world, and even more importantly allows non-immigrants to understand these immigrants' stories and develop empathy for their situation. Reading about these experiences in other cultural contexts,

in this case, in Austria, offers the readers a different perspective of these issues which might broaden their understanding of the situation in their own country. In addition, the novel criticizes the overwhelming influence of consumerism especially on those whose economic situation excludes them from joining in. Both topics, the experience of immigrants and the pressure to consume, add to the cultural relevance of the novel. Since this book had not been translated into English, yet offers a compelling story about the lives of immigrants told tongue-in-cheek in a fresh and creative way, I thought this story was worth being shared with an English-speaking audience, and thus needed a translation.

Life in Vienna

While deciding which book to translate, I was also in the process of organizing an internship in Vienna, Austria for Summer 2019. I ended up working for an online translation company called Nativy Translations - while I wasn't doing translations myself, I did learn how they run their online translation system, as well as what they look for in translators. This includes experience and having a degree in translation and/or the source language, which contributed to my decision to pursue a master's degree in Translation, which I will be doing at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California beginning in Fall 2020. My internship was slated to start in May 2019. At that point, I hadn't yet decided on translating *Superheldinnen*, but I had read some of the book, and knew that the majority of the plot took place around Siebenbrunnenplatz which is in the fifth district of Vienna. Shortly before the end of the Spring 2019 semester, I received my housing assignment, and my apartment in Vienna was on Siebenbrunnengasse - I would spend the summer living right in the neighborhood where this book takes place. It felt like a sign that ultimately *Superheldinnen* would be the perfect choice for my project because I would be able to learn so much by immersing myself in the community where this book takes place.

My months living in Vienna were a wonderful experience, both for gaining a first-hand view of the online translation business, as well as for learning about the community where the novel for my thesis takes place. The characters shop at the same grocery store, Billa, that I shopped at, and ate at the same restaurants in the square. I got to experience Café Sette Fontane (whose name means 'seven fountains', which is also the translation of 'Sieben Brunnen', the name of the square Siebenbrunnenplatz) where the three main characters spend so much of their

time deciding how to help others using their abilities. This gave me a really unique connection to this book and allowed me to better understand the cultural aspects of the story that I needed to translate into the English version. My experience living on Siebenbrunnengasse ultimately led to my decision that *Superheldinnen* would be the perfect book for my translation project, both because of its content and my own personal connection to its location. I was very excited to start working on my translation, and in reflection upon this experience, I know that this book was the perfect choice for this project.

Biographical Information about Barbi Marković

The back cover of the book offers a short introduction to the author, translated here: “Barbi Marković was born in 1980 in Belgrade, and studied German language and literature in Belgrade and Vienna. In Belgrade, she worked as an editor at Rende Verlag. She has been living in Vienna since 2006, and in 2011/2012 she was a writer-in-residence in Graz, Austria, the results of which were published in 2012 as “Graz Alexanderplatz”. In 2009 with her Thomas-Bernhard-Remix-Novel “Ausgehen” (“Going Out”, originally in Serbian *Islaženje*, 2006), she became a pop literature sensation of a new generation. Then followed short stories, plays, radio dramas as well as numerous prizes and awards. “Superheldinnen” is the first novel that Barbi Marković wrote partially in German and partially in Serbian.”

From just this brief biography of the author, I became interested in her story and the novel that she has written. Looking further into her background, similarities between her life and the lives of the characters in *Superheldinnen* started to emerge. Marković herself fled from the war in Belgrade and moved to Vienna, where she enjoys living and has not particularly thought of returning to Belgrade (Sommerbauer). When looking back on the war, she expressed memories of the crisis that meant no future for young people, and no chance for leaving the country (Sommerbauer). This is much like the life the women in *Superheldinnen* left behind, from which they are eventually able to grow and thrive in Vienna, much like Marković herself. A lot of this is reflected in the character of the first-person narrator, in her traumatic memory of experiencing and fleeing the war, and in the pigeons that represent her heritage that have tormented her since childhood. The main characters’ low economic and social status that causes their lack of confidence, together with their eventual solution for never having to worry about money again, act as a comment on the power of consumerism in the West that many immigrants

struggle to deal with as they are often forced to flee with very little and face difficulties in escaping the constant cycle of poverty. This stark yet inspiring representation of the life of an immigrant who has fled from war illustrates why it is so important for immigrants to tell their stories, in order to validate and sympathize with other immigrants as well as to show non-immigrants what it is like to be an immigrant. *Superheldinnen* does an exemplary job of telling this story, and this is a major reason why I chose to translate this novel.

An important previous work by Marković was also mentioned in the brief introduction from the back cover, namely “Ausgehen”, her “remix” of Thomas Bernhard’s “Gehen”, which retells the story but set in the nightclubs of Belgrade, adding a modern twist to the story through the youth culture during the war (Sommerbauer). For *Superheldinnen*, an important influential work was Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, mirrored in the story of the narrator’s attempt to move to Berlin with the constant presence of advertisements that overwhelm her and bombard the reader, just like they do the protagonist of Döblin’s novel (Kegele). Through her studies of German language and literature, Marković was aware of this influential text and was able to work in this cultural reference despite German being a non-native language for her. Even more impressive, *Superheldinnen* was also transformed into a play where the three characters play out their experiences live on stage (cf. Stöger). With all of its cultural references and importance in the understanding of the immigrants of the world, *Superheldinnen* proves to be an influential and representative literary work of the modern world.

While the story in “Superheroines” is of course fictional, as an immigrant living in Vienna herself, there certainly could be experiences that Marković could have shared with her characters. Furthermore, in the same way that I felt a personal connection to the setting of the novel, Marković most likely had first-hand experience of the unique neighborhood around Siebenbrunnenplatz. This allows her to give the setting of the novel such a detailed description, which I strongly connected to and which gives the story another level of depth because of the close connection to the neighborhood. As a fellow non-native speaker of German, I find Marković’s feat of writing this novel mostly in German very impressive. Though she was unable to quite finish, instead finishing in Serbian and having Mascha Dabić translate the Serbian into German, the overall story and experience of the novel reads very naturally in German, aside from some constructions that seemingly contribute to the experience of an immigrant living in a country where they are forced to learn another language, which actually add to the authentic

character of the novel.

The Process of Translation

The idea for this project began to take shape in my junior year, as I worked through the textbook *Thinking German Translation: a Course in Translation Method: German to English* (2006) from Sándor Hervey, Michael Loughridge and Ian Higgins. This book offers an introduction to German to English translation specifically, including how to deal with translation loss and other difficulties of translation, as well as practice translation exercises in a variety of genres, including scientific texts, literature, poetry, songs, etc. This became my foundation in German to English translation, and throughout the process, I followed the methodology I learned in this book, including reading through the full text, identifying salient features, translating the text, and editing for style and accuracy. Although I had not yet settled on translating *Superheldinnen*, I did a sample translation of about 20 pages as part of my 3 credits in Readings & Research for the Junior Year Honors College requirement. After my summer in Vienna and deciding on this novel for my translation, I received my own copy of the book and began reading it all the way through to gain an understanding of the text as a whole before beginning translation.

From there, I began translating chapter by chapter, and meeting with my thesis advisor to discuss particular aspects that were difficult to translate or needed further discussion and contemplation, so that I could ensure that the correct meaning was being translated throughout the novel. The book is split into five parts, with a varying number of chapters in each part. Most of the chapters are relatively short, which was nice to work on because each one was easier to finish in one sitting, compared to having to stop in the middle of longer chapters. I found that over time, the translation process got easier for me - at the beginning, a page would take a much longer time to translate than toward the end of the project. I was learning how to be more efficient in my translation, as well as getting used to the author's style, which allowed me to work faster and improve the quality of my translation. After finishing the translation itself, I then returned back to the beginning to edit the whole novel for style, to make sure the sentences themselves sounded natural and to maintain consistent style throughout the book.

Difficulties of Translation

Translation brings the work of a writer or speaker to another culture through language, and the translator is an important link in the chain of cultural exchange. A large question within translation has been whether there are any exact translations - does a word translated into another language mean the exact same thing, and what happens if a word is too specific or too general? These are questions I was asking myself throughout this project when facing a number of elements that posed difficulties for translation. This includes both linguistic difficulties based on differences between German and English, as well as difficulties based on cultural idiosyncrasies and differences in cultural literacy. Overall, my main goal in tackling these elements was to avoid as much translation loss as possible, so that the overall meaning and effect of the text would still be preserved in English.

One area where linguistic and cultural differences overlap is in idioms and proverbs. These can pose difficulties for translation because they inherently do not have a literal meaning, and therefore cannot entail a literal translation. While some may have equivalents in other languages, others do not. Therefore, translating idioms and proverbs can instead require finding an idiomatic equivalence, as explained in *Thinking German Translation*. The authors discuss how proverbs and idioms sometimes require special treatment in translation because a translation may not use a literal idiomatic or proverbial equivalent but rather one that is standard for the expression of the situation in the target language, which is called “communicative translation” (Hervey, Loughridge and Higgins, p.19). By using communicative translation, the goal is to produce the same effect on the target language readers as the original idiomatic phrase has on the source language readers, which is the most preferable choice to avoid translation loss. As in many literary texts, Marković utilizes proverbs and idioms in *Superheldinnen*, and creates word plays with them in order to creatively express situations that the characters experience. Sometimes these have equivalent translations in English, but others require communicative translations in order to produce a similar effect as the original to minimize translation loss.

For example, there is an anti-proverb in Part 1 in the description of the local grocery store: “Lange Finger hatten kurze Beine”, which is based on the original German proverb “Lügen haben kurze Beine” which translates in English to “Lies have short legs.” While this proverb exists in English in that form, it is not necessarily as commonly used as the German proverb. In order to translate this anti-proverb, I had to choose what would incur the least amount of translation loss. There were essentially two choices: either translate the anti-proverb as “Long

fingers had short legs,” which although it is a literal translation of the German, it preserves the proverbiality of the original as well as the effect of making the reader think about what this means in the context of a grocery store; or translate it as something like “Stealing won’t get you far” which does not preserve the proverbiality but very explicitly expresses the intended meaning. In the end, I chose to translate this as “Long fingers had short legs” because I do think there is a bit of a riddle in the original text that I wanted to maintain in the English, and I think that readers would be able to figure out the meaning of the anti-proverb in the context. I included a footnote to this point, however, to help explain to readers what this phrase means and demonstrate the cultural difference between the two cultures.

Another example includes an extended idiomatic expression. In the sentence, “Mascha und ich hatten unseren traditionellen Tanz um den heißen Brei, in den wir schon mehrmals hineingefallen waren, bereits begonnen”, Marković is using “Tanz um den heißen Brei” (literally “dance around the hot porridge”) idiomatically, in that of course the two characters are not literally dancing around hot porridge, but rather they are avoiding directly saying what they think, dancing around the topic instead of confronting it. She adds “in den wir schon mehrmals hineingefallen waren” (literally “into which [the hot porridge] we had often fallen”) to show that this strategy often had unfortunate consequences for them. I ultimately chose to translate this sentence as “As usual, Mascha and I started to act like a cat on a hot tin roof which had gotten us burned many times before.” A literal translation would not make any sense in the context, and in order to preserve the idiomaticity of the sentence, I wanted to use a communicative translation with a different idiomatic expression that could provide a similar effect to express the idea of avoiding something and being punished for it. Within the context, I think my choice ultimately can be understood to have a similar meaning to the original. “Like a cat on a hot tin roof” shows how the two characters are unable to directly confront the topic of conversation because it is too “hot” to deal with. The recurring element is then expressed by “which had gotten us burned many times before”, showing that their avoidance had backfired while maintaining the reference to the idiomatic expression. On the whole, this was a very difficult idiomatic expression to recognize, understand and translate, but this solution seems to be an idiomatic equivalent that allows for the least amount of translation loss in this context.

An additional fun yet challenging feature in this novel was a word play in the recurring phrase “Host an Tschick? Bau kein Mist!” This phrase appears as stickers on trash cans that are

asking people to properly dispose of their cigarette butts instead of throwing them on the ground. In the German, there is a near rhyme, which I wanted to preserve in my translation. Regarding the use of phonic stylistic features such as rhyme, *Thinking German Translation* explains that translators must take into account the purpose of the source text when deciding how to deal with these features (Hervey, Loughridge and Higgins, p.66). In this context, the rhyme is being used to make the slogan effective, and therefore it was important to try to maintain the rhyme in the target language. There is also word play involving the phrase “Mist bauen”. This phrase can mean “to mess things up” as in to make a mistake or screw up, but in addition, “Mist” can mean “crap” or “mess”, in which the phrase could also mean “to make a mess”. I chose to translate “Bau kein Mist” as “Don’t mess up” because it both expresses the idea of not making a mistake, and also could be understood as “Don’t make a mess” when disposing of cigarette butts. My translation “Have cigarette butts? Don’t mess up” therefore is able to preserve a near rhyme as well as preserve the play on the word “mess” that the original does with “Mist”, ultimately producing a very similar effect in the English as it does in the original German.

While the linguistic elements are of course important, cultural elements are also subject to cultural transposition, meaning that sometimes cultural elements may need to be adapted from the source language (and culture) into the target language (and culture). For example, elements like street names (which usually end with -straße or -gasse in German) or phone numbers can sometimes be difficult to translate because they differ from culture to culture. In this novel, I have chosen to keep street names and other locations in their original form because many of them refer to small, specific streets that wouldn’t necessarily make a larger reference to a cultural element and are simply the name of a location, so can be left in their original form. Some, like Mariahilferstraße, are cultural references that many Viennese or Austrians would recognize, since it is a large shopping street, so I chose to keep the name but provide an explanatory footnote.

Another recurring theme in this novel is the idea of alienation, which in some cases was expressed through the inclusion of texts from the environment, which are marked in a lighter text color, and foreign words, including Serbian and English. I decided to keep many of these, and I kept some German words to parallel the effect that the English had on German readers, in order to give English readers the same experience of alienation from foreign words and texts. Many of these texts are advertisements for services or items or food, and they represent the overwhelming

constant pressure of consumerism that many immigrants feel because they are not necessarily able to afford the products constantly being advertised to them. In her attempt to move to Berlin, the narrator is bombarded by advertisements on Alexanderplatz, reminiscent of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and these slogans permeate her consciousness and the rest of the book as a representation of this overwhelming consumerism. The reference to Döblin's novel brings up another important issue of translation loss. Most German readers are familiar with this novel and will immediately recognize it as *Superheldinnen*'s intertext, but English readers will not and will miss this literary interplay. However, the slogans explain the protagonists' dream of finally being able to join the middle class and be financially well-off enough to no longer feel like they are trapped in a constant cycle of poverty, unable to even afford to buy food at the café they spend so much time in (cf. Kegele). In order to address this translation loss, I have also provided an explanatory footnote in the text to give some background information. On the whole, these cultural elements provide rich details in the original text, and it is important to try to maintain the effect in the translation so that the overall effect is similar for English-speaking readers as it is for German-speaking readers with the original.

Overall, the largest difficulty in translation is avoiding translation loss. There are many different ways that translation loss can occur, for example through literal translation of idiomatic expressions, through a lack of cultural transposition, or even simply through grammatical elements that may differ between the source language and target language. For example, translating the German pronoun *man* requires different translations depending on the context in order to make sense - sometimes it can best be translated with 'you', 'people', 'one', etc. This is a phenomenon I was able to look at in depth for a research paper in my Linguistics Capstone Seminar, where I used the original text of *Superheldinnen* and my translation as a parallel corpus in order to look at all the instances of this pronoun and how I translated it into English. For more than two thirds of the instances of *man*, I translated it as 'you.' For example: "Der Natur muss **man** sich strategisch nähern und nur das Allerbeste nehmen", which I translated as "**You** have to approach nature strategically and only take the best of the best." However, other cases used very different syntactic constructions in order to best translate the sentence to sound natural in English. For example: "Und in der Anzeige stand nichts davon, dass **man** Erfahrung **brauchte**", which I translated as "And there was nothing in the advertisement about **needing** experience"

with the verb “need” in its present participle form instead of using a clausal construction with a pronoun.

With translation, it is not always a one-fits-all case, and the translator has to make choices that will best preserve the meaning and effect of the original text. This is true for all elements of translation, many of which I have discussed here, since they require time and effort in order to make the best choice for translation and avoid translation loss.

Concluding Statements

It has been a joy to work on this project as my thesis in my senior year. After doing this long-term translation, I now have an idea of what it will be like to continue doing this as a career in the future. I learned a lot about translation, and I am excited to continue learning more as I pursue my MA in Translation at the Middlebury Institute. My love for German and German literature has only grown through working on this project, and I am thankful to all those who have helped me throughout this process, including my advisor, my thesis committee members, and my German teachers for the past ten years.

Barbi Marković

Superheroines

Novel

With translations from Mascha Dabić

Translated into English by Emma Roach

Mascha was the backbone of the group - mentally and physically always ready for all the challenges of witchcraft such as annihilations and lightning strikes, competent in magic as well as in the social sphere. In other words: a deity for all the people who are plagued by bad luck.

Direktorka was the last to join the group. She was still in the process of figuring out our range and its boundaries - and based on her experimentation, perhaps she even had the potential for something big within herself.

I was Mascha's first partner, Marija's granddaughter. Disappointed with life, with a flexible conscience. I have always found pleasure in analysis.

What do you do when an angry, senile housewife like **Marija** sends you the curse of the pigeon? Everything she asks of you! Marija first gained her importance after she moved to Belgrade, into the moloch.

Rabija was the woman from Mascha's past who had been cut in half. A woman with a mission and telepathic abilities that we could only dream of. Had she possibly foreseen the events?

The snotty kid was an orphan from the suburbs of Berlin, equipped from birth with above average mental and paranormal abilities. His outer appearance was in no way frightening, but hey, all of Berlin trembled before him.

None of us had ever learned to lead a normal life fit for human beings. We were surrounded by crap and mistrust and pigeon shit everywhere. Everything was terrible. A lot of people were hungover. The world was merciless. People were sticky all over from a cold sweat. Headache and vertigo and chills and too much street pizza with tabasco every day. That could have been it, but we were determined.

Misprints, changes and errors reserved.

Part 1

1.

Something unexpected happened, and after that, our lives were never the same. The fateful day was a Saturday in Sette Fontane. Today I know how everything turned out, so I can explain some things from our past and describe our habits. I'll talk about cities and what you could have seen in them in the year when Rabija died, the snotty kid appeared, and I spent the summer in Belgrade to take care of inheritance matters. I'll also talk about how I met with my friends two years later in Vienna, our chosen city, to perform our well-oiled Saturday ritual. What I know now, but couldn't know then, is that all three of us had secret motivations and that above all, each in our own way, we intended to put an end to the depressed state of mind we had been in for years. It was a condition that made us into women of our time, into capital city residents who cultivated a bad and somewhat allergic relationship with nature. We only knew life from an urban perspective and unfortunately, we didn't belong to those who had collected pork blood in buckets during their childhood. Often, we compared cities because the choice of where to live meant great freedom and tremendous responsibility to us. Up to the fateful Saturday, each of us had moved from one country to another at least once in our life and we bore the consequences of this decision. Living in relative poverty was our little curse. In accordance with the usual distribution of roles in a friendship triangle and the three unique ways of dealing with problems (to die, to move, or to change something), each of us longed for a real intervention. On that day, we all spoke evasively and bet against each other, then again one with another against the third, to achieve our respective goals. In the story I'm telling, the productive principle of the third friend and savior triumphs in the end, and the whole thing culminates in a neo-liberal robot-self-tracker-astronaut-happy-end.

Of course, everyone has the right to their own opinion. Everything that I'm describing is normal and logical. People break up and do strange things. This is because every person has some weakness, as well as an idea of what could help them.

For a long time, we have had a heightened sense for avoiding Viennese dog poop. Teenagers became mothers, internet platforms begged people to reveal details about their

preferences and habits, and the three of us still didn't know anyone in the city who had died, and we didn't feel constricted, but rather apprehensive. We were afraid the wind could carry us away.

2.

Until the very end, absolutely nothing indicated that everything would turn out all right. Bad signs were everywhere. On the way to Siebenbrunnenplatz, I came across a pile of vomit half a meter wide on the steps, and I thought that the time for change was now. Especially since a pigeon stood in the middle of the yellow acid and ate it. Because the mess was liquid, the pigeon threw its head backwards from time to time in order to swallow better, and you could see from its face that it was happy, while you could see from my face that I wasn't happy. Right then and there, it occurred to me that cities chewed us up and spit us back out again and again; and we were moving around tirelessly, expanding our reach. It also occurred to me that pigeons flew around in a similar way, constantly in search of dirty terraces with full garbage bins where no one would chase them away with a broom, and moreover, they actually entertained the hope that a lonely and sick retired person would allow them to build a nest under their bed. People poisoned the birds, chased them away with sharp needles and punished everyone who fed pigeons. Again and again, I came across a terminally ill pigeon that came creeping out from some hole.

Šimunović. Protection against birds. Installing needles to protect against birds is the most efficient solution for the problem of birds landing on balconies, banks, gutters, store fronts. For the first time in this country! Promo prices! Completely harmless for birds. The protection merely prevents them from landing. Solve the problem! Call us at: 061-274-942

Whatever the case, as I observed the disgusting scene on the steps and told myself that the time was ripe for change, I had very specific changes in mind.

On this Saturday, just like every Saturday for the past two years, we had arranged a meeting in Café Sette Fontane on Siebenbrunnenplatz. It was March in Vienna, and due to the lack of sun, our faces were as white as a sheet. Bouts of depression tore us into pieces, twisted us, and pinned us down to the floor. We were good for nothing. Although true friendship existed among us, as I believe it did, we didn't start our conversation with reports of our respective inner states of mind. The Saturday meeting in Sette Fontane didn't involve simply drinking coffee,

laughing, crying, and the exchange of private information. It involved serious work sessions that followed strict rules and a clear agenda. We began around 10:00 in the morning, although Direktorka always came five minutes late and Mascha always came ten minutes late. Direktorka's five-minute delay was her way of displaying power within the group (a result of her complex), while Mascha's ten minutes meant nothing other than her sincere attempt to arrive on time. After Mascha had rushed through countless stations in her fully booked universe, she stormed in out of breath, apologized, and got out a huge amount of material she had worked on over the course of the last week. One look at her impressive collection of data nipped any critique of her delay in the bud. We were aware of the responsibility that came with our special abilities. On that Saturday, each of us put their stack of pictures, newspaper clippings and notes on the table. We were ready to go.

#Vienna

In Café Siebenbrunnen on the corner of Reinprechtsdorferstraße, the waiters served guests a turkey schnitzel with noodles for €7.50. Trash bins called to passersby: *Have cigarette butts? Don't mess up!*¹ For all questions regarding trash separation, the trash help line was at the disposal of the citizens. People were advised to engage in life. To find a goal. At least a travel goal. One of the top 68 destinations in Lower Austria. Luckily, everything was simple thanks to cell phones, internet, and television. The citizens got back on their feet and participated in the referendum for education, out of fear that Austria could flunk². Every signature counted. Siebenbrunnenplatz was in the Margareten district. That was where you drank Zipfer beer, ever since 1858. You ate fresh goose with red cabbage and dumplings for €16.80. You ate homemade pastries and drank sparkling wine with honeydew melon. Zipfer was like a glass of pure joy. People ate cake and tiramisu and read announcements for concerts headlined by Halid Bešlić and

¹ This phrase appears as stickers on trash cans that are asking people to properly dispose of their cigarette butts instead of throwing them on the ground. In the German, there is a near rhyme as well as a play on the phrase "Mist bauen". This phrase can simply mean "to mess things up" as in to make a mistake or screw up, but in addition, "Mist" can mean "crap" or "mess", in which the phrase could also mean "to make a (physical) mess". My translation "Have cigarette butts? Don't mess up" attempts to preserve the near rhyme as well as the play on the word "mess" that the original does with "Mist", by both expressing the idea of not making a mistake and not making a physical mess when disposing of cigarette butts. This ultimately produces a very similar effect in the English as it did in the original German.

² The Austrian 'Bildungsvolksbegehren' was an education reform intended to improve the ratings of the educational system in Austria.

the old band Crvena Jabuka, and even for the mega-concert headlined by Lepa Brena, powered by ilovecars.com. The most important media partner for the concerts with the folk stars from former Yugoslavia was the diaspora newspaper, *Kosmo*. Have cigarette butts? was written on the trash bin. A merchant bought used goods. He called on the Viennese people to bring him everything they couldn't use anymore. It was better to engage in soccer than racism. On the corner of Kohlgasse, people like Lili's son sat in small booths filled with smoke and played interactive games. In the booths, they were filmed by cameras. People under 18 weren't allowed in. When the gamers were met by losses over the course of their participation in the interactive games, they smoked, and when they didn't have any more cigarettes, they could buy some at a nearby vending machine. In any case, there was the chance that smoking would prove to be deadly in the end. The taste of cigarettes didn't change even though the design did. The smokers shoved their ID cards into the vending machines and paid with coins and bills. I shop here, said a satisfied supermarket customer. Amir had written his name on a pole near the area where things had taken a turn toward the better. The management of the supermarket made suppliers observe the limitations for delivery times and avoid noise. Times were sad, and during the week, a lot of people socialized exclusively through television. The *Kurier* was the true newspaper, the cruel reality. The Billa stores were video monitored. Long fingers had short legs.³ Merchandise was electronically monitored to prevent theft. Everything was protected. The shopping carts warned shoppers: "We must stay inside!" The customers who enjoyed the trust of the supermarket had the opportunity to witness the epiphany of Billa's extreme quality, particularly the boneless roast pork, seasoned and ready to cook. Green electricity stemming from the perfectly clean Austrian water energy flowed through the veins of the supermarket. The store thought sustainably, didn't shirk responsibility, and endeavored to meet its Billa standards. It called on citizens to start their

³ "Long fingers had short legs" is my English translation of the German "Lange Finger hatten kurze Beine", which is an anti-proverb, or a play on a proverb, based on the original German "Lügen haben kurze Beine", which translates in English to "Lies have short legs" and essentially means that lying doesn't get you far. This anti-proverb in the context of the grocery store Billa is meant to tell customers that stealing won't get you far. While the original proverb exists in English, it is not as commonly used as the German proverb, and therefore presents a difficulty in translation since the original proverb is more culturally relevant in the German language than the English language. Though this could have been more simply translated with a sentence such as "Stealing won't get you far," the proverbial reference adds a certain element of style that I felt was important to try to maintain in the English translation. Furthermore, since the source text also imposes a bit of a riddle on the reader, in that they have to interpret what the changed meaning intends, it seems appropriate to provide that same effect to English readers. Thus, the English translation "Long fingers had short legs" adds a proverbial style that is important for cultural understanding, as well as inspires English readers to think a bit more about what this sentence means in context.

dream careers. Some wanted to become head of the deli department. November 11th was the day of the apple. Consumers were expected to celebrate the apple holiday by buying a whole bucket of apples. Crispy fresh apples, red and Golden Delicious. In front of the store, there was a parking spot for dogs. Everything was always getting better. This year, Robert Sommer introduced his book about the poor, which said that the poor were already on the sidelines anyway, and that if they didn't change anything, they would always stay on the sidelines. Robert Sommer was an author, founder of the street newspaper *Augustin*, and co-initiator of the first public bookshelf in the Margareten district. Free access. Donations welcome. Everyone who wanted could take a book. The bookshelf was in the Turkish restaurant Mimoza on Siebenbrunnenplatz. Some people didn't want to sit in the restaurant, so the employees packed their meal in aluminum foil and Styrofoam boxes, regardless of whether they wanted to take out something liquidy, like a soup, or something solid, like a fried chicken drumstick with potatoes and rice. In the square, there was the eternal struggle between love and pure hatred. Everything was always getting better. People didn't have to pay account fees for up to a year. That was a typical offer from Bank Austria. A bank that promised its customers a profit and loss account and provided cards for different purposes. Welcome to Bank Austria. Life was full of highs and lows, but the bank was there for its customers. Account management was free for one year and that was valid for all newly opened profit and loss accounts. There were exceptions. The typical Austrian life lived by the typical man Max Mustermann. For example, Bank Austria gave him an account free of charge for one year. Such generosity was typical for Vienna, typical for Bank Austria. Life was full of highs and lows. The bank trapped its customers. Everything was always getting better. Have cigarette butts? asked the trash bin. Siebenbrunnenplatz was video monitored for the safety of the citizens. Money was in circulation. For only €30, an Austrian citizen could give sight back to a blind person in the third world. The residents of Vienna knew that everything was in their hands and that they weren't allowed to mess up. Vienna was different from other cities. The people said they were okay with the ban on conventional light bulbs because they could differentiate good from bad and right from wrong. Nevertheless, they knew that although energy saving light bulbs would provide good services during their life, once they burnt out, they would cause nothing but headaches as garbage. Normal light bulbs are easy to dispose of properly. Many people wanted to leave atomic energy behind them. They fought for Austria's withdrawal from Euratom. A family was looking for their Siberian husky

throughout the entire city. The dog had been stolen; he had one blue and one chestnut brown eye, as well as a scar under the blue eye. Ball games were prohibited in the square. The merchandise was good. Was everything random? Have cigarette butts? asked the trash bin to a passerby, and he had everything at his fingertips, and he tried not to mess up.

3.

I was always under the impression that our powers were *dark* in a certain way. I myself couldn't answer the question of whether our pessimism was a consequence of these powers, or rather our powers were formed in the darkest, tar-covered depths of our pessimistic souls as gifts of fate. We were led by idealism but only to a certain degree. We practiced lightning and annihilation because we could. We were lonely and took great care to save our self-respect. An acquaintance once asked me why my thoughts were so dark, why I raked around in unpleasant memories, and why I was so grim, and I answered him: "One morning at 5:00am on the corner of Reinprechtsdorferstraße and Arbeitergasse, I had to sell happiness to a snotty kid, and for very little money, in fact. And now when I start to say something, only the blues come out of me." The snotty kid actually did his thing in another city much bigger than Vienna but that made no difference. Basically, the statement was true. Other than this extreme pessimism, this feeling that says nothing will ever be good, the three of us still have something in common, namely, our interest in unsuccessful biographies and failure. We chose Direktorka since we needed a third person in the group because of cosmic balance and the accumulation of power. Her empathy made her stand out from all the other candidates. During our conversation with her, we noticed that in a short time and with minimal information, she was able to figure out what troubled the people around her. She knew whether they had toothaches, or thought their top didn't suit them, whether their cat died, or they themselves were hurt or sick. She was impeccable even though she was self-taught.

I still remember how we cleared everything off the table (except for the fake flowers that were stuck on), so the waiter had enough room to put down three oval metal trays with three coffees and three big glasses of water. He brought each of us a big glass of water because he already knew our habits. He knew that over the course of a couple hours in the dark coffee house on Siebenbrunnenplatz, we would get a drink or two, and in addition, he thought that our

standard of living had to be low just like most of the guests of Sette Fontane. He probably thought that we didn't earn much, and he was right. "We'll eat at home," we said, even though no one had asked us. We were equipped with worthless capabilities and therefore nothing that we wanted to do or could do brought us enough money. Our standing among other people wasn't particularly high. We did really disgusting things in order to survive. You could accuse us of anything possible except that we didn't know what life was like. We knew life in a bad light, like the body of a sick client that we've often bathed and dressed and undressed. We had experience and we had had enough. Mascha started. She got a piece of paper with her proposal out of a clear folder and gave it to us to read. I had to read upside down because I was sitting in an inconvenient place: "This evening, we will think of Alfred, who is 54 years old and recently lost his job. Alfred had been working for the same employer for more than 20 years and now he hardly has a chance to find a new job. Let us focus our thoughts on him on Wednesday at 6:00pm and we will help him collect himself and go on."

4.

Some people are simply made better. They have whiter teeth. They get sick less. Mascha had many advantages over me and Direktorka. She ran faster and climbed higher. In magical endeavors, she went one step farther. She held herself back so she wouldn't stick out within our group. She hid that she had extra powers at her disposal, like the visions that have been haunting her since she looked in Rabija's coffin and saw how Rabija's body fluttered between visibility and nothingness. Occasionally, she was also able to read thoughts, which, in retrospect once we learned about it, explained her behavior at our fateful meeting in Sette Fontane. Mascha was able to distinguish between the important and unimportant things in life. She didn't place her bets on beauty, but rather on health. She never wore makeup. At our meeting in Sette Fontane, she came running in, arriving last, and plopped down onto the velvet-covered bench. Beforehand, she had secretly groped for the vouchers in her pants pocket. But I'll get to that later. She knew that we wouldn't be productive that day, and apparently, she knew what would happen after, so she didn't make any effort with her first proposal. I'll repeat the proposal: "This evening, we will think of Alfred, who is 54 years old and recently lost his job. Alfred had been working for the same employer for more than 20 years and now he hardly has a chance to find a new job. Let us

focus our thoughts on him on Wednesday at 6:00pm and we will help him collect himself and go on.”

She found our reaction amusing because it met all her expectations, but she chuckled quietly. She waited patiently for some of the things that she had foreseen for this day to happen. She only listened to half of what we said. However, she prepared herself for the intervention. She had already known for months that this fateful Saturday would happen in just this way, so she put all her concentration into writing an appropriate script. After the intervention, she stayed calm and collected. Mascha wasn't a child of happiness, but rather a child of survival. She planned the next steps. Within the framework of imposed limits, she stood above life.

Our Sunday columns in the newspaper *Astroblick* always had a religious tint. They evoked group prayers from amateurs, which added to their popularity with readers. When she was still a child, Mascha was catapulted by the war to Austria, to its rural outskirts, which consequently led to her ability to perfectly imitate the condescendingly disdainful, passive aggressive, benevolent Catholic tone. The religion teacher, the only man willing to teach German to the speechless girl in her first months in a new country, instilled this special type of communication and its corresponding lifestyle in Mascha. Direktorka and I started writing these columns because of Mascha, since that was only one of her hundreds of jobs, and we even took great care to adhere to the given style formulas, and in the meantime, we managed to do so to a certain degree. Naturally, our style wasn't as clean and sophisticated as Mascha's. I still remember that the texts that Direktorka or I initially submitted constituted nothing but a nightmare for the editor of *Astroblick*. He complained that the unusual mistakes would have him, the editor, doubt the logic of his own language, which would negatively impact his career. But our work as a group wasn't just limited to the columns that we published weekly in *Astroblick*. In reality, the trade that we practiced under the disguise of an esoteric column couldn't be learned in school. Instead, it involved a knowledge that was passed on from one generation to the next under highly improvised conditions. My knowledge had been crammed into me during my childhood in Belgrade, partly consciously, partly unconsciously, by my grandmother Marija, whose specialty also involved the pigeons. Mascha had also acquired her knowledge in her childhood, with great difficulties from her crazy neighbor in Sarajevo. Rabija had been a merciless teacher, and Mascha a gifted student. Her best power was the lightning of fate. She was equally good at the disreputable practice of annihilation. My power, which was weaker,

unpredictable and dark, had to be controlled by the group. Direktorka joined us with relatively developed telepathic-empathic radars, though she was still insecure and inexperienced, despite her great talent and her willingness to commit herself to her trade. We named the columns, which presented a cover for our paranormal activities, in reference to the magical technology of the same name, *Lightning of Fate*.

Nothing was okay. Mascha should have explained the details of her decisions after she presented the text about Alfred. Normally, a discussion followed every proposal. But this time, something made her insert a long pause into her explanations. While a sinister silence spread in the coffeehouse from a lack of conversation, anxiety brewed within me. I, the one who had previously fought like no other for observing entrenched customs, I of all people, the one who was afraid of entropy and who adhered to every rule, had another agenda on that Saturday. Mascha's pause was also my chance to bring chaos into our Saturday ritual. To do something forbidden. To bring down the protective shield. While Mascha and Direktorka tried to fill the uncomfortable silence by rummaging around in their folders, supposedly looking for some document, I said loudly that I suffered from extreme loneliness. On our work Saturdays, we weren't allowed to bring up private problems, but nevertheless, multiple attempts had been made in recent years. We could easily nip these in the bud, always two against one, and continue on as if nothing happened. But by mentioning my loneliness, I advanced into a type of no-man's land, because I had never taken such a chance even in our most private conversations. On this Saturday, when I made the problem of my loneliness a topic of discussion, we had known each other for more than ten years, working together and exchanging information. Nothing important or unimportant could happen to any of us without the other two knowing about it. We shared our successes and failures. We formed a stable, friendly community and were on the way to growing old together. But there were limits. I watched the other two over the fake flowers and thought: friendship is a complicated board game. I thought that every reasonable person should be careful not to infect their friends with their inner contamination: A reasonable person recognizes the moment in a friendship when sympathy for a valued person turns into contempt for an idiot. I knew the boundaries were invisible, and only careful listening and collective efforts revealed which boundaries went where for whom, which prevented the decline of friendship due to a violation of these boundaries. It had never happened that Mascha or Direktorka threatened my boundaries by talking about things that seemed unacceptable to me. Fortunately, I was able to

leave or change the topic every time before I was filled with disgust. Since I knew about the principle of boundaries within friendship, I was afraid that I would involuntarily violate Mascha's or Direktorka's boundaries. This game was horribly complicated, because an exaggerated thoughtfulness could also be counterproductive. If we hadn't shared our secrets, inner states and insecurities, we would merely be superficial acquaintances and not friends. I always took great care to find the right balance, but on this Saturday, I deliberately ventured out one step over the boundary. My goal was to bring their attention to me and to prepare them for my next step. I took great care to present my problem as intolerable and hopeless. I told them: "I think I caught the modern virus of loneliness on the way from one city to the other. At a time when no one really knew me, the virus crept into my bones and now it bothers me even when I am surrounded by people. I was so lonely in some cities that I ate up to 200 grams of chocolate per day, and not least because the greeting from the vendors in the store on the corner represented my whole social life. I was so lonely in some cities that in my memory, my friends became as big as houses."

Mascha and Direktorka lifted their gaze from their stacks of paper. They looked at me skeptically, murmuring something like, "But it's like that for everyone", and returned to their work. They conducted themselves so elegantly and professionally, as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, I knew that my breach had not been for nothing. The stage was set.

Mascha's proposal to carry out the next intervention for the previously mentioned Alfred, who recently lost his job, surprised me because it was simply bad. At that moment when Mascha put it on the agenda for the day, Alfred wasn't ready for lightning or annihilation. Mascha had never made this kind of mistake before. From Direktorka's facial expression, I could see that she was also disturbed by Mascha's deviation from her usual perfection. Even when the lightning was at its best, when all three of us participated with heart and muscle, Direktorka and I were aware of the fact that it was Mascha who held everything together. Without her, the pivotal link in the chain would be missing, and the whole thing would implode. We said: "Without Mascha, we would have nothing to do with this strenuous trade." Direktorka and I expressed our opinion, one after the other, that with regard to Alfred, we shouldn't do anything, but it wasn't easy to criticize Mascha since she had been a shining example for us for years. We were afraid of her reaction. It was obvious that Direktorka and I were thinking the same thing, because suddenly, we acted like we had planned it. Direktorka tried to lessen the critique. She suggested that we

keep an eye on Alfred for a while before deciding how we should proceed with him. On the other hand, I tried, by all means possible, to steer the conversation toward forbidden or insignificant topics.

When Mascha suggested Alfred, she had definitely deviated from her usual style. So far, she had always tried to cover the whole spectrum of possible fates with her suggestions and had tried not to advance into the sphere of serious politics, but still stay true to her socialist, left-leaning youth. Her candidates represented vulnerable groups, classes and ethnicities, carefully chosen according to the degree of hopelessness of their respective situations. If I had suggested Alfred, no one would've been surprised. My proposals were always a little personal and limited to my immediate surroundings. I could only picture the suffering of people that I knew. My proposals were subjective and hasty. It also wouldn't have surprised anyone if Direktorka had picked Alfred. Her creativity frequently meandered in pointless directions. Certainly, she occasionally succeeded in meeting in the middle and she accomplished something that both Mascha and I would have thought was impossible.

“Is Alfred on Facebook?” asked Direktorka.

Today, of course we know that Mascha's proposal wasn't an accidental mistake or a sign of her exhaustion, but rather that she had an ace hidden up her sleeve the whole time, but because we couldn't know that at the time, we tried to overlook the fact that for the first time in the history of our group, a proposal from Mascha had been rejected. In order to transition to a new topic, Direktorka threw out a safe lure. She asked if Alfred was on Facebook and expected a violent reaction. Mascha said: “Of course I can't know if Alfred is on Facebook! And where should I get that information from, I don't have an account myself!” She threw a powerful look at the group. “I will never make an account,” she said, “because I have no capacity for dealing with all these private fates. I would burn out from pure empathy. I would surrender myself to the ADHD epidemic.” Direktorka and I said that, in contrast to her, we definitely used social networks. From time to time, someone attracted our attention. If their only activity was spreading blatant and excessive viruses, we took a look at them, checked on their actual situation, and would finally take appropriate actions. *1 life 1 click facebook...* The discussion about social networks was one of those discussions that we had again and again. Obviously, we all felt the need to take a stand and update our position. I said Facebook disgusted me and I felt nothing but contempt for the pleading voice that called to me from the blue depth of accumulated *user data*,

that pulled on my sleeves, for the jammer bot that constantly asked: “What are you doing? Where are you? What are you planning? What are you doing on the weekend? With whom?” I said that Facebook reminded me of an opportunist whose attempts at brown nosing disgusted me, but who gradually conquered my social realm anyway and put itself between me and all the people I wanted to meet. But then I recognized that the opportunist could definitely do without me and showed up wherever I wanted to be.

5.

While I watched the waiter of Sette Fontane smoking behind the bar, I realized that he also seemed somewhat rundown. Someone had probably conned him, and half his life had slipped through his fingers. Suddenly, my attention turned inward, and I remembered the day when Mascha and I met each other for the first time at our distant friend Lili’s celebration in honor of her family’s patron saint, and the moment of the short when our powers instantly connected with each other. That was more than ten years ago. Our bizarre lives finally coincided, even though until then, each for our own reasons, we had essentially tried to forget and stifle everything that made us different from everyone else.

Up until meeting Mascha, my power had only agonized me. Like a chronic illness, it prevented me from leading a normal or at least somewhat happy life. After an intervention which had essentially hijacked me by accident, missed its goal or had gone wrong in some other way, I stayed in bed all day, searching for a reason why I should return to life. Eventually, hunger forced me out of bed. I hated interventions, they hit me like epileptic fits. They were unarticulated, somewhere between a curse and an annihilation, with the constant participation of the loathsome pigeons. In Mascha, I saw the perfect opportunity to gain control over my powers and finally share my fate. She saw something similar in me. The best thing with regard to the annihilation of Lili’s son was the fact that it almost occurred without the terrible exhaustion or the suspicion that we had gone insane. While Lili served sarma with nuts at the celebration, Mascha and I carried out our first spontaneous joint annihilation. As a result of this drain of energy, Lili’s heaviest weight, her spoiled son, disappeared from the next room. After my hands and Mascha’s met over the salad bowl and the room spun on its own axis, things changed, both for us and for Lili. But Lili didn’t seem alarmed in any way. She would never notice that

anything was different. Only we knew that her son didn't exist anymore after that evening. The green-bearded, aggressive loner had disappeared as if he had never existed. His belongings had also disappeared. Everyone who had known him forgot him. Lili's son left behind nothing but some first-person-shooter tutorials which circulated anonymously in gamer forums.

Maybe Lili's son had been a good boy somewhere deep within. If he was, he stayed that way in his new form. The people that we annihilated didn't completely disappear, they kept the majority of their previous personality and emerged again under better conditions, but they wouldn't be recognizable to the people who had known them before.

6.

Only after we brought Direktorka into our circle did our power multiply and define itself, and our interventions gained a certain system. Back then, Direktorka had been exhausted by her incessant fight to support the arts, and she welcomed the challenges of our activities as a type of therapy. From one moment to the next, she dropped all her projects with an incredible ease and plunged herself into the magical adventure. Since she still had to make a living, she returned to the less glamorous job that she held before a documentary allowed her to establish herself to some degree in the unstable world of art and culture. She went back to working as a waitress in a restaurant.

On this Saturday, she woke up in her squeaky-clean apartment with properly watered green plants. Direktorka worked Monday to Friday for a small salary and sometimes more, sometimes fewer tips. She passed along a part of this money to a cleaning lady, fully conscious of the perversity of such an expense, because she didn't want to get her hands dirty in her free time. She always drank black coffee with no sugar. A guide to Berlin and a document folder were laying on her living room table. She had become sick of everything because she wanted more from life, considering her ambitions and her level of education. She had come from Belgrade to Vienna in the wake of an overarching crisis in her home country, and it was due to a convenient coalescence of circumstances that she had been able to rise from the stinky fryer and make it into the art world. Strictly speaking, it was an activist group from her homeland that had engaged her as an actor for a film about migration. And since none of the participants spoke a word of German, and therefore no one was capable of editing the film, Direktorka underwent

training for a relevant editing program without further ado. Quality might never have been a criterion for the activist art. All of a sudden, Direktorka became an amateur actress, had her first credential, and at the same time was listed in the credits of a documentary as author. After a chance engagement and two independent short films which were shown at festivals focusing on human rights and minorities, there was no further demand, and it became clear to her that destitute people couldn't survive in the culture world. So she went back behind the counter. She owed her self-confident appearance to her short excursion into the neurotic world of fear and ego, which in turn helped her snatch up a morning shift at the restaurant. Further consequences of her excursion into art were immeasurable pride and insatiable ambitions. She wanted more from life, so she devised plans to move to Berlin. She had prepared her life like a PowerPoint presentation, like the sketches of a long-term project whose completion still needed additional support. She had stowed her life in a document folder.

She showed up five minutes late at Sette Fontane, clean and pressed. Since the benches with their greasy velvet disgusted her, she pulled out a small towel and sat down on it. If everything went according to her, we would have met in Café Museum or at least Café Sperl, but Mascha and I insisted on Sette Fontane. Because of the proximity, the anonymity and because it ensured that no random encounters would bother us. On this Saturday, Direktorka exchanged some hostile glances with the waiter. After that, he put two regular guests on us, and the events ran their course. Violence gives rise to violence, like in the Wild West. In Café Museum, it never would have come to such an incident, but we hadn't met in Café Museum on the Saturday in question, but rather in Sette Fontane, so it made no sense to keep thinking in this direction. Direktorka was next and she made an interesting proposal, but Mascha and I corrected her. We had both practiced magic for a long time, but Direktorka was still a student. She didn't actually have any powers, but we needed her. She took criticism poorly because she felt insecure and took great care to meet all expectations. In her opinion, Mascha and I may be gifted for magic, but not for life. She said we weren't capable of feeling pleasure. She didn't tolerate the people in Sette Fontane, but she put up with everything just to be accepted. A part of her pitied us while another part envied us. Later in the day, Direktorka used a moment when I was in the bathroom to talk to Mascha about an intervention for my growing malice. She said it's especially important now, and Mascha sensed why, but she had her own plans. As things finally took a turn in our

favor, despite all our fears, it was Direktorka who was the happiest. She had gained this ability in her happy childhood.

7.

In principle, our story was classic. The three of us had moved here from the capital cities of poorer neighboring countries and survived, constantly striving toward the middle class to which we felt we belonged with our heart but not with our budget. Direktorka and I came to Austria with a speech apparatus that had already been trained, so our foreign accent stood in the way of a normal life because almost every random acquaintance inevitably led to a conversation about our origin. That was frustrating every time, especially since our origin wasn't our favorite topic, and the countries that we happened to come from weren't in the center of our interests. Honestly, we tried very hard to not take personally the awkward questions about the extent of culture shock that we were supposed to have experienced when we arrived in Vienna. In the face of occasional personal degradations and regular humiliations from bureaucracy, we maintained our composure. I had to work on myself more than the other two in order to not use my power for personal revenge campaigns, because personal revenge was in my blood. Few people know that my late grandmother Marija had annihilated half of her husband's family and part of her neighborhood in Belgrade out of revenge, causing the whole country to be out of balance. Some of the people who had been annihilated had guarded irreplaceable trade secrets, and as a result of their disappearance, their companies had to declare bankruptcy. Factories had to close. This produced a domino effect, and in its wake, the economy went to the dogs. As if that weren't enough, my grandmother Marija also obliterated most of her friends out of spite in order to have the last word in her arguments, and subsequently spent the last twenty years of her life completely alone.

Something constantly dripped down onto us from the people and especially the institutions in Austria, like drizzling rain that falls year round incessantly and after a certain point starts to impact consciousness, but for moral reasons as well as out of precaution, we always tried only to do what seemed right to us: to pull people out of the mud and, in doing so, not get rid of anyone whose disappearance could trigger an economic chain reaction. Of course, the local proletariat only had contempt to spare for us. It was clear that those who had little feared those who had little to lose. From my insistent urging, we helped the umbrella seller, Hannelore Ochs,

on Arbeitergasse, even though she had exploited and conned us a few months earlier. We asked ourselves later how we could have allowed that, but the answer was clear: it was that we lived slightly above our circumstances and always had one foot in the crisis. So we agreed to sew for the standard hourly wage of seven Euros in the small room in the back of the store, day and night, so Hannelore could deliver an order punctually. The problem was that she didn't pay us. A hundred times, we went into the store to ask what was up with our money. Every time, she said she was waiting on payment herself and we shouldn't come anymore, she would contact us. We should leave her alone, otherwise she would go to the authorities. One time she even said, with an umbrella in hand, that she would beat us up. I didn't know how likely that was. She was older than us, and according to Direktorka, not far off from a heart attack. However, we also knew that in a fight, it isn't the younger and the stronger who triumph, but rather the crazier and more bloodthirsty, so we didn't want to take the risk. On the other hand, it was she, Hannelore Ochs, who, at the same time, had to put up with a husband and son who were both alcoholics, who drank away Hannelore's wages and abused her, although mainly mentally. They were all very unhappy. So we resolved to get rid of the two men. After the annihilation, and despite the fact that she had swindled us, we took a look into the store now and then to see how she was doing, and we could see how she annoyed her customers with her stories about umbrellas. She looked happy.

Ever since we had been working together, we've slowly recognized that maybe it wasn't bad to have special abilities. We were able to be soft on others because we were aware of having these powers about which the people around us had no idea but certainly would have wanted to have them themselves. This is how it was with Hannelore. But this power came along with an overwhelming responsibility. Someone else in our position would have tried to change the world. Someone who hadn't already been seized by resignation and covered with it from head to toe like a rash when they were young. Someone who, in contrast to us, would have had no magical tradition backing them up. We didn't interfere with big politics because we were too dumb and at the same time too smart for that. We knew that we weren't capable of predicting the consequences of such risky actions. None of us were big players. We wanted to stay small people and keep ourselves busy with other small people. We had sworn to ourselves to act locally, and I think in the complex world we lived in, that was a reasonable decision. In Rabija's notes, you

could read what Mascha always noticed as well, namely that the power was limited to the radius we moved within. I don't know exactly what would happen if we were to perform an intervention on a person from the media or an important politician. None of us had ever considered such a thing. Rabija's notes said lightning and annihilation were not very effective on people who were well connected to others. This lesson had stuck in Mascha's mind despite the counterexamples I provided. I believed that it was also possible to intervene for such people. But it was much too dangerous. Besides, I could never decide for myself what type of world I would like to live in. Still, in light of certain social developments, we often had to explain to ourselves that we didn't use our power in the name of an ideology. It was the burden of the privileged, and its weight was staggering.

We continually improved our abilities in the field of magic, but we also knew that we would never gain full control over the annihilation and lightning. The annihilation came along with obvious dangers, as shown in the case of my grandmother and teacher - the grumpy Marija - who, in her hubris, had caused an economic crisis throughout the whole region. But the lightning was no child's game either. The difference between lightning and annihilation is that for the former, a problem disappeared, and for the latter, the cause of the problem itself disappeared. Lightning was a random power that frequently struck near the target. A powerful wave of energy gushed over the object of the lightning and it was impossible to predict which direction the object would be sent in. Lightning that was too strong occasionally caused an esoteric-catatonic existence or an all too distinct media presence. At our first meeting, Mascha and I had already resolved to employ both interventions equally in order to guarantee balance and self-control.

8.

On average, we were 33 years old, but for the last ten years, we've constantly been feeling like everything was lost anyway. Mascha exercised like crazy, Direktorka incessantly tried to tidy up the world around her, and I racked my brain, but nothing helped. The weight of depression only lifted during the evenings, in interactions with superficial acquaintances. We liked to call them friends even though we wouldn't ask any of them to drive us to the hospital in an emergency. Our friends organized cultural events. Smoke and sleepless nights seemed duller and duller. They were unfriendly. They opened businesses and let themselves be buried alive by them. They

opened businesses and after that, new businesses, and talked incessantly about them. They had horse-like strength and wasted it on art. They were interested in their social life and in fashion, and always wanted to lose weight. They were perfectionists but that wasn't enough for success. They survived for the whole year without an apartment but were still always freshly shaved and in a good mood. They were reckless and superficial, and got through life in the best way possible. They easily became depressed and avoided alcohol. They didn't have a clue about anything, but they were fond of each other. They were always drunk and ready to let out a neat burp. So much fun and open to new things, they always wanted to get what they asked of you because they were hungry and addicted to heroin. They were always in love with the wrong people and they were aggressive. They talked nonsense. They were only accepted by those around them when they were stoned because otherwise, they behaved unbearably arrogantly. Dumb and with no awareness of their limitation. They had been raised by their grandparents, and you could tell. They had money and they were not afraid of sharing. They were looking for someone who was like them. They drank coffee with each other and discussed the quality of the coffee. The younger ones had more self-awareness and work discipline than the older ones. Our friends waited in vain for some luck and raced after a standard of living that their income didn't allow. They underwent gender reassignments, visited exhibitions and went to demonstrations. Sometimes they intended to undergo gender reassignment and got stuck halfway. In uncomfortable situations, they threw up from anxiety. Due to feelings of guilt, their legs failed to work, and they could hardly walk. They led lives of vampires, they loved sex. They took care of their younger sisters. They collected empty bottles to get a little bit of money. They were much too crazy and much too normal.

We had gotten to know them in their better days and didn't annihilate any of them. As long as they still had the power to drink and smoke, they were strong. As long as they were still up to date with information about parties, they were well connected. Therefore, the three of us even went to clubs or concerts more or less regularly to test our vitality. Mine was weak.

Considering my allergies and my pale skin, sometimes I was surprised that I was still alive at all. I was weak. A nothingness could throw me to the floor, but I had the ability, even after bad breakdowns, to get up again and again with the new spring and return to my original position. Of course, I was thinner and paler every time, but also more experienced. I thought life and the world were unfair. I remembered that Marija, according to her own account, had told her

husband at one time that theoretically, he could beat her up, but only once, because she would poison him right after. I loved bean soup and hated stuffed peppers. Anxiety motivated me and inhibited me at the same time. I worked on myself without interruption. Recently, little green sacks had started to grow on my neck. For certain reasons that were rooted in my family affairs, I was hurt and angered, I stood with my back against the wall. In the weeks before the meeting, I was struck by an increase in the frequency of the pigeons and overall potential for injury. It had gotten serious, but I had an idea for how I could change my situation.

9.

While we chatted with each other, the waiter wiped down the smooth surfaces and carried glasses from one place to another. He approached us strategically to listen in on our conversations. Direktorka, who always did everything precisely, was bothered by the way the waiter used the cleaning rag. Direktorka's work ethic was very high, no matter what work she was pursuing. She was an excellent waitress, in contrast to the employees in Sette Fontane, who apparently only fiddled around. I saw how Direktorka took out a slip of paper from a clear folder and considered how easily she had gotten over the fact that she was no longer an artist. She read out her proposal:

“(3/4 8:00pm) This evening, we're thinking of people like the 14-year-old Christoph, who is desperately looking for an internship after graduating from middle school. These young people are just at the beginning of their life's journey and are full of hope. Let us come together in the circle of light to give them power so they will not fall victim to resignation and may recognize their chances.”

“What a shame that no one hurled a lightning bolt at our generation,” I said.

Mascha smiled and stealthily rolled her eyes. I took this as her reaction to Direktorka's proposal. Direktorka's ambition to aim the lightning of fate at a whole generation of middle schoolers was a bit naive, but we stayed silent. We let her recognize the mistake by herself. Our power was not infinite. The effect of the lightning became exponentially weaker as the radius grew.

“Sometimes, the lightning is like nothing. Sometimes it's like everything. The purest homeopathy,” I said.

Super detox super cheap super sale superbrands super gifts super prices super fast mobile internet. Give prices the red card. Read, we take care of the prices.

The example Direktorka had brought forward showed that she had a good relationship with work. Her attitude was halfway positive, she liked to reward hard-working people who had bad luck. Completely the opposite of me, who was only interested in difficult cases, in terrible people. I preferred to avenge everyday offenses in the neighborhood. I knew that I would be up next after Direktorka. My palms were sweating, and my heart was thumping. My behind was asleep from sitting in one place for a long time. As expected, my proposal was targeted at the termination of a hopeless situation, in contrast to Direktorka's proposal which aimed to improve a difficult situation. I had always preferred annihilation. I didn't believe in the lightning. I hated life because I wasn't good at it. I hated the world because I only found my way in it with great difficulty. These days, it seemed to me as if I had always wanted to surrender, only I didn't know how.

10.

The years in food service, especially in the dark, sticky coffee house Sette Fontane on Siebenbrunnenplatz, had taken their toll on the waiter's mental health. Later, Direktorka claimed that she had been suspicious of him right away that day, so she had been keeping an eye on him from the beginning as a precaution. It perplexed me that he took so much care to clean the tables because I couldn't remember him ever spending so much time beyond the bar. "We were careless," Mascha finally said. About an hour after our meeting in Sette Fontane started, as the first regulars arrived to cure their hangover and the waiter whispered something to them and pointed at us, it should have been obvious to us that something wasn't right. Later, Direktorka claimed she had heard him tell his regulars: "Ask them. Ask them!" Still, she couldn't have suspected what would happen after that. Particularly as one of the regulars actually came up to us and said: "Do you guys know what's going on here? -- it's about sex," and grinning, returned to his bar stool. At the time, we only thought that it probably actually was about sex for him. Instead, we should have kept an eye on the waiter. Since he rushed right up to our velvet booth armed with a small knife. "What are you guys laughing about?" he asked.

We'd never be able to find out exactly what story he had put together in his paranoid mind while he had eavesdropped on our meeting. "Did you guys steal something?" he uttered briefly. Later, Direktorka said there's a phenomenon in food service called waiter fever. After a certain amount of time behind the bar, while the waiter suffers through the murmuring of strange conversations, he starts to imagine that everyone is just talking about him and every laugh indicates a plot against him. He starts to hate and suspect customers. People who are affected by waiter fever usually sink into apathy or fight with the first customer who comes along. But in Sette Fontane, everything was more intense. Darkness, velvet, the stench of the fryer, and in addition, the waiter fever. Short and explosive. I should have predicted it. I must have suspected it as the pigeons began to cover Siebenbrunnenplatz. The small knife. "I saw how you guys stole my happiness!" he yelled, or something like that. There was no point in trying to convince him that we hadn't stolen his corroded happiness. That only made him even angrier. He raised his hand and tried to stab me. Even though I was depressed, I didn't want to be stabbed to death by this waiter with his small knife. I hated injuries. I was lucky that my friends jumped up to my defense. Mascha took a stool and smashed it on the maniac's back. We had quickly regained control over the situation. The next thing I saw was him slowly rising up, and we determined that he wasn't hurt. Mascha patted him on the back. Obviously, his aggressions had faded. Direktorka, who knew some things about waiter fever, convinced us that the danger was past, so we ordered another coffee. A cappuccino.

11.

Together, we were a serious opponent. We were all different but, in my view, we made a good team. Direktorka herself understood how to differentiate between good and bad, she was precise and had a talent for organization. My gift was analysis and warning. On the other hand, Mascha stood back most of the time and only stepped in when we were up to our necks in difficulties. She was not afraid to get her hands dirty. She was strong like a cockroach. I always said: "If another bomb was dropped tomorrow and we'd all be killed by the radiation, Mascha would come crawling out unscathed from under some rubble along with the other cockroaches and continue her life with dusty wings." An unbelievable instinct. Certainly, her talent for getting her hands dirty was a double-edged sword, as she admitted herself. "Since I'm not afraid to wade

around knee deep in shit, I am constantly up to my neck in dirt and mud that no one else wants to get near,” she said one evening after she had drunk too much red wine. I can remember that sentence well because the whole evening was exemplary. Direktorka had gotten two theater tickets from a friend, and the three of us split the cost for the third ticket and we watched a performance of “First Ladies”⁴. After the performance, we drank a lot of wine because it cost almost nothing at this indie theater. After the third glass, Mascha was seized by self-pity and started to draw comparisons between herself and the characters of the play: “I am Married! Since I’m not afraid to wade around knee deep in shit, I am constantly up to my neck in dirt and mud that no one else wants to get near.” She meant that just because she could do things others couldn’t because it made them sick, it was always simply her who also had to do what others didn’t want to. I said I would like to be like her and not such a sallow creature that fainted at the first sign of danger. Direktorka noted that her boundaries were more hygienic and she, Direktorka, could very well get her hands dirty in a metaphorical sense, just not in the literal sense.

We had this conversation while we walked along Margaretenstraße. Meanwhile, the theater had closed, and very soon, our walk home gave us the opportunity to put our abilities to the test. As we stopped shortly because I was explaining that my fainting spells ran in the family and you couldn’t do anything about them, a very drunk man trotted past us. I grabbed the handlebar of my bike and accidentally pressed the bell while I was talking about myself. I suddenly heard Mascha say: “Stop it!” because she saw that the man was trying to turn to the source of the unpleasant noise and was in danger of losing his balance. “Stop that, stop ringing the bell!” said Mascha, but the man had already fallen over and hit the back of his head on the edge of the sidewalk. After that, a scene followed which confirmed all of our assumptions: While the man bled from the back of his head and a big red pool formed in a few seconds, Mascha reached in her purse and pulled out a scarf and laid it under his head which caused her to be covered in blood up to her elbows. On the contrary, I ran away into a side street so I wouldn’t faint and called the ambulance from there. In turn, Direktorka gave Mascha words of support from a safe distance, and after the ambulance had taken the man away, she took out her antibacterial gel and carefully disinfected Mascha’s and her own hands.

⁴ This is a play entitled “Die Präsidentinnen” by Werner Schwab, written in 1990.

12.

A human creature stays in an unfavorable position sometimes for months and years and can't get out. But then a small blow is enough. Something that makes the whole situation a little bit worse. Then the creature gains strength, stands up, and begins to change things. This formula, which holds true for almost all revolutions and for numerous personal fates, applied to the waiter in Café Sette Fontane. Our blow had freed him from a year-long patina, and we could see how he pushed the curtains to the side, polished the glasses, and created a better atmosphere. And despite the season, right at that moment, a ray of sunshine came through the window. We even thought we recognized Lili, whom we hadn't seen in a long time, crossing Siebenbrunnenplatz in the distance. We thought we sensed that spring would come soon. That the waiter had ironically gone off on me certainly meant that my life unmistakably was exceedingly prone to uncomfortable surprises and difficulties. Bad omens, a bunch of compromises, an inedible mush. I was ill tempered. The waiter profited from his minor fall, and only a half an hour later he happily mopped the floor. I was next in line to share my proposal. Everything was the same as always. We had special powers and hid them. We wrote an esoteric column in the newspaper *Astroblick*. My first proposal was nothing other than a warm-up exercise.

“3/10 7:30pm Regarding the lightning of fate, this evening we think of Albert, who can't talk about his emotions. He grew up in an environment where you didn't share fears and worries, so he thinks he has to do everything alone. His reserve ruins his relationships. Today, we aim all of our power at Albert, so he learns to confide in his partner.”

Mascha and Direktorka immediately realized that what I was calling lightning of fate for our column was actually a proposal for an annihilation. “You're becoming crueler and crueler,” said Direktorka, who often found it difficult to agree with an annihilation. She didn't feel capable of evaluating which existences should be replanted, because, as she said, she wasn't such a Nazi compared to Mascha and me. “Lay your arguments on the table,” said Direktorka. I explained that Albert was a man who was not capable of showing his emotions in his love life simply because he had no emotions, and that it wasn't he who had suffered, but rather the unfortunate women who clung to him like flies for some reason. These women even constantly asked themselves where they had gone wrong, while Albert led a calm and comfortable life. When a relationship broke up, he made a little bit of an effort, just enough to enter the next one. I

proposed a revenge annihilation on the grounds that Albert was a completely normal emotional criminal. As normal as a gray tabby cat. I wanted to annihilate him for fun so the world would become a tiny nuance better.

“Does he have a family?” asked Mascha.

“Just a partner who wrote to *Astroblick*.”

“Colleagues?”

“He’s replaceable.”

Mascha said: “The older you get, the more you resemble your grandmother Marija who annihilated half of Yugoslavia. On the other hand, each of us has their own style. Both in life and in annihilation. Our moral balance is based exactly on that. I don’t agree that revenge annihilations should be carried out in the name of any disenchanting partners, but do what you want.”

“Do what you want,” said Direktorka as well. And so I received permission for a revenge annihilation. But generally speaking, it had never been my plan for this proposal to be waved through so easily. Why were they both so compliant? And what would happen with my actual concerns? So I admitted that I still had reservations and asked for a postponement until next week.

13.

Two hours and two coffees later, cookies and candy bars hidden under the table couldn’t help anymore. We were hungry. In such cases, we usually took a break and went home to eat something, or we ate sushi, kebab, or pizza. As a rule, we split up because that was the easiest solution to deal with our different nutrition ideologies. However, we didn’t want to interrupt the meeting this time because each of us had prepared an important proposal based on the negative developments in her life which she saw as a way out, at least for herself. Direktorka noted that she preferred eating at home, but she would make an exception this time and order something in Sette Fontane. We asked for the menu. “Who knows where they get their meat,” I said, “I’m suspicious. It’s probably not organic.”

“People exaggerate their concerns about where food comes from,” said Mascha.

Direktorka asked us to skip over this discussion but it was already too late. As usual, Mascha and

I started to act like a cat on a hot tin roof which had gotten us burned many times before⁵. It has happened that we quarreled because of food and we steered clear of each other for the whole day. It was a typical case of sounding out each other's boundaries. Whenever it was about food, Mascha and I were plus and minus. Since we were hungry and nervous that day, the conflict broke out all on its own. Food was one of the few topics we did not agree on. I said the way to health is through the stomach, and healthy nutrition is my religion. I said, soon I would change my diet according to the principle of the five elements, and in addition I would only eat meat from the free-range production of small businesses. "Super," said Mascha, "and some people have absolutely nothing to eat." Mascha thought it was nothing other than a perversion to put too much life energy into thoughts about nutrition. I answered that thoughtless nutrition is bad for everyone. We were hungry and we fought. Direktorka was bored because we had already had this conversation many times. "Kebab is expensive in Vienna," she said, "in Berlin it only costs half as much."

That was a well thought out chess move. Before Mascha and I, divided in conflict, knew what happened, Direktorka succeeded in changing the topic and striking up a propaganda speech about Berlin. As soon as we noticed what was up, we tried to interrupt and cut her off, but we didn't stand a chance. I thought our meeting would lose its seriousness and was worried whether I would be able to make my most important proposal at all. All three of us ordered a grilled ham and cheese sandwich.

Direktorka said: "In Berlin, the people are more open. Everything is cheaper there. It's livelier. Berlin is not a village." "Berlin," Direktorka chattered on for five minutes without pausing. Then Mascha succeeded in saying: "One time, I was there for three weeks in July and it rained every day."

⁵ This sentence uses an extended idiomatic expression. "Tanz um den heißen Brei" (literally "dance around the hot porridge") means that they are avoiding directly saying what they think, dancing around the topic instead of confronting it. Then, Marković adds "in den wir schon mehrmals hineingefallen waren" (literally "into which [the hot porridge] we had often fallen") to show that this strategy often had unfortunate consequences for them. A literal translation would not make any sense in this context, and in order to preserve the idiomaticity of the sentence, I wanted to use a communicative translation with a different idiomatic expression that could provide a similar effect of expressing the idea of avoiding something and being punished for it. Within the context, I think my choice ultimately can be understood to have a similar meaning to the original. "Like a cat on a hot tin roof" shows how the two characters are unable to directly confront the topic of conversation because it is too "hot" to deal with. The recurring element is then expressed by "which had gotten us burned many times before", expressing that their avoidance had backfired while maintaining the reference to the idiomatic expression.

“Lousy climate,” I confirmed. Meanwhile, Direktorka didn’t listen to us, just like we didn’t listen either, but rummaged around in her lightning of fate documents instead. Absently, I stared at the pile on the table before me and suddenly it seemed to me as if I had seen her own picture among the photos of the candidates. My vision went dark, as if someone had hit me on the head: Obviously she was pursuing a similar plan to mine. But before I could manage to do something (dump coffee on the papers?) or say something (beat her to the punch and present my proposal?), Mascha, who had also seen the photo, said: “What is that? Is that you? Give it to me, I want to see it.” Direktorka blushed. “That’s my next proposal.”

We had always strongly defended our points of view, but the more years went by, the weaker our persuasions became. We had retracted our pricks. Of course, we had never been actual cacti, but we had never expected that we would transform into mimosas so quickly. What had gone wrong? It was the times. Life in Vienna flowed in its lovely indirectness. Life in Berlin flowed in its strange orderliness. On the other hand, life in Belgrade flowed through any type of absurd canals. Through the window, we saw Lili again, who was obviously going back the same way.

“Take a look at my life,” said Direktorka, after she had arranged some of her photographs in chronological order. “1) Happy and healthy kid with a small green spot on the neck. 2) Direktorka as a student. 3) Stylish teenager in a new red dress. 4) Young woman in front of a supermarket, waiting in line for oil. 5) Young woman with a university degree in front of the bus on which she will leave her hometown in search of a better life.” In each photo, the little green sack on her neck appeared a little bit bigger than in the one before. I knew that meant nothing good. “6) A photo from the website of the restaurant “Konoba”: A young woman presents wine in a polished glass, the guests are happy. Click. I don’t want to end like that! I think I have the right to a second chance,” she said.

Up until this point, a silent agreement had existed among the three of us that we wouldn’t carry out any interventions on ourselves. Too dangerous, too definite, too unfair towards the others. Direktorka had suddenly crossed the line. What was inconvenient for me was that I had planned to cross the same line that day. What Direktorka requested - that we gave her a lightning of fate so she could successfully move to Berlin - was unacceptable for multiple reasons. She had her role to play in our lives. We were three, not two friends. Mascha said that Achilles had also been asked whether he wanted to lead a long, meaningless and pleasant life, or a short,

meaningful and hard one, and that, from the perspective of people nowadays, he had given a dumb and wrong answer.

“You will go to Berlin, you will forget us, it will be -4 degrees Fahrenheit, you will freeze. You will stand on Alexanderplatz and ask yourself what pushed you to make this absurd move. You will inevitably come across the snotty kid, and that will seal your fate. Better stay here where we ride the tram and can go for walks, don’t go there to play Russian roulette with the snotty kid,” said Mascha.

Life is hard. Life is full of highs and lows. Urban lifestyle, liberate marijuana, run for your life. Paylife. The price of something does not reflect itself in its monetary value, but in the amount of life we are ready to give in exchange for it. Prison conditions are extremely harsh. While some expand their capital and their political power, the lives of others get more and more uncertain, poverty grows, and society splits more and more.

Part 2

1.

“It has practically no human weaknesses and its power is enormous.” Mascha and I looked at each other and confirmed with a subtle nod that the time had come to tell the story of the snotty kid. “Can I tell it?” I asked. “Of course, you saw it up close. I’ll chime in when I think it’s necessary,” said Mascha. Direktorka wanted to hear the story, but she didn’t like that once again Mascha and I had the upper hand and indicated to her for the umpteenth time that she would never be our equal within the group. I started the story with the smug intonation of an expert. I said every woman/man who wanted to carry out an annihilation must accept the fact that she/he is not the only one of her/his type. Because colleagues are already at work in most cities. However, they naturally hid from the eyes of the public, so it was difficult to obtain relevant information. Nevertheless, rumors about some particularly influential individuals or groups spread from time to time. I said the Ōendan, a group of masked fighters who specialized in helping people on the brink of burnout with a magical dance, are allegedly active in Tokyo.

I mentioned that the snotty kid was also famous. Then I recounted how I myself tried to begin a new life in Berlin before Direktorka joined our group, but at the time, I had the bad luck of meeting the snotty kid on Alexanderplatz. “I had no idea that you wanted to go to Berlin,” said Direktorka. I said that meanwhile my story was supported by facts that I was unaware of at the time.

2.

On the day I came to Berlin with the idea to start a new life, a blonde, bare-footed boy in a new but strikingly thin coat was walking across Alexanderplatz. The square was icy and pale, and a weak wind blew from the northeast. The small boy’s five-year-old feet plodded on the concrete, making an unpleasant sound similar to the heavy, slow drops of a fading summer rain. However, it wasn’t summer. But rather a terribly cold winter. Another kid would just be packing up his backpack for school at this time of day. Another kid wouldn’t want to eat his fried egg and would instead smear Nutella on a slice of brown whole wheat bread. He would get into the car,

get out of the car again and go into the courtyard of the kindergarten. But the young boy from Alexanderplatz wasn't under parental supervision and was not prone to the flu. In the winter when I arrived at Alexanderplatz, when the earth had already been frozen for weeks and the tired population went crazy with apocalyptic prophecies, this kid often stood in the middle of the square bursting with a repellent force and independence. His superhuman immune system blatantly mocks all anxious, grown-up nail-biters.

My decision to go to Berlin came at a time of insecurity. People were under pressure because of uncertain forms of flexibility, life was made up of countless separations, motivational letters, declarations of bankruptcy and renewed ascensions from the ashes. People were forced to trot incessantly on the treadmill of society, they had no time to turn themselves around and reflect upon the fruits of their labor. A tabular résumé shouted like a hydra with four hungry heads: with the head of career, the head of health, the head of lifestyle, and the head of love. Millions of people constantly had to make sacrifices to the heads of the hydra in order to stay in the race. Anyone who paused fell down as if struck dead. I wanted to settle down and search for happiness in Berlin. And even now after many years, the flow of people, the hundreds and thousands who get off trains and planes there, expecting opportunities, freedom and fun for themselves, doesn't peter out. But that day on Alexanderplatz, I was waiting for a distant relative who was supposed to hand over the keys to an apartment. Pretty soon, the situation turned out to be questionable.

Direktorka eyed me skeptically, and her facial expression revealed that she was gritting her teeth so she wouldn't say anything unpleasant, for example that my failure resulted from a fatal combination of three characteristics: arrogance, depression, and incompetence. But I didn't care what Direktorka thought anymore. I wanted to tell her the story of the snotty kid. I told her she had to understand the circumstances at the time.

We remember that year because of the threatening apocalypse that all the media was reporting about even though it was total nonsense, and because of the snotty kid that wandered around Alexanderplatz deciding the fate of the residents and new arrivals, which absolutely no one wrote about. Berlin was a city where everything was possible for everyone, every day. A modern, big city, a city of pleasure and of different lifestyles, a city of cheap properties and the unemployed. A city where you suddenly find love or death, where you discover or lose an apartment or plunk down everything and could start anew to make everything better on the

second time around. People came from the country and from other countries to try their luck. Every day, a million people on one side and the snotty kid on the other side. On holidays, when tons of people gathered on Alexanderplatz, the barefoot child caught everyone's eye and as citizens, they felt obligated to check the circumstances. Later, they told their friends that it wasn't just a normal helpless kid. A Prussian rigor in the eyes, an expression that had no business being on the face of a child. As soon as a conscientious citizen's gaze met that of the snotty kid, their sympathy for these naked feet disappeared. The boy looked so scornful and malevolent that even the greatest philanthropist was obliged to turn away. Not everyone knew about the snotty kid, but he wasn't unknown. It was generally understood that the snotty kid would bring bad luck. If you met him shortly before you made an important decision or wanted to apply for a job, that was a bad sign. People said: "Be careful that the gaze of the snotty kid doesn't touch you." The snotty kid presented no danger for a psychologically stable, wealthy lawyer with an apartment and a happy family, but such a person was usually nothing other than a projection of other people. The snotty kid showed his icy eyes to the uncertain, the poor, the sad. People who were afflicted with depression. People who already felt the desire to die as soon as they woke up. People who didn't feel well and needed to stay in bed all day. The voices of the depressed constantly rang out in the unbearably cold Berlin nights. Voices that sang their solo.

3.

1)

I fly to Berlin, I stay there.

The men in Graz abused me.

2)

Dear God, send me an angel.

No, I will send the snotty kid.

3)

Friends, don't take me for a fool,

when you have no use for me,

Don't abuse me.

4)

You abandon me, what should I do?

I don't like anyone else, only you.

That won't do. That won't do.

No. It kills me too.

5)

One morning around half past three in the morning,
when you did something terrible.

6)

I have a friend,

she drives a cool car.

How did she earn that?

Surely not with piano lessons.

7)

Some people want a lot of money,

some want wine and song,

but I just finally want a diagnosis,

I cry about it all night long.

8)

Once I had a job,

but I was too sloppy.

Today I'm free to be sad.

9)

I walked home from the zoo,

my blood sugar level sank,
and I didn't want to go on anymore.
Oh, oh, oh, oh.

10)

When I drink, I'm nasty and mean.
I look for a beating and conflict.

11)

The woman I love has departed,
she left me this morning,
and her face was gray.
She had a knife in her bag,
with this gray face.

12)

The poor Ingomar,
his daughter is an asshole.

13)

But one day, one day, people,
I will change my mind.
Oh yes, I will stop drinking so much.

14)

And the times will come,
so it will be.
You can't stop the winter.
The times will come,
I won't say any more.
I will pass through this door.

15)

Stay home, my love,

you are a slut.

I feel best, girl,

when you get out of my way.

16)

Wake up, love. Don't be so quiet.

17)

The old man Jens doesn't feel well.

The lady with dark circles under her eyes.

What should he do?

18)

I'm going. I won't stay gone long.

I know you will miss my whining.

19)

I went to the train station.

I took a look at the schedule.

The train was there.

I couldn't afford the trip.

20)

I am so sad

that my feet hurt while walking.

That wouldn't be so bad,

but my tongue hurts when I talk.

21)

This morning it was so dark,
I was so sad,
I couldn't lift my head,
I couldn't move.

22)

If you've ever been depressed,
then you know how I feel.
If you've ever been depressed,
my friend,
then you know
how an unemployed person feels.

23)

I walked and walked,
until my shoes got wet.
I walked and walked and walked,
until my feet got wet.

24)

Don't tremble and don't worry
and don't cry over me.
Don't cry and don't worry
and don't tremble because of me.

25)

But one day, one rainy day.
But one day, one sunny day.
I will wake up,
I will clean the apartment.

26)

Damn, vodka in my thoughts,
when you catch me drinking.

I drink.

It is dark and cold.

27)

Oh dear, I don't have a girlfriend,
now the economic crisis is coming.

I don't need a girlfriend anyway.

28)

Oh, wake up, love,
wake up and don't sleep so soundly.

Give me what you promised me,

Before going to sleep, I want sex.

29)

If only I had listened to my mother,
then I wouldn't be here now,
but rather at home in my bed.

30)

I will still sing this line,
and then I'll sing no more.

I am sad, dear God,

I think I'll have to go.

31)

Now I have a wife

and I want to treat her well.
She wants to go drinking
and fight, ooh, and rage all night.

32)

I went to church,
they wanted me to pray.
I got down on one knee,
sister, no words came to me.

33)

Here I am, sister,
in the cold again.
The man I'm sleeping with
is damn stupid.

34)

Women and children cried:
Where should we go?
Their houses were destroyed
and they aren't safe anywhere.

35)

Breakfast here, dinner in Frankfurt.
I announced myself,
why didn't you pick me up?

36)

I have nothing against drowning,
but the water is so cold.
If I have to leave the world,

then preferably with painkillers.

37)

I can sit here
and watch reality shows.
I can observe
what my girlfriend does.

38)

I started to whimper.
I burst out crying.
I had spent the money,
and I don't know what on.

39)

Earlier, I was empathetic,
I couldn't see you suffer.
Now it doesn't matter to me
if you live or die.

40)

My friend from the eco district
crochets all day.
Sister,
if you don't stop crocheting,
you will lose your mind.

41)

As surely as a sparrow
holds itself in the air,
there is a job

for me in the world.

42)

Have you ever woken up
with toads in your brain?

43)

The Chinese doctor healed me.
I stand up, I'm dizzy,
but he predicted that.

44)

Sometimes I feel well,
most of the time, I don't.
Most of the time I want to continue to live, sometimes I don't.

45)

I'm drunk and inadequate,
it doesn't matter to me.
If it bothers you,
you can sleep on the couch.

46)

I woke up this morning
and took my shoes.
I love a woman I can't satisfy.

47)

The alarm clock rang this morning,
but I turned it off.

48)

I pack my things
and spit on your most beautiful dress.
I'm leaving you, old maid,
and I'm never coming back.

49)

I'm going to Kassel,
I'm not coming back until fall.
If these bouts of depression overcome me,
I won't come back at all.

50)

It is hard to love you
with your new body.
Believe me when I say,
I'm dying of self-pity.

51)

"Now!"
I once said to you, sister,
"now!"
But now I don't say anything anymore.

52)

I woke up this morning
and had three different bouts of depression.
I woke up this morning
and laid back down.

53)

I don't want to get married.
I want to sleep with you.

54)

A cent is a cent.
A Euro is a Euro.

55)

He is homeless,
he is never well.

56)

I am not depressed, people,
only dissatisfied.

57)

I have nothing to wear,
I think I am terribly ugly.

58)

Either you make me crazy,
or I'm going crazy.

59)

I will commute on this highway
until I drop dead.
Please, my love, when I die,
bury me deeply.

4.⁶

I told Direktorka that I would have frozen to death that day if I hadn't been able to go into a fast food restaurant every now and then. I hadn't arranged anything specific with my distant relative so I didn't know how long I would have to wait.

In contrast to those people who would never move voluntarily, who go to college, have children and eventually die in the same place they grew up, but also in contrast to those who gladly and constantly move, I only changed cities a few times, and only when I was forced to. I was afraid of new beginnings and I was convinced that this anxiety was justified. I was playing a game with no clear rules. The older you are when you start over, the rarer these strokes of luck become, which, perhaps in the form of good acquaintances or accidental encounters, take you from the bottom of the societal hierarchy up a couple levels.

I found myself in this situation because of the disgraceful behavior of the distant relative in question. It was typical behavior of my relatives. They always promised a lot and gave nothing. Alexanderplatz was deserted and the few people who had dared to go out on the streets at all in the terrible cold took great care to bury their heads as deep as possible into their down jackets. They ran across the square and disappeared into the entrances to the subway. At 1 degree Fahrenheit, the skin starts to burn. People were weak, nature was sneaky. People ran for shelter and found it in Burger King. I ordered a coffee and sat down behind a pillar in the hope that it would be warmer behind the pillar, but it wasn't warmer. At the next table, two boys sat and chewed their favorite hamburgers in the relative silence that prevailed in Burger King, and it was obvious that it wasn't friendly chewing but rather a patiently conducted, ruthless fight.

Whopper €3.69 Double Whopper €4.69 Big King €3.69 Big King XXL €4.69 X-tra Long
Chili Cheese €4.25 Double Steakhouse €4.79 Double Cheeseburger €2.79 King Menu €5.29
Chili Cheese Burger €1.49 Bacon Cheeseburger €1.49 Bacon Cheeseburger €1.49 Cheeseburger
€1.19 Hamburger €0.99 Whopper Jr. €1.99 Best of Chicken Griller Chicken Classic €3.95 Long

⁶ This chapter, and continuing until the end of Part 2, describes the narrator's experience in Berlin, particularly on Alexanderplatz. The myriad of advertisements, shown in the lighter text color, bombard the narrator, permeate her consciousness, and overwhelm her with the incessant pressure to consume. This is reminiscent of Alfred Döblin's work *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which is even mentioned later in this chapter. This contributes to the alienation that many immigrants feel when faced with the overwhelming pressure of consumerism because they often face economic difficulties and cannot afford the products constantly being advertised to them. The protagonists of this novel have themselves been stuck in this relentless cycle of poverty but continue to use their powers to help others in this situation, eventually helping themselves to attain middle-class status.

Chicken €3.69 Crispy Chicken €3.69 Chicken Nugg@s Burger €1.29 King Snacks King Fries small €1.49 medium €1.95 large €2.29 King Wings 6 pc. €3.19 9 pc. €4.19 15 pc. €6.69 King Nugg@s 6 pc. + 1 Dip €3.19 9 pc. + 2 Dips €4.19 20 pc. + 3 Dips €7.19 Onion Rings 6 pc. €1.99 9 pc. €2.99 Specials Apple Fries €1.29 Country Burger €3.39 King Delight Salad incl. Dressing €1.99 Grilled Chicken Wrap €3.29 Extras upon request K@chup Yogurt Dressing / Balsamic Dressing Extra Cheese Extra Serving of Bacon Extra Serving of Tomatoes free Extra Serving of Onions

I told Direktorka that while I sat there and warmed up, Alexanderplatz came alive a little bit, and that some people sat in front of the Burger King to drink in the cold and show others that they didn't give a damn about anything and that they braved the wind, but no one could say what kind of state they were actually in. I told her that my distant relative texted me to be at Alexanderplatz at 8:00 and then sent a second text which more or less said that he still had to go somewhere and would possibly stay there for a while, but that he would call in half an hour or an hour. I told her that he asked me to wait longer for him at Alexanderplatz, that my neck got stiff from the cold and my backpack slowly became torturous.

Tram tracks ran across Alexanderplatz. At the tram stop, no one smoked because smoking was forbidden. No one lit a cigarette like they used to, when they hoped to be able to summon the tram by lighting a cigarette. That was an old school rule. The cigarette was the magic wand of city dwellers, but with every new regulation, the magic decreased. Everything was announced and calculated. It was a time when trams refused alcoholics, tough guys, stinkers, germ carriers and pistoleros. A time of tram-quarantine. Order accompanied social progress.

"I don't get the point," said Direktorka.

"Wait, I'm still getting to it," I said and looked sharply at the dusty fake flowers on our table so I could focus better on my memories from that year. My goal was to present my experience in its repulsive entirety to Direktorka. I said that at that time Berlin was a disgusting ice cube for new arrivals, and after just a short time on the street, you had to find somewhere to be inside straight away, but there were hardly any opportunities to warm up anywhere without spending money.

Only in a big mall would you not be directly asked to consume. However, people who were obviously poor weren't allowed to go in. The visitors of the mall were plagued by fatigue and flu, but at least they were allowed to hang out there for a longer period of time during

business hours, Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 9:00pm and Saturday from 9:00am to 7:00pm, by the shirts and in the makeup department, between cashmere sweaters and clearance items. You couldn't sit down anywhere, and entering a mall meant entering into a contract where the step through the revolving door was the signature with which the visitors committed to bearing the legal consequences of theft and furthermore to paying the mall management fifty Euros for any trouble caused. I didn't want to steal anything, but I also didn't want to buy anything, everything seemed too expensive to me.

Mirror €29.95 Shower gel €7.95 Body lotion €11.95 Hand cream €9.95 Mascara €12.95 Eyeshadow €7.95 Nail polish €4.32 Soap €4.95 Massage brush €9.00 Massage belt €9.25 Bathrobe €134.95 Bath towel €54.95 Hand towel €17.95 Guest towel €8.45 Cushion cover green €12.99 Cushion cover pink €14.95 Cushion cover purple €5.95 Placemat round €19.85 Placemat square €22.95 Bathbomb €3.99 Bath soap, 100g €3.95 Apron €19.95 Kenwood Toaster €69.99 Kenwood Coffee machine €99.99 Kenwood Electric kettle €69.99 Solac Hand blender €39.99 Philips Iron €49.99 Krups Nespresso machine €149.99 KitchenAid Stand mixer €549.00 Flowers in pot €10.95 Etagere €22.95 Tray, white €39.90 Cushion €25.95 Coffee maker €36.90 Eau de toilette, 30ml €39.95 Clock €49.90 Total: €1,621.69

I told Direktorka that I waited for a long time and looked around, and that as soon as the temperature rose a little bit, the square would be flooded by desperate young people with humiliating jobs.

Of course. Young and cheap! Exploitation with insecure monthly wage#

In the name of Samaritans, sick bears and black babies, they stuck out their hands covered in cold sweat, introduced themselves with their real names and their only honor, and tormented their unwilling conversational partners for so long until they finally coughed up their account numbers.

“Oh please, I'm not stupid,” said Direktorka.

“I'm responsible for telling the story,” I said. “Do you know what was written on the house across the square at the time? A quote from ‘Berlin, Alexanderplatz.’⁷ ‘Reunion on Alex, freezing cold. Next year, 1929, it'll be even colder’ used to be there. And do you know what was there when I was there, in the freezing cold of Berlin? At that time, it said: ‘With such a first-class view, who wouldn't like to be an office.’”

⁷ This is Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel, as previously mentioned.

I continued with my explanations. I said that because of the ruthless conditions, an enormous amount of people applied to be Grillwalkers⁸. A job that anyone could get if they succeeded in carrying a sales booth out of an office which hung on a strap around their neck when they got to the sales site. And I said that hundreds of them soon rushed to Alexanderplatz with little hot dog kiosks around their necks to sell hot dogs in sun, rain and snow. I told Direktorka that these people sold the occasional little sausage for €1.20, of which they were only allowed to keep 20 cents for themselves. I explained to her that the work was cumbersome and that every couple hours, someone threw in the towel because of physical or psychological problems. I said that the rumor soon spread among the Grillwalkers that there was more to it, that in truth it was a competition, a kind of reality show without cameras, and that the one who showed the most stamina would be awarded a prize. I explained that it was said that only one person could carry a kiosk around their neck longer than all the others, only one, without breaking their back and losing their mind from boredom, and only one could become the king of the Grillwalkers. I explained to Direktorka that the rumor about this reward intensified the competition and made the Grillwalkers' work even more dangerous and more horrible than before, and that the crazy people immediately replaced the careful ones as much as the ruthless people replaced the considerate ones, as was always the case in times of crisis, and that in this February when I eventually got hungry from waiting and ordered a sausage, only six Grillwalkers were still in the game and this number sank to four after my order. I recollected to Direktorka that the vendors believed only one of them could carry the kiosk around their neck long enough, only one of them wouldn't break their back. Only one wouldn't lose their mind from boredom. And only one could be king, and that with my decision to buy a sausage, I inevitably caused a fight between two vendors who were standing on the same corner.

In light of this supposed competition, which I couldn't have possibly known about at the time, it was only logical that one vendor shouted to the other: "At least we don't sell rotten meat!" at which point the other countered: "Neither do we!" and they continued their fight even after I had already left, and then they pushed each other with their portable kiosks for so long until one fell over so the sausages flew about and the plastic sheet that was required to protect against splatter fell down. And it was also no wonder that after all that, they both left their positions out of fear and because of the sustained humiliation.

⁸ Grillwalker = someone who walks around with a portable grill selling food.

“Tell her about the control of the automat,” said Mascha, whom I had already told about my traumatic attempt to move to Berlin. So I recounted that the backpack I had been carrying on my back the whole time got extremely on my nerves, that the weight bore down on me and made me depressed, so I resolved to invest my change in a locker.

Four hours, 1 Euro 50 cents. Be careful not to lose your key. Direktorka became restless again, so I said to her: “I know why I'm telling you all of this. Nothing is ever as you imagine. Every small misstep can lead to such complications that a labyrinth suddenly opens up in front of you and you will never find the exit again.” I said that I noticed that my phone was in the front pocket of my backpack only after I had locked it in the locker. But the aforementioned distant relative could call any time now. If you forgot something, you can open and close the locker once again for free within two minutes. I told Direktorka that unfortunately the two minutes had already passed, so I paid because it was impossible to have a discussion with the machine. Dear Berlin visitors, the use of the locker must occur exclusively according to the rules of procedure. I said to Direktorka: “If you ever go to Berlin and some coincidence leads you to Alexanderplatz and you want to lock your backpack in a locker - turn around and run away because the system is disgusting and complicated.” I told her that a lot is prohibited. It is prohibited to enclose credit cards, credentials, jewelry, laptops, cameras, telephones, acids and bases, flammable materials, letters, photos, documents, weapons, drugs, extremist material, living creatures and plants. For people who beg professionally and in an organized manner on Alexanderplatz, for people who loiter around the square, as well as for so-called hawkers who intend to temporarily store their wares, it is likewise prohibited to use lockers for luggage storage.

After a certain amount of time, I was fed up with waiting for my distant relative, so for my own sake, I resolved to call him, and since I had a foreign SIM card, I thought it might possibly be cheaper to call from a phone booth which could still be found on Alexanderplatz. I said to Direktorka that phone booths had always been nothing other than torture chambers for the very poor, they were desperation toasters, broken love dealers, short of breath dragons, which delivered bad news, and that the set formula of evil sounded as follows: Lift the receiver off, put in a coin. The machine doesn't make change.

“I’m telling you this because I’m not sure if you’ll tell it to yourself. You want to start fresh in a new city? You seem to have forgotten how hard a beginner has to concentrate just to survive. Every mistake results in a financial penalty for you.”

On my short, unsuccessful telephone call which only took me to my distant relative’s answering machine, I immediately lost 2 Euros. Clearly, my distant relative didn’t have important business to handle. Surely, he was just sleeping as I called him from the phone booth. Surely, he was hungover and poisoned from the previous day. Surely, he had the feeling that the room spun around him while he could hear his wife washing the dishes in the kitchen loudly on purpose to finally wake him up. Surely for months, the first thing he thought every morning was to strangle her, but at the same time he knew that she was tougher than she appeared. Surely, he thought how nice it had been before they lived together. Surely, he had moved in with her for economic reasons. Surely the roaring TV ads from the living room bothered him. Surely his life had always been crappy compared to the TV ads. Surely no fragrant white bed sheets surrounded him, but rather greasy surfaces. Surely, he never encountered seductive shine in his life, but rather always unwashed cushion covers. Surely, he had more blackouts than beautiful memories. Because that’s always how it is when you’re in financial distress. Work life and personal life mix together in a disgusting way. And you can only turn to your girlfriend and rent your own place, which you clutter up with all of your furniture and most of your things, to the grown-up daughter of your distant relative.

“Then came the thing with the mole,” said Mascha.

I didn’t let myself be rushed. It was a long story. I said to Direktorka: “After the unsuccessful call, I abandoned my enthusiasm, and I uneasily met my dull eyes in the mirror of the mall where I kept walking around for a long time. The mall was relentlessly brightly lit, and the people who wandered through it were brutally resolved to get a hold of a discounted product as fast as possible. Complete loneliness, whose weight always corresponded to that of the whole population, descended over me. Every cashmere sweater and every silk shawl represented a cold person who would despise me if we met. I got the shakes. It wasn’t pretty in the mall and I had to get out again.

Do you feel lonely in German society? Join us. We are an international group, we offer friendship and support. We offer free classes for languages, sports, yoga, Tai Chi, music, dance, as well as therapy. For two hundred Euros a month (the covered period of time can be longer or shorter than a month) we offer meals and housing. Our house also offers psychotherapeutic support. Sports, housing. Suitable for all generations: Berlin. Sale, for our loyal friends.

On the square, a man whose stomach fell down sharply over his pants like a teardrop was eating noisily at the corner of a house. His nose was red and covered by a grid of huge pores. Glasses like a pair of binoculars. Like a mole, he channeled his way through the blanket of snow towards me and said: "Please excuse me, I would like to ask you something." With a friendly but unsure smile on my lips, I said: "Go for it," at which point he asked: "Can you take me home with you?" His question flattered me because I was proud of myself for apparently looking like someone who knew their way around the city, but I said: "Hardly, I only arrived in Berlin today." Right away, it became clear to me that things were more complicated because he responded: "Surely you have a place to stay."

I said to Direktorka that like everyone else in my family, I often spontaneously promised more than I could deliver, and that I offered five Euros to the man who had approached me like a mole because I thought he had been stuck with no shelter that day for some reason. But while I instantly regretted my hasty reaction in light of the eventual consequences, he said: "No, thank you. I would give you fifty Euros." And he winked at me. I told Direktorka that even in a moment of the worst boredom and loneliness, fear made it impossible for me to continue a conversation with someone who offered me fifty Euros for sex, so I had to leave quickly.

Sexy KFC. Freshly breaded everyday - is that still fast food at all? Sex and violence. Too sexy for this T-shirt? Steal the night. Fairy tale-like "all inclusive" weeks. With <3 and love locks. "Forever yours." On the occasion of Valentine's day, for a wedding, as a token of love, in memory or simply because. More and more couples immortalize themselves on bridges.

5.

Intoxication with Vicks NyQuil reached its peak that winter in light of the low temperatures. Berliners swayed through the city absent-mindedly and with artificially lowered body

temperatures. On that day, I was also among the sick beings. I smoked cigarettes for relief and shivered to keep warm. The hour-long wait wore me down, memories of many terrible moments overtook me. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day. The fourteenth of February is Valentine's Day.

I dried my tears with my scarf.

I told Direktorka that life is full of bad days, but every couple years a catastrophic day comes and sends everything to hell like a bomb. I said no job is safe enough, no relationship strong enough, no person resilient enough, no stomach full enough to resist this power that destroys everything that you have created and accumulated. I said to Direktorka that after a few hours of waiting, under the influence of dark thoughts, I had resigned myself to the fact that the questionable relative wouldn't show up, and that at that point I succumbed to the surges of adrenaline that flowed through my body, after I had formulized the thought that now I had to start my life anew on Alexanderplatz from far below zero without any help and without housing.

Attention, Attention, Attention! Employees wanted, potential colleagues with equally low income. This is a serious job with an income of 500 to 2500 Euros a month and even more. The company is called Multicount. Presentation of the system at a five-star hotel in Berlin. Get in touch if you want to revive your dreams and satisfy your needs.

I already had certain ideas. Absurd seminars were the future of the art of survival. People sold their stories about overcoming weaknesses for a lot of money. In doing so, it was more important to offer understanding for the problem than a solution. Money, partner and body. Anxiety, bad poetry.

Learn to speak in public.

At least a few beginners would register for every imaginable course. I didn't know which direction I should go in. The times were difficult everywhere. Life was only good for the strong and resilient. I had the feeling I was getting a fever.

The small lexicon of hypochondria, of imagined diseases, 12.95 Euros. The capital should pay for the crisis!

What protected me from freezing that winter on Alexanderplatz was a down jacket as well as the fact that it wasn't so easy to die. I put all my hope in my survival instinct and in the

possibility of building a life for myself from nothing with a lot of luck and my muscles. I defined life as an income and a small apartment.

Flowers in the store today.

While I prowled aimlessly on Alexanderplatz, I immediately saw my reflection in the window of a flower shop. I only examined myself from the corner of my eye, without turning my head to the window display, and tried to catch the most objective view of myself possible, like an uninvolved passerby. That didn't work since I had failed at this for my whole life. The passerby always looked at me furtively. In any case, a job was advertised in the display window, the flower shop was currently looking for a salesman or saleswoman. And there was nothing in the advertisement about needing experience. I could apply.

Become your own boss. Flower 2000 - contact us! We ship flowers throughout the whole country. In store and online www.flower2000.com.

I told Direktorka that I was scared to enter the flower shop, scared that someone would ask me to talk about my favorite flowers or to name even one of these flowers. So I decided to first prepare myself for this test in an Internet café and come back later.

A business enterprise is looking for an employee for the opening of a branch in Berlin. Part time or full time. For research, consultation or data processing... Appropriate qualifications necessary.

Tchibo apprenticeship in retail m/f, beginning August 1, 2012. The experience in retail is diverse, exciting and opens many perspectives. With us, you are a team member from the beginning, and from week to week you transform your own store into a new world of shopping and enjoyment. Your goal and ours is to inspire every single shopper with consultation and sale. So that we succeed, you will develop into an expert together with us and our coffee of the highest quality as well as our products that we update every week. Do you want a real prospect for your future? Do you want to give our company a new face? Then we look forward to you and your application at www.tchibo-careers.com. Only at Tchibo.

I said to Direktorka, everything nauseates the person who was in search of a new life, but the irrational hope of the gambler pushes them further. They were in shock and didn't even notice small disruptions. I said I took great care to be strong and smart like never before, I was full of optimism and believed in change. "Today I know that the decision about my life in Berlin,

about leaving or staying, about life and death, that this decision was made by the snotty kid in my first hour on Alexanderplatz, and I never had any chance at all.”

I explained to Direktorka that I didn't know that at the time, so I wasn't afraid but instead went off to eat a kebab. I said that even before I had started to feed myself sensibly, I considered the kebab a disgusting and dirty pleasure with yogurt sauce, a forbidden sin that I committed again and again out of hunger. A good friend in times of crisis, strengthening and cheap. The perfect choice for the situation I was in.

I told Direktorka that I was even in the middle of collecting all the coins that were in my bag in front of the Turkish restaurant when I saw an Alexanderplatz beggar who was carrying a far too big blonde child on her back. I recounted how she slowly shuffled past the open kitchen window of the restaurant and the kid stuck out his hand while passing by and pulled something out of the kitchen. I said I wasn't able to see what the kid took but our eyes met, and the look of the kid was downright alarming. I said I read in his face the willingness to hurt a person without batting an eye, and I smiled but that didn't help anything because the kid fixated on me hatefully and showed me his teeth. I told Direktorka that I was already aware at the time of the fact that in a duel, it was not the stronger person that triumphed but rather the crazier person, so I stood still, petrified, for a couple more minutes after the kid on the back of the unknown woman moved on, and for a moment I forgot what I wanted at all, but the loud rumbling in my stomach reminded me again.

All images resemble the corresponding meals. All prices in Euros include tax and service. Menu 1 - Doner kebab with 0.5l drink = 4.80; Menu 2 - Durum doner kebab with 0.5l drink = 5.80; Menu 3 - Turkish pizza with 0.5l drink = 5.80; Menu 4 - Bratwurst sausage with 0.5l drink = 3.80; Menu 5 - Doner plate with fried potatoes and 0.5l drink = 8.80; Menu 6 - Margherita pizza with 0.5l drink = 6.00; Menu 7 - Chicken schnitzel with fried potatoes and 0.5l drink = 5.80; Menu 8 - Sausage in curry sauce with fried potatoes and 0.5l drink = 5.60.

After long consideration I ordered Menu 5. That was certainly expensive, but I needed a break from poverty. I had rice instead of potatoes. It could have been an extraordinary meal if the rice hadn't been oily and overcooked. But it was neither the right place nor the right time for high standards; the food tasted good, especially after I mixed the rice with the yogurt sauce to outsmart the fat. I had to proceed strategically so the yogurt sauce lasted until the last bite. While I was still eating, the kid emerged again in front of the window. He was standing with some

people in the closed garden of the restaurant and pointed at me with his finger. I waved to him and smiled, but the kid just scanned me with his serious and hostile gaze. I only finished eating after the kid left a quarter of an hour later, I gave the waiter 9 Euros and 50 cents and had to go out in the cold again. In order to survive, it was necessary to have a roof over your head; many were looking for exactly that, and many offered just that, but from year to year it became more and more expensive. It's hard to say when exactly I realized that my relative would never appear, it was a process that came in multiple waves. So I had to manage on my own. I was surrounded by a huge, spacious area that was covered with a thin sheet of ice, and fresh snow was piled up in certain places, white sterile surfaces spread all over, a bitter wind blew.

I'm looking for an apartment in this area for rent or purchase (price around 370,000 Euros) without an agency fee. Send offers to mydigibox@gmail.com by July 31. Your product could be advertised here. For rent. Information at (030) 234-5977.

I told Direktorka how a street dancer near the world clock suddenly rolled out his mat in front of me and with that events gained momentum, and I said that the street dancer turned on his boom box and started warming up. So I went in his direction to watch. I said that I threw a coin in his new plastic cup while he warmed up to Madonna's "Like a virgin", and that it flattered me how intently he looked at me because he was good looking and I liked him, and that I couldn't have suspected that he was nothing other than the first sign of many indicating that my plan to settle down in Berlin was doomed to fail.

Although he was performing his dance in 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit weather, I had no sympathy for him because, like I already explained to Direktorka, he was good looking and seemed healthy. I said that incidentally, sympathy was no longer in fashion back then and barely anyone even felt the urge to offer it anymore. At the time, people liked to hear: "I don't need any sympathy," even when they absolutely needed it. I told Direktorka that the dancer turned up the music and lowered his nose in the direction of his chest so it became clear that the performance was supposed to start, but he posed in this position for a couple minutes until a big enough crowd of curious onlookers gathered around him. I said that he started to dance shortly afterwards, and I wanted to describe the dance to her, but it was hard to describe. I told her I forgot to mention that at first, I had the impression that he was looking at me the whole time, but that at the end he wanted to crush and hurt me, and very soon after the beginning of his dance, I felt forced to perform evasive maneuvers in order to avoid these blows. I said to Direktorka that the situation

became more serious after each of his pirouettes, and that I was frightened after he mercilessly stepped on my foot, and after he saw the fear in my eyes, he deceived the rest of the audience with an unbelievably long, smooth Harlem Shuffle (to the right), made a circle and distanced himself, only to dive toward me once again with even greater energy. I told Direktorka that after that I fled into the dm⁹, and although as I turned around and I saw that he didn't follow me, I kept going anyway. I explained to Direktorka that today, after a safe amount of time had passed, I assumed that his goal wasn't to kill me but rather to frighten me. But since I didn't know what was yet to come that day, I rushed into the dm where I immediately felt safer. There, I was allowed to be¹⁰. There, products were on display that I could afford. I said to Direktorka that on that day in Berlin, the dm probably saved my life, but that was no wonder because the dm had always been an excellent therapy for every semi-poor person who went insane. Dm. Here, I am human. Here, I go shopping.¹¹

“It's hard for me to believe you,” said Direktorka, “those kinds of things don't happen to anyone.”

“Those things don't happen to anyone who is standing on solid ground and has two friends to go and drink coffee or wine with several times a week, and who doesn't hang out in public places, but such things, and with that I mean absurd hostilities and accidents, indeed happen to a person who comes to a city without adequate resources.”

I told Direktorka if she already thought the attack of the street dancer and my escape into the dm were exaggerated and unlikely, then there was no point at all in telling her about the snotty kid and his part in the whole story. However, I said that considering the circumstances under which we were currently talking, I knew very well that she believed me, so I continued my story. I said that after the encounter with the street dancer, my situation on Alexanderplatz deteriorated from minute to minute and that I left the dm several times but turned back every time because some homeless person or a street vendor attached himself to me or a subway security officer chased me away. It appeared to me as if on this day, a number of different individuals were against me for no reason, but it turned out that they were people who regularly

⁹ A popular drug store in Germany and Austria.

¹⁰ This is a reference to Goethe's *Faust*, in which he says “Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich sein”, translated as “Here I am human, here I am allowed to be.”

¹¹ This is a dm slogan also playing on the quote in the previous footnote from Goethe's *Faust* - the slogan in German is “Hier bin ich Mensch. Hier kauf ich ein.”

lingered on Alexanderplatz or worked there, and that all of them were working for the snotty kid. I told Direktorka that surely the dancer only physically intimidated me, but the security guard of the subway station followed me everywhere and as soon as I stood still, he warned me that it was prohibited to loiter here, and that the homeless people stalked me and laid down at my feet, while the street vendors mobbed me with their kiosks and cardboard boxes and urged me to buy a fur hat. I explained to Direktorka that I didn't have a way out anymore. That they would have mobbed me. That suddenly around thirty homeless people, beggars, security officers, alcoholics, students with jobs and street vendors (also including women) came up to me and I couldn't have known what they were intending to do to me, so I broke out in tears. I told Direktorka that the snotty kid subsequently appeared. I explained to her that my fear was justified because not everyone would escape from the snotty kid with their life.

The police president of Berlin is asking for your help. Attempted homicide: On Saturday, June 9, around 4:10, a 23-year-old man was critically wounded with multiple knife wounds. The assault occurred on "Alexanderplatz" in front of the bar "Alex Oasis" during a mass brawl.

Description of the perpetrator:

- Male
- Approx. 25 years old
- Approx. 5'2 - 5'6
- Black hair
- Dressed in a black T-shirt

The investigators ask:

- Who observed the incident?
- Who can provide details about the preceding mass brawl or the groups of people involved in the mass brawl?
- Who made additional observations that could be connected to the incident?

In a few words, I told Direktorka that the circle of freezing, rough faces opened up in one spot and the woman that I had seen a couple hours before leaving the Turkish restaurant took the terrible kid from her back and put him down in front of me. I said that the people who formed the circle started to shake, that I risked fainting and I couldn't say anything anymore because my throat had closed up. The snotty kid looked at me from below and said:

"This here is Alexanderplatz. Please be quiet."

His voice was too low for a kid and too loud for a single person. It was as if it were coming out of all the loudspeakers of all the devices on Alexanderplatz at the same time.

“You are no longer permitted to live on this square. Please use the bus station and go home immediately. Please do not step foot in the city again. Caution, every unauthorized stay in Berlin will be penalized. You commit yourself to payment in years of your life. Toilet free. Entrance prohibited. Putting down heavy loads is not permitted in all of Berlin. No admission. No entry. Only access for emergency exit. Don’t use in case of fire. No forgiving no forgetting. No return of remaining balance.”

I told Direktorka that first and foremost, I understood the threat of the snotty kid on an emotional level, so without considering it very much, I set off to the bus stop to buy a return ticket to Vienna because it became clear to me that the matter wasn’t funny anymore and I could be happy to be alive at all. Direktorka watched me, she didn’t know what she should ask. I said that Berlin made short work of me and spat me out, that of course I only became aware of the details at the bus stop, where I encountered the mole who had offered me fifty Euros for sex a couple hours earlier. I said that the mole recognized me and asked if I was going home, and he said he already suspected that I had encountered the snotty kid because I was the type, and then he told me everything he knew about the snotty kid. “On the whole, you were lucky,” said the mole, I told Direktorka, “the snotty kid punishes in a number of ways. Look at me. I’ll buy your return ticket if you give me a blow job in the bus station bathroom.” “Fortunately, I could still afford to refuse,” I said to Direktorka.

Now you can access the internet wirelessly from here: Welcome Alexanderplatz. For you, “Investment”, for me, “Home”. From the historic advertising column to the cutting-edge digital Bluespot - whoever is out and about in Berlin doesn’t get past the wall. For cities, for people: Wall City Toilet. Valentine’s Day is on February 14th. Valentine’s Day is on February 14th. Valentine’s Day is on February 14th. Not an escape route, do not use in case of fire.

Part 3

1.

We spent a lot of time together, but we were very different, both in appearance as well as in personality. Our friendship was a three-person game where every decision required a majority vote, so one would usually be outvoted by the other two. Fortunately, different alliances emerged depending on the topic, and in the meantime, we had learned what type of confrontation would mean fighting a losing battle from the outset for whom. Direktorka's problem was that Mascha and I almost always sided with each other thanks to our extensive experience whenever it involved the use of magic. With regards to magical matters, Direktorka's subordinate position was clear from the beginning. Several times she had accused us of deliberately misinforming her but that wasn't the case. I don't know why we didn't tell her more often that she had an extraordinary talent for organization and that we would never be able to maintain our database or collect information without her. We needed her and we were ready to do anything to keep her in our group. "How did you even come up with this idea to move away, with or without lightning?" I asked, "You of all people know how exhausting it is to build a new life. You even told me about your recurring dream where you see a new world war breaking out and suddenly have only five minutes left to pack up the most important things and then you panic in the dream because you can't decide what to take with you."

"No, I told you that," said Mascha.

Mascha suggested moving the decision about the lightning for Direktorka as well as her move to Berlin to our next meeting. She said it was an important decision that we should not make without deliberation. Direktorka agreed to continue the discussion next week. As a matter of fact, she had absolutely no choice. Now in retrospect, we can hypothesize that this was a deceptive tactical move on Mascha's part because she surely must have already known at the time that there would be no next time. Mascha pulled out a new sheet of paper.

"4/25. For today's lightning of fate, I ask that we collectively think of Sebastian from Floridsdorf. Sebastian is just 22 years old, but he has already made countless mistakes in his life. At seventeen years old he was addicted to heroin, and ever since, he struggles in the claws of

addiction. He tried to detox several times, but he never succeeded. Let us help Sebastian find enough strength for the so-called normal life.”

I had to laugh as Mascha said: “the so-called normal life.” I had to laugh because I imagined how she had fought with herself to use the phrase “normal life”, and how she had lost the battle because “the normal life” wasn’t usually part of her vocabulary. The proposal was solid. Mascha’s idea was that we would instill enough strength in the young junkie so he could endure the boredom and emptiness of a middle-class existence, even in its worst form, namely without money. It was clear that such a person would never get used to the routine of couch, work, bus and misery that he would have to endure until he had paid back all his debts. Without the lightning of fate, he wouldn’t be able to make it. But it wasn’t clear at what point his life could be considered normal, so Mascha had qualified the corresponding phrase. I also laughed because I knew that the editor would automatically remove the word “so-called” and that “normal life” would appear in the published text. A long time ago, we had stopped fighting with the editor of *Astroblick* over individual words because it was pointless. The editor was a person who stuck to the rules like a robot. On the other hand, he was the only person in the newspaper editorial staff who took his job seriously.

The editorial department of *Astroblick* was a joke. The whole publishing company was based on questionable contracts between Casinos Austria and the editor-in-chief. Our column and all the other sections were only the backdrop for huge, double-sided advertisements for Casinos Austria, which was obvious for most people, but it didn’t seem to bother the readership of *Astroblick*. The readers of *Astroblick* were like a herd of sheep. But their esoteric humility served a positive function. It helped our activities. In this newspaper, which was solely a scam, a few cynical art students wrote horoscopes that were several pages long, while the three of us - three marginal existences which had also agreed to fill a page for a below-average wage - wrote the section “Lightning of Fate.” Nevertheless, the newspaper was able to repeatedly mobilize several thousand people who concentrated their thoughts at the same time on a specified date on the “lightning of fate” candidate that we proposed. The energy from the readers flowed into our energy and intensified the power of the intervention. This mass of energy was vital for an annihilation or a lightning of fate to succeed halfway smoothly.

2.

The waiter had turned on the TV because of the sports broadcast but the program hadn't started yet, so everyone in Sette Fontane collectively watched the news along with the short culture segment. We needed a break. Direktorka rolled her eyes, as always, whenever one of her former colleagues appeared on the screen. "I don't know who is worse, the influential middle-aged men or the banal activists," said Direktorka. Mascha said it was important to stand up for certain things so the world wouldn't be destroyed. "I already know that," Direktorka said, "but these people are disgusting." Direktorka said the art scene that she had been a part of for a long time was the purest breeding ground for liars, and she had to see with her own eyes how it was nothing but hot air. But Mascha and I knew her reactions to culture segments on TV were above all a result of a displaced anger based on her own failure. Because for whatever reasons, Direktorka never had a chance in the fight for financial resources in the culture scene. I think that was because of her excessive pride, but Mascha maintained that it was the god of chance who decided on success and failure. For a while, Direktorka tried nevertheless to settle down in the scene that disgusted her, but eventually she gave up. While we watched the news along with the culture segment in Sette Fontane, I contemplated how up until now we assumed Direktorka would have come to terms with the loss of her minor fame, but that wasn't so. Apparently, the dissatisfaction gnawed at her. She wanted to leave the city.

"It is definitely not your fault that the last film was a flop," said Mascha. "You should have taken on the script and the camera and should have conducted all the interviews."

"Don't remind me," said Direktorka.

"Why don't you shoot a film about all of that?"

"I don't know."

"The film could be great!" said Mascha.

"Drop it," I intervened, as I noticed that Direktorka was on the brink of losing her temper. She was already nervous anyway because we had moved the discussion about her move to Berlin to next week, but now Mascha, in her well-intentioned tactlessness, pushed her to remember her failed, underfunded project. My goal was to get both of them in a good mood by the end of the meeting because otherwise I would have little chance of pushing through my own proposal which I had set aside for the end. Either way, my prospects were poor, but I still didn't give up hope. I tried to play a double game. On the one hand, I helped Direktorka out because I was

counting on possibly coming to an agreement with her. On the other hand, I sought a special relationship with Mascha, knowing well that without her participation, not even hundreds of agreements with Direktorka would be of use to me.

Through the years, my faith in Mascha's talent for lightnings and annihilations had solidified. Sometimes it seemed to me that she didn't need me at all and that she even could have annihilated Lili's son back then just as effectively without my help. Nevertheless, she claimed that wasn't the case. Mascha never wanted to admit the extent of her power. She said she would just do her job. "Just like you guys," she said, but we didn't believe her.

Shortly before our meeting in Sette Fontane, Direktorka asked me why Mascha was so modest, and I explained my theory to her. I said, in my opinion that was because of Rabija. Mascha's fear of admitting the extent of her power to others as well as to herself was rooted in her anxiety that she could lose her mind or suffer a moral breakdown. She was afraid of losing control, she didn't want to become the deflector for the powers of the lightning. I told Direktorka the story of Rabija, of her death and of how Mascha had taken me with her to Sarajevo for the funeral a couple years ago. "She took me with her because she didn't dare endure that all by herself."

Mascha had been shocked by Rabija's death. But not me, who hadn't known the deceased, so I could observe the people and events from a certain emotional distance. I listened to the gossip stories that dealt with the unbelievable circumstances of Rabija's death and her insanity. In Rabija's apartment where Mascha wanted to pick up a couple books that she had inherited, I rummaged through the study and came across Rabija's diaries. As far as I could conclude from those and from the gossip stories, Rabija had been a completely normal girl at one time and later a completely normal young woman, and then she was one of the many who had survived the war in Sarajevo. She liked reading coffee grounds, she watched OBN-TV and ate Mikado chocolate. Of course, she lost her life under unusual circumstances.

#Sarajevo

In the year when Rabija died, Sarajevo lived on. Some things were under video surveillance, but aside from that, people had a barbecue, played soccer, celebrated, organized competitions and chatted with each other in the neighborhood. People came from other cities to spend a crazy

weekend in Sarajevo. “Let’s all go to Sarajevo!”, they said, and they were ready to pay in a number of different ways: Raiffeisen¹², Visa, Visa electron, Maestro. It was no longer Rabija who observed her fellow citizens from the window, but rather a big brother from elsewhere. A student was looking for a roommate for an apartment on Ulica¹³ Alipašina across from the Bosna Movie Theater, 062 121 427¹⁴. In that year, the dance school Eurorhythm opened for children and teens, for couples, older people and singles. People didn’t know what they were supposed to do when they were alone, so they learned the tango, waltz, rock, rumba and cha cha cha. They were expected by the dance loving Hadžihasanović family who lived on Ulica Kulovića without a house number. People really didn’t know what to do when they were alone, their souls frothed up and gushed in all directions like shaken Coca-Cola. Why did you shake the coke? Coca-Cola was the medium of interpersonal relationships. Gas would be delivered to their house. On Ulica Ferhadija, in the house across from the business school, someone was renting two nicely furnished student apartments - 062 291 662. Many years ago, Mascha’s family had responded to a similar advertisement. All her life, Rabija carried a great responsibility because of her powers. We are thinking ahead with you. In 1999, Sarajevo engraved its gratitude toward the citizens of Barcelona in stone. You could be sentenced to prison for up to three years for the destruction, annexation and illegal exploration of this national monument. The citizens of Sarajevo founded a council for a better future. In mourning, many families notified their relatives, friends and neighbors that a beloved person was gone and that the burial would take place at the city cemetery “Lav.” A girl named Ivana opened a hair salon for dogs. She combed the dogs’ hair, bathed them, trimmed them, filed their nails and cleaned their ears. Whoever wanted to be nominated as a representative of the community had to submit their candidacy at the local council. The highest quality accommodations were up for grabs at the lowest price. Vans transported goods and passengers. In Sarajevo, identities were a work in progress, the citizens refreshed themselves with ice cream and Coca-Cola. Samir and Duki cheerfully greeted guests in the café on the square. Coca Cola, refresh yourself! Coca Cola, refresh yourself! Coca Cola, refresh yourself! Coca Cola, refresh yourself! Coca Cola, refresh yourself! Coca Cola, refresh yourself! A ten-day ticket that was valid for all modes of

¹² A large European bank with headquarters in Vienna, Austria.

¹³ The Bosnian word ‘Ulica’ translates to ‘street’ in English.

¹⁴ Note that the typical amount of numbers in phone numbers used in Bosnia and Herzegovina are different from that in the United States.

transportation cost 31.20 convertible marks¹⁵. Customers were obligated to take the receipt and keep it with them within the vicinity of the sales location. Paja Taxi was our taxi. Paja Taxi, your taxi! As the only surviving relative, Mascha received condolences before the funeral. In Sarajevo that spring, dresses were sewn in grand style for graduation balls, and even though they were extraordinarily well crafted, you could purchase them for a low price. The tailor shop Unikat offered a variety of services. From time to time, one or the other person completed the transition into the afterlife, ahiret¹⁶. Young women and men went to parties and to work. Foreigners learned the Bosnian language. Unemployed people tried to convince other unemployed people to take a course in web design with them in order to secure a successful future for themselves. Bosnia was a social country, a national state. One of the world's foremost experts for photo epilation lived in Sarajevo. The citizens' lives were in the hands of the number one. It's all about experience, trust and quality. Ninja, Ninja, Ninja lived in Sarajevo. Fuck Onek. City dwellers smoked the products of the tobacco factories. Their city was clean and beautiful. They remembered Skender Kulenović. That year, the soldiers founded the Visionary Democratic Party. Its chairman, Adnan Ivković, had been the commander of assault troops during the entire war. No other party chairman could offer such a qualification. The goal of the soldiers' party was to unite all veterans and to get their people into the local councils so they would fight for laws there, which benefited all soldiers. Independent of name. A soldier must never betray another soldier. The multicultural individual built the world. In 1977, on the birthday of the much beloved comrade Tito, the residents of Sarajevo began an epochal environmental protection project in order to create the best possible living and working conditions in a socialist, self-governed community, for themselves and for future generations. At the time, many families were applying for assistance for their sick family members. If you dialed a certain phone number, you could help collect resources for sick kids who were supposed to be treated in foreign countries. You could travel to Tunisia for just 379 convertible marks. Mak Dizdar had already been dead for a long time. There were diplomatic educators among the citizens. Air-conditioned vans travelled to the ocean, to the mountains, to seminars and to the European Union. Very convenient and not particularly safe. On public transportation, people adhered to the rules when getting on

¹⁵ Currency in Bosnia and Herzegovina. 1 Bosnia-Herzegovina Convertible Mark equals approximately 0.56 United States Dollar.

¹⁶ Serbian word for 'afterlife' borrowed from Turkish.

and off because behavior that followed the rules shortened travel time. This way, you could avoid traffic jams in Sarajevo, and traffic discipline slowly increased. Unfortunately, the passengers often didn't have valid tickets, they used fake tickets, undermined the work of public officials, damaged vehicles and disturbed the public order and peace. Administrative and criminal proceedings were initiated against such passengers. The office for public transportation appealed to the citizens to behave appropriately and correctly and not to pass their tickets on to other passengers after getting off. The cleaning team did house visits in the spring and cleaned all types of synthetic flooring, rugs and carpets for only 10 to 20 convertible marks. People relocated using vans. The drivers carried the furniture up and down for free. Do you think your wishes are unattainable? We offer solutions for the fulfillment of your wishes. Life's reality consisted of rise and fall. While the citizens were on their way to a better tomorrow, the banks were hot on their heels. Welcome to the Unicredit Bank. Bookshops had to close. Do you need a book? Tension was high. Life was at risk. You lived at full price. I am an animal trained by society. Don't be afraid, I'm just your reflection. It was a faceless terror. The citizens thought their wishes were unfulfillable. The housing loan was a hit. Despite everything, people made plans for the future, so a loan represented an important decision. In that spring, just like in every spring, household trash was collected and taken away. For urgent astrological services, you called the number 063 108 487. Kids played with educational toys. Wet the sponge, sharpen the crayon and draw your grandfather. Citizens could buy many goods only in installments without interest and fees. Managers were annoyed on Mondays, so employees postponed their questions until Tuesdays. Do you want to negotiate better working conditions? Apply to the labor union! Things were bad for the unemployed. The parties congratulated the workers and citizens on May 1st, the day when opportunity had been created. Sarajevo went on but remembered the writers who had fallen in the People's Liberation War Kalmi Baruh, Zija Dizdarević, Ilija Grbić, Hasan Kikić, Jovan Kršić, Safet Krupić, Džemo Krvavac, Velimir Kovačević, Veselin Masleša, Vasilije Medan, Ognjen Priča, Huso Salčić, Marcel Šnajder, Branko Zagorac. In a parallel universe, Mascha and Rabija sipped their first Coca-Cola. The secret services obtained their information from a newly published biography about the Yugoslavian president. Children became inseparable friends of ninja turtles. It was the time for games. I love games. My buddies are true friends. This project was supported by the embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was a time for games. The citizens made life easier for their relatives, gave

them injections and insulin, changed and reset their catheters, bathed them, dressed them, got groceries and prescription medications. In the year Rabija died, the fastest running shoe got a brain. 0101 1010 10101 1 10100101 10101010 101 10 distance 0110 11 speed 101 10 1 01 1 010 0101 00 1 111 comp@e share compare 01 00 010 10 1110 100 00 1010 adizero f 50 1 0 100 micoach 1100 11 1 adidas adidas adidas adidas adidas adidas the fastest soccer shoe just received a brain 0101 1010 10101 1 10100101 10101010 101 10 K was Communism. K - that was OK. The answer to the question “What am I?” was JNA¹⁷. Who should be the chosen one? Sarajevo had thousands of problems. The people were hallucinating. Majokowski had recited fervently before a selected salon society: “Almighty, you created hands, you made it so we have minds, why couldn’t you make it possible for us to kiss, kiss, kiss without agony.” Sarajevo was a clean city, the city of truth for Vedran, where you ate little ćevapčići¹⁸. People were plagued by terrible visions. Living in the name of the people, I take the money, it was lying there, I came, fatal reckoning, bankruptcy. Neither laws nor bans can prevent it ... National security, national security, national security, in the name of the people. Print banknotes. Who needs criminals in the name of the people, do you need a diploma, guiiiilt in the name of the people, I fuck you completely. Ninja, Ninja, you will get a beating, junkie, you are dead!!! I fuck your mother, JNA, JNA, JNA, JNA, those were patients. Then PTA is defense, national monument Bosnia and Herzegovina. Fortunately, the city was partially restored in its original architectural language after 1995 when a lead shell had exploded in close proximity to the market and 43 people were killed and 84 were injured. The bathroom in the Ulica Ferhadija was open during the day. The Buregdžinica “Bosna”¹⁹ was also open. Everyone had a bank at hand. The country was ready to get hoping. Ready, set, in the EU! On your mark, get set, in the EU! Everyone was done living in the country of blood and honey. The country didn’t belong to anyone. Freedom was limited. The skin tight. The cat black. Sarajevo was full of ghosts. Smoking prohibited. Time was money. God liked Mercedes. Thanks to the bank Unicredit, it was possible to transfer larger sums of money. Time was money. People lined up in front of the ATMs. They entered something, corrected it, changed it, cancelled the transaction and confirmed. Enter. The women in Sarajevo looked mundane. They went to yoga courses and rushed to free cocktails. A girl, about whom

¹⁷ JNA stands for Yugoslavian People’s Army.

¹⁸ Ćevapčići is a type of Balkan sausage.

¹⁹ Buregdžinica “Bosna” is a restaurant in Sarajevo.

everyone had nice things to say, urgently needed the help of her fellow citizens in her fight against a malignant illness because she had to be treated out of the country. The medical expenses would exceed 200,000 convertible marks. To save a life was just as difficult as saving the whole world. The residents of Sarajevo slept on pillows with buckwheat filling. Women often stood in front of their closets and didn't know what they should wear. They needed something new. That was fashion. The facade crumbled away while the drug addicts in the city center sat through modern addiction treatment methods called "La vita". The city residents licked ice cream. They knew their wishes were unfulfillable. They used Twitter and Whatsapp, touched their devices and typed. That year, the commemorative futsal²⁰ tournament was held. People laid down flowers for the Schechiden, the fallen soldiers. The residents of Sarajevo found ways and resources to refresh their world. Friendship was cheap, you bought it with Pepsi. Still, you were in search of a cure for the recession. Go! Go! Go! Go!

3.

Rabija had been a normal woman from Sarajevo until an unfortunate accident gave her mysterious abilities. Before her downfall, she led a seemingly protected life. She had worked at a single job, and to her it seemed as if not much time had passed between the first day of work and retirement. Up until the accident, which happened in her sixty-fifth year of life, Rabija had thought the world was a peaceful and good place. The war, which was soon to come, wasn't yet foreseeable. She and her husband planned to travel to Styria on vacation in the fall to see with their own eyes some mountains they had heard a lot about. Thanks to the retirement of Rabija's husband, who used to be the director of the publisher Svjetlot, and because they didn't have any children, they were both well off enough to travel, in contrast to many of their peers.

Rabija loved adventure but she suffered from travel anxiety. On the day of their departure, she was completely panicked, obsessively searching for things that were right in front of her nose and checking ten times whether she had turned off the stove. A couple hours before the departure to Graz, more out of excitement than necessity, she set off to the store for the second time that day to replenish her reserves of tissues and toothpaste. On the way, she fell into an open manhole. She slammed her head against the edge of the manhole with full force, which

²⁰ Futsal is a variation of soccer.

caused something to shift in her brain. The trip was canceled. After a month in the hospital and two surgeries, Rabija was discharged. She, who had been a pleasant and reasonable woman up until then, gradually deteriorated after her hospitalization. She started to have conversations with herself and just looked out the window most of the time: day and night, she observed what was going on in the neighborhood. “What are you doing?” her husband wanted to know occasionally, to which she answered, for example, “I’m cooking.” But she wasn’t cooking. She was looking out the window.

After her accident, Rabija felt mentally and physically destroyed. Nevertheless, she still showed a couple traits of her original personality which had always focused on the solution, never the problem. In light of the first big obstacle in her life, she rolled up her sleeves and got to work. In her opinion, the solution was strict discipline, physical training in the form of long walks as well as mental training with the help of philosophic and esoteric literature. She didn’t let herself be deterred from her plan even though the first walk after the accident seemed like an impossibility. With the utmost effort and gritted teeth, she succeeded in squeezing seven steps out of her body. The following night, she slept for ten hours, and the next day she went out on the street again and managed to get to the garbage can and pet the local cat. Twenty steps. On the fifth day, she went uphill. She encouraged herself. Every day, she went a bit farther. Her successes motivated her. In spiral patterns, she grazed through the steep streets of Sarajevo, always further uphill up to the edge of the city. She went past houses, children and cats, and avoided the cars that rushed around the corners. She even walked in the rain. Obsessed with the thought of becoming healthy again, she was solely interested in her progress and didn’t notice at all that her husband had become severely emaciated in the meantime and wasn’t feeling well. On a Saturday, when she had finally made it to the edge of the city where street dogs prevented her from continuing into the forest, she went into her husband’s study after her walk to ask why the TV was on when no one was watching. Since her husband wasn’t in his study, she looked for him in the bedroom. There, she found him dead.

Obligations concerning the funeral arose immediately, and the apartment saw a lot of visitors for a little while. But even under these conditions, Rabija didn’t stop taking her daily walks. Her muscles were strengthened, her spirit had become cheerful. Only her thoughts were floating around. Rabija became aware of her loss only a couple months after her husband’s death. She

became sad. The sounds of the past and present mixed together in her mind. She remembered how many years they had spent in peace, how much they had laughed about things that were weird, and how much they both had loved mountains and pancakes. As a consequence of the delayed shock, a deep crack opened in Rabija's brain. Peppermint tea and a medication that a relative in a white coat had prescribed her calmed her down. She stayed by herself and returned to her place at the window where she observed the neighbors. Winter moved into the country.

Everything got better in the spring, just like every year, and it seemed as if Rabija would also flourish at least to some extent. Thanks to the walks, which she hadn't renounced even in the most difficult moments, she gained excellent stamina. Her cheeks were flushed. More and more, she took part in the life of the community and her immediate surroundings. She visited people at home, and at first, she was happily received. People felt inspired by hope when they saw how well their old neighbor Rabija was succeeding in overcoming her double tragedy, and they were even ready to ignore small signs of mental problems.

Rabija lost herself, namely from time to time in alternate realities. If she drank too many beers at a party, it could happen that she would utter unreasonable, evil warnings. A neighbor who just ate a pie had to hear that she didn't have another year left to live. Rabija asked about things that, according to those present, she never should have known anything about (about illegitimate children that were secretly kept, about sexual problems, inheritances and similar things). Rabija's offences kept increasing over time, and surprise and uneasiness spread in the neighborhood such that at some point people stopped inviting Rabija to celebrations and birthdays. They steered clear of her or pointedly abandoned her. Nevertheless, Rabija continued to stay in her neighborhood because, among other things, she had nowhere else to go.

As her social life came to a standstill, Rabija still just stuck to her window. What she couldn't see from there, she supplemented with her visions. Since her head injury, she had lost confidence in her own memory and took to writing down all information. In her study, she created an archive. She wrote down everything that seemed important to her in large handwriting on A4 sheets of paper. She filed these in folders, ordered by date, and then in turn filed the folders on shelves which were organized by address (street, house, floor). In doing so, Rabija invented what we would later call Tracking, and she had become the first analog neighborhood tracker of Bosnia. In the mornings, she took her walk and dealt with her shopping, spent the rest of the day at the window, and archived the collected information at night.

Rabija's hobby wouldn't have been worth mentioning at all if she hadn't woken up one night after a nap drenched in sweat and gotten up in a semiconscious state to remove a name from the archive. She crossed out the name Nada Čatić. She was one of the two sisters from the sixth floor. The next day, as Rabija knocked on the door of Nada's apartment, her sister opened the door and said that she lived by herself in the apartment and didn't know anyone named Nada. She said she was the only daughter of her parents and Rabija surely must have mixed something up, but that wasn't a bad thing and could happen to anyone. After Nada suddenly disappeared without anyone posting an obituary or a missing person ad, Rabija had to fear that she had finally gone insane. From then on, her powers raged on throughout the neighborhood, and she sank into a deeper and deeper despair due to her isolation and insanity. Rabija's memories of people who didn't exist gaped like open wounds. She swallowed tranquilizers but ultimately these didn't help. She was out of sync. She constantly cried, laughed hysterically and had conversations with herself. From time to time, she stopped one or another passerby on the street and told them about their relatives who had supposedly disappeared. She told unbelievable and very detailed stories. The neighbors were surprised by Rabija's disgusting fantasy.

Essentially, people were forced to avoid her. Anyone that got entangled in a conversation with Rabija listened kindly and nodded. Though Samira from the tenth floor pushed her to the floor and threatened her with the asylum. It seemed as if a terrible misunderstanding arose between Rabija and the whole world, and as if she just sank deeper with every attempt to iron things out.

4.

At the height of Rabija's unpopularity, Mascha's family moved into the house. The family had two daughters, one of which was healthy and the other was sick.

Rabija didn't miss that the family moved in but based on the many uncomfortable experiences with her surroundings, she initially stayed at a distance. The information about the new family gradually spread around the house, meanwhile Rabija was busy finding out as much as possible about herself and her unusual conditions. She returned to her archive. Although she wasn't sure if the annihilations and visions were just happening in her head, she started to act more carefully and thoughtfully. She started to make plans. She learned to hold back her energy

and economize her powers. In contrast to the three of us, she had no one she could have talked to, and she could never be sure that anything happened at all. She didn't believe in consequences, so she annihilated multiple people that we would have left in their original environment. If you take into account that Rabija had no idea at all that annihilation is nothing other than a relocation into different life circumstances, but not a complete destruction, you could say that she was a rather cruel woman. According to her personal logic, she still mainly annihilated people whose lives were unbearable. The neighbors considered Rabija strange, but then again, a strange person in the neighborhood was a normal occurrence. At least one woman like that lived in every residential building in Sarajevo, with or without cats, more or less crazy. Such women stared down into the streets, developed varicose veins in their legs, passed judgements and ensured the flow of information. Certainly, hardly any of them had the patience that Rabija summoned to organize her notes at night, and hardly any commanded the power to change the fates of others.

The new family was given a rather cool welcome into the neighborhood because of the sick daughter. "The little one is cute like a doll," said the women in passing, but Samira said: "A broken doll." That year, solidarity wasn't popular, and after the family moved into the neighborhood, not even two months had passed before most of the neighbors decided to blame the parents for the sickness of Mascha's sister. Seeing the small, broken doll brought people out of step - people who fought against entropy for their survival on their expeditions between shopping, the workplace and their apartment. With her upturned eyes, her open mouth and her apparently painful life, the girl triggered ideas of helplessness and horror. Although Rabija had observed the new family from her window ever since the beginning, she didn't dare make contact because first and foremost, she was afraid of herself.

One day, Rabija was on the way home from the market and was having a quiet conversation with herself when she incidentally encountered Mascha's mother with her younger daughter and decided to finally introduce herself. She wanted to interrupt her monologue and kindly walk up to the mother and daughter, but she was not able to. She could only feel herself sweating more and more heavily and shifting into a faster gear. Instead of walking up to them and introducing herself, she ran past her neighbor with her kid while unintelligible sentences. After that, she was mad at herself for days. However, the unfavorable circumstances in which the first meeting between Rabija and the new neighbor had played out didn't make a second one impossible. Soon after the incident on the way to the market, Rabija sat in Mascha's family's

apartment for the first time and drank coffee. Mascha told me she remembered the visits because someone always sent her outside to play whenever Rabija was there, no matter what the weather was like. Rabija definitely had enough of her own problems, but she still thought about the new neighbor often, about her hard life, and in general about this family who stood on the brink of collapsing. In Rabija's view, there was no way out for them, for Mascha's father who had since started to drink in order to escape complete isolation, for Mascha (the older daughter) who was ignored and played alone on the corner ("poor kid") and so on. Without much inner discussion or consideration, Rabija decided to intervene. That day, she went down to Mascha's mother for a cup of coffee. In the kitchen, the whole floor was covered with the orange-colored mush they fed to the doll child, and something was burning in a pan on the stove. Rabija found the neighbor in tears and with messy hair. When Rabija saw this tragic scene, she ran into her late husband's study and took the notes about Mascha's family out of a file folder. While muttering hectically, she rammed the tip of a compass into the doll child's name and released a strong lightning bolt on her.

After that, Mascha's sister was no longer known in the neighborhood because of her illness, but rather for her singing talent. No one had noticed that a change had occurred, not even Mascha's parents, and life moved on in its normal ways. Since the lighting, the mother had been promoted to a content woman with two healthy daughters and was soon well integrated in the neighborhood. She took a course at the community center where she learned to roll out puff pastry. Suddenly, she was ashamed of Rabija visiting her and asked her not to come to their apartment anymore. Rabija reacted to this injustice with increased activities and wholeheartedly committed herself to her trips to the market and her walks, all the while shouting at the top of her lungs and conducting herself like a crazy person.

Summer came, and Rabija now walked in clogs and with a headscarf and carried a bag full of rotten fruit and ripped clothes. One day, on the steps of the indoor market, she coincidentally met Mascha, the neighbor's untalented daughter. "Hello," Mascha said. Hardly anyone greeted Rabija on the street. Mascha was the only one who did that without skeptical or vicious looks. She was always nice. But all of that was in vain, because even Mascha's little black-haired head in the sun couldn't calm Rabija in her insanity. She spat out seemingly meaningless fragments: "Doll... orange... I helped your mother." She didn't want to frighten the girl, so she turned around, threw in another "excuse me" in her incoherent muttering, and wanted

Mascha was gone. The war reached Sarajevo and met Rabija at the height of her loneliness and her personal unhappiness. Unfortunately, in the course of the three years the training had lasted, she had almost completely lost her vision which was why she could no longer continue the records about the lives of her fellow citizens. Nevertheless, she followed the fates of the people who were tormented by the war. Rabija later wrote in a letter to Mascha that in those years, she had no idea whom she should have annihilated first, that the lightning bolts were too weak in light of the overall misfortune and she couldn't help everyone because her powers were limited and she could only carry out an intervention once a week. Rabija was forced to only choose the most tragic candidates. The selection process exhausted her and drove her to despair. Her conscience plagued her, yet her idealism moved her to continue the work. I am sure Rabija's comparative catalog of the misfortune of these years would have been greatly beneficial to us if it had existed.

5.

I told Direktorka, who had only known a little bit about Mascha and Rabija up until our conversation, that rumors about the terrifying circumstances surrounding Rabija's death spread at the funeral. Although the neighbors tried to suppress their own sensationalism in order to spare Mascha's feelings, they cautiously wove the truth about the tragic event into their condolences. There was talk about "what was still remaining of her" and that "not even the heart was there to be buried". Half an hour after the beginning of the funeral, I had already found out a lot of details about Rabija's death and had heard this or that other unbelievable theory.

During the night when Rabija lost her life, heavy, persistent rain fell, and the streets were deserted. Rabija sat down next to the chessboard on Liberation Square. She was completely soaked. She worked diligently, like someone who had to concentrate on a delicate task. She put down a box of personal belongings in front of herself. A number of people saw from their windows how she sat there in the rain with her open box and thought "What is this Rabija doing?" or "poor woman". She stayed alone in the darkness. One after the other, people lowered their blinds.

The next morning, someone found half of her body on the chessboard. She was split in half lengthwise, and rather precisely so. People were shocked, although they had witnessed all

sorts of terrible things a few years prior. It wasn't Rabija's mutilated body that scared people, not even the fact that apparently someone had taken away the other half, but rather the fact that the body had stayed intact where it had been cut and that it wasn't bleeding. It looked as if someone had deleted half of a body with Photoshop and blurred the edges with the sponge. I said to Direktorka: "Rabija flowed between the half that was present and the half that had disappeared."

"Why did she do that?", asked Direktorka. I told her how Mascha and I had racked our brains for a long time that evening after the funeral about Rabija's terrible and at the same time brilliant act, and we had asked ourselves how she succeeded at all in accomplishing such a thing. Mascha said she tried in vain not to think of the possibility that the other half could still be alive somewhere. Meanwhile, one thing was clear to us: that night, Rabija must have tried to annihilate herself and something must have gone wrong. Mascha drowned in feelings of guilt. She regretted not having called Rabija more often.

6.

However, we didn't want to come to an end like Rabija, so we strictly stuck to a division between "magic time" and the rest of the time. A couple months before, Direktorka had even started to keep a tally of the time that we spent collecting information. We took great care to organize ourselves as well as possible. The newspaper *Astroblick* played an important role in that. It was true that it was made up of a troupe of unconscionable amateurs, and since we worked there for little money, we took part in the distribution of banality and wage dumping in the world, which we weren't proud of. But we wrote a column because it was an easy way for us to get access to the readers' energy. As a result, we consumed less of ourselves and could regenerate faster. The energy from the readers gave shape to our powers. Furthermore, the rhythm of weekly publication of the newspaper brought structure to our magical activities. So we've been meeting each other every Saturday in Sette Fontane for some time. We knew we could work there in peace. Only a few alcoholics gathered in Sette Fontane on Saturday mornings. Just like us, these regulars also followed a defined schedule, mostly sat alone in the corner and had their much-needed drink while Radio Vienna played old hits. The relative quiet in Sette Fontane was pleasing to us. Only now and then would a social spark ignite unexpectedly among the guests and a discussion about popular topics would flare up out of nothing, such as

questions about human nature or about the condition of woman. This also happened on that fateful Saturday at our meeting which was disrupted again and again. The older woman with the yellow poodle, who always sat at the window and drank an extra mild spritzer, let everyone that was there know that it was terrible to be old. "At any time, I would exchange old age for youth without giving it a thought," she said. Immediately, the waiter gladly took up the topic and noted: "Be happy that you're a human being and not an animal. The human being is a wonder. The human being can spend up to ten years in prison unharmed. But if you cage an animal, do you know what happens then? Then it dies. But the human being doesn't die."

"What nonsense," I thought, but no one reacted. The disputes in Sette Fontane were mostly comprised of statements randomly thrown about and no one ever tried to bring the confusing heap of claims into conversation or put the lines of argumentation to a test.

The waiter's comment served as a cue for Direktorka. She said: "Look at us. We are no longer young, our eyes don't sparkle anymore. We are no longer capable of dreaming. Recently, more and more I have the impression that this city certainly keeps me in a relatively good condition, but I kneel with my face to the wall and everyone passes me by and pretends not to see me." I said that nowadays, people everywhere feel the pressure of their own fate and have no capacity to acknowledge every passerby on the street. But Direktorka said: "Sure, you had no luck in Berlin, but I know people are much more open there. I have thousands of examples of that." Mascha and I exchanged sympathetic looks. We didn't know what we were supposed to say. It wasn't in our interest for Direktorka to move away. The first pale sun of March shined in through the window, it was a weak and miserable sun, but nevertheless we thought that still, this would always be better than absolute darkness. The woman with the poodle smiled. She was happy that nature was stirring and that she herself would be witness to another spring.

Coffee house disputes were nothing unusual in Sette Fontane, but we had never participated in one before. However, this Saturday decided not only the fate of some Viennese citizens but also ours. We were forced to put our attitude toward ourselves and toward the coming times to a test, and that exhausted us. We ordered beer. In the year I'm talking about, it was hard to be happy about anything and that was due to the weather, among other things. It was constantly raining or snowing, feathers got wet, plans thwarted. The domesticated nature in the Natural History Museum awaited its visitors. Spring in Vienna bore no similarity to spring in Belgrade, which Direktorka and I loved more than all other seasons. Here, it was windy, and

everything that you could see or experience was unpleasant. Life happened in closed rooms. You drank in nature in the form of natural juices. Nature gave energy and took it away again. Everything was damp. People bummed around in the dungeon of nature. I sensed a grim future. Depressed by such thoughts, I suddenly felt the urge to take part in the conversation with the few guests in Sette Fontane. I said even in nice weather, I would only be happy to a certain degree: “If the wind stops, if the birds come out and start to chirp always the one and the same song, then the flowers open up and emit their scent, the people become nicer and fall in love, but I start to sneeze and cough.” I said I loved nature. “I adore nature,” I said, “but I don’t tolerate it well. I have a lot of allergies, and most of the time I’m not in the position to sit relaxed in the grass.” I raised my beer glass and drank to the diseases of civilization, and everyone there joined in. As Direktorka saw how the tension that had built up during our meeting fell off of me during the interaction with the other guests, her opportunism enticed her to join in on the conversation. “I love nature,” she said, “but I don’t underestimate it. Before I sit on a park bench, first I always check which tree the chestnuts fall from and where the wind is blowing from. In nature, you have to be careful. In order to be able to enjoy it, you absolutely have to pick a good spot. You have to approach nature strategically and only take the best of the best. You’ll never find me in mud, in dirty water, on hot sand or anything like that.” Direktorka raised her glass to toast, and Sette Fontane followed her submissively. “Considering what you just said, I don’t understand why you would want to move to Berlin under uncertain circumstances!” said Mascha and added: “In contrast, I think that it is absolutely necessary to wade in the mud, to jump into the river and to stick your head in the snow. You have to wear yourself out properly and expose yourself to disgusting substances. You have to steel yourself in the wind and cold. Only in conflict with nature can human beings gain control over their own body and convince themselves that their blood is flowing and their muscles tense and relax. You have to ride horses and eat cows!” Mascha said, “Cheers!”

“To eternal love!”, the waiter threw in.

“To security,” I added a little bit quieter and continued the conversation at the volume of the table. “Look at this woman with the poodle,” I said quietly to Mascha and Direktorka. “She’s an alcoholic. The waiter tops up her drink with water because her bladder fails whenever she drinks too much. She isn’t rich, and she doesn’t seem happy, but I am convinced that she doesn’t suffer from the same fears we do.”

“We lost trust in the ground under our feet early on, so our steps are always unsure,” Mascha confirmed. “We have no confidence in the earth we are standing on, and also not in the language we speak,” added Direktorka. “In the blink of an eye, we could lose our life,” I said. And so on.

7.

On this special Saturday, we behaved more and more undisciplined. In addition, we smoked cigarettes and had alcoholic drinks. When we looked at the clock the next time, it was already evening. We had never stayed in Sette Fontane for so long. We had been convinced that only a small group of professionally drunk guests sat here from morning until night, but as the dark gray poured over Siebenbrunnenplatz and transformed the whole area into a shapeless, homogenous mass, the coffee house gradually filled. While the waiter emptied our ashtray, we asked him if it was like this every Saturday, and he said that quite a lot of people were there today because of the concert. I took a look at the bar and saw that in the meantime, a worker had appeared in Sette Fontane that we had never seen before this evening. The waiter was friendly and excited because the restaurant was well attended, and since he wanted to win us over, he pulled up a chair and took a seat in our private corner in order to tell us, quickly and in confidence, the story of the musician who had his monthly solo show in Sette Fontane today. The waiter said this man hunched over in the wheelchair, who had just been pushed by someone in the direction of the stage where his bags and his guitar waited for him, had previously been a considerable star. “Little Joe Licht,” he said. “Maybe you’ve heard of him.” The waiter explained to us that he didn’t agree with the often-quoted wisdom that he who gives is happier than he who only ever takes, because the case of Little Joe proved exactly the opposite. He said the story of Little Joe’s decline was nothing other than the story of a parasite and its host. “The parasite feels better than the host while it drinks his blood!” Little Joe had always dreamed of one day being carried away by the big wave of the Ö1²¹ Blues audience and climbing to the top of the music scene, but instead he was sucked dry by a single fan in the middle of his ascent. The waiter said it was told that in the beginning the fan, who was known by the nickname Gollum, had won over Little Joe with compliments and a profound expertise. As an artist who wanted to

²¹ Ö1 stands for Österreich (Austria) 1, a popular radio station.

get feedback like so many other artists, Little Joe initially liked the idea that there was someone out there who was ready to go to every single one of his concerts and listen to every single interview. It only got complicated when it turned out that Gollum went much further in his thorough critical reception than Little Joe could have ever imagined. “Imagine you all are the musician,” the waiter said to us, “Gollum buys every single, listens to every song a thousand times, saves clippings of newspaper articles, follows your appearances in the media, reacts to every recommendation. At concerts, he stands right in front of the stage and writes down the order of the songs, records the announcements and addresses to the audience. Now imagine he owns hundreds of those notepads, nothing evades him, not even the smallest mistake. Maybe you would also like it at the beginning, just like Little Joe did. Maybe you would introduce him to your friends and give him the status of a VIP fan. But with time, his persistent presence, his notetaking and questions would bother you. The knowledge that after every concert you would receive a letter with a list of mistakes and corresponding comments would probably cause stage fright and exhaustion, just like it did for Little Joe. And maybe you would eventually turn into alcoholics of a disgusting degree,” said the waiter. “Although Little Joe eventually banned Gollum from showing up to his concerts and he stopped opening Gollum’s letters, Gollum still came persistently and patiently wrote down everything for such a long time until one day, at a poorly paid mini performance in Café Industry that he had done out of pure politeness, Little Joe came up to Gollum and requested access to the data that was in the white notepads in Gollum’s apartment, about an hour away from Vienna. They took the first train of the morning, and when Gollum subsequently opened the door to his private museum, Little Joe went pale. He took a lap through this temple where all items were dedicated to him, Little Joe: records, newspaper clippings, copies of mailed letters and response letters, notes about concerts, music quality and performances. Suddenly it became clear to Little Joe that everything in this house stemmed indirectly or directly from him. Little Joe realized that first and foremost, his whole career up until now was feed for Gollum’s museum, a forced gift to the voracious person who stood before him with outstretched arms, ready to receive even more. Appalled by the realization that everything that he created would sooner or later end up in this jam-packed hick town near Vienna, he tried, at least for a moment, to reverse the direction of flow of intellectual property. He said: ‘How would it be if you did something for me for a change? Make me a coffee, recommend a movie to me. Show me something you wrote or painted.’ However, Gollum wasn’t

interested, he said: ‘Given our relationship, it goes without saying that everything flows from you to me.’ He smiled and added: ‘Always to me. Never to you,’” the waiter said, and added that it sent ice cold shivers down Little Joe’s spine, that he immediately lost any semblance of superiority and became aware that he had slaved away for years for a lunatic. Direktorka asked why he didn’t call the police. “He did call the police,” said the waiter, “he even got a legal restraining order. But after that, depression came over him, and he started to deteriorate. That went on for a long time until eventually, he stabilized. In the course of this whole process, his long-time girlfriend left him, but eventually he reigned in his ambitions, he adjusted himself to new conditions, and it seemed as if things would take a turn for the better. The story could stop here if Gollum hadn’t appeared again and dealt one last blow.” “For goodness’ sake,” said Mascha. “Gollum managed to sneak up to Little Joe at the Blues Summer Festival in Goldegg. He asked him why he hadn’t opened his letters, and then he said: ‘I would like to introduce you to my wife.’ You have three guesses for who this woman was,” said the waiter. “We don’t know, tell us,” I said. “It was exactly that long-time girlfriend of Little Joe’s who had left him earlier,” said the waiter. “With that, Gollum had dealt the last blow, and from that moment on, the musician Little Joe only existed as Gollum’s slave. Now Gollum organizes smaller performances in Viennese coffee houses for him and finances his alcoholism. He is his manager and critic at the same time. It wasn’t hard for him to move to Vienna to be at his victim’s disposal around the clock,” said the waiter and winked at us. “But stay for the concert. Little Joe is my favorite musician.”

We weren’t sure if we had correctly understood the story. Direktorka and Mascha thought that the waiter was none other than Gollum himself, and I also had the impression that he was somehow involved in this story, but the interpretation by the other two still seemed to go too far to me. Apart from that, the answer to the question of whether the waiter was Gollum or not was by no means high on our list of priorities. We drank beer and listened to the concert. From time to time, the waiter went around with a black hat and asked for a small contribution for the artist. Suddenly, Sette Fontane had become something between a club and a nursing home. The restaurant was crowded and filled with smoke. Completely different from the morning Sette Fontane we knew. We had landed in the middle of a Saturday evening party of false teeth, cigarettes, family dramas and of advanced alcoholism, but it was a real pleasure, and we let ourselves be carried away. Direktorka tried to convince Mascha to ask for a song as the covers

came up next, but Mascha didn't want to attract attention. "This evening has definitely gotten out of hand," I said, mostly to myself. I became increasingly uneasy. The whole time, a line from a song we had learned in first grade of elementary school whizzed around in my head. Pigeons circle around the school. They spread out their wings and look through the window. Pigeons circle around the school. They spread out their wings and look through the window. Pigeons circle around the school. They spread out their wings and look through the window. Pigeons circle around the school. They spread out their wings and look through the window. Pigeons circle around the school. They spread out their wings and look through the window.

Through the noise of the guests, the loud music and the clinking of glasses, dull beating sounds gradually made their way to us, almost unnoticed at first. Direktorka was the first to realize that the sounds came from outside, as she turned to the window and saw a pigeon smashing against the windowpane and falling to the ground. Then another bird. Direktorka pulled on Mascha's sleeves and pointed at the window. One after the other, the pigeons flew into the windowpane. Mascha said it was a classic suicide action of pigeons. She pulled me aside and said: "See what you've done here!" Mascha pointed at the windowpane with the greasy bird imprints. "Can't you ever relax?", said Direktorka. I went to the window to see what was up. Dozens of injured animals were lying on the asphalt around Sette Fontane.

I knew these birds all too well. Since I was little, I constantly heard their scratching and cooing somewhere, and I could never predict what they intended to do. Often, their methods were cruel and self-destructive. They laughed with their dirty beaks. They wore rings on their feet. Their feathers were wet. Their heads were sticky with mud or gasoline. They were ready to kill for a breadcrumb. They had no home. They lost their feathers. They didn't decide what to eat, but rather who to shit on. They hated people but couldn't do without them. They always walked back and forth on the sills of houses, and if they sensed the presence of a weak or nervous person, they flew into their apartment.

Mascha and Direktorka correctly assumed that pigeons flying against the windowpane was directly connected to my tension, and that the accumulation of bird bodies would only stop if I calmed down.

Quiet please. Burning & looting. A moment of peace can and will save the world. Hemp museum, hemp parade. Freedom, health, justice. Plunge into the world of consciousness, learn more about yourself and gain different ways of entry to the inner world which is full of peace, fortune and happiness. To solve one individual inner problem means to solve hundreds of

external problems. Actively shape destiny. Melodies full of peace and love on west and east instruments. There is no impossible. Who am I really?

I admitted that despite the party and the good mood, inside I was foaming with anxiety out of fear that we would let ourselves go beyond all boundaries and in doing so, forget the remaining points of the agenda. I wanted that Saturday in Sette Fontane to be of decisive help so my life as I knew it so far would not go on endlessly. Furthermore, my proposal demanded a lot of courage, and I wasn't ready to prolong my agony until the next meeting. Direktorka and Mascha knew that the situation with the pigeons could only get worse because once the wheel of anxiety and dissatisfaction was set in motion, I was no longer in charge of the situation. I was no longer able to stop the pigeons. The question of where my extremely poor stress management and the accompanying supernatural phenomena came from was a waste. It was completely clear that everything that wasn't right with me came from Belgrade. I grew up there, my brain malformed there.

Part 4

1.

I still remember that when I left Belgrade, the city looked like a gray cow pat that was ripped open with steam rising out of it. Puny souls, capable of unending contempt, fought out their battle in the cracks of the cow pat. The noise of the city neutralized any stirring of the conscience to interfere here. From the bus on which I was fleeing to Vienna these many years ago, I looked back, exhausted, at what I left behind, at run down houses and at women who had forced themselves into clothing that was too tight. The stronger hit the weaker with baseball bats. Like snakes, people were judged by the skin they covered themselves with and by the poison they spat. That day, I had left hell, but hell would never leave me. For the rest of my life, I'll carry the Belgrade organ, a little sack of green poison, in my throat above my voice box, which I constantly check because a lot depends on its size. If the little sack swells, the pigeon activity increases. Should the little sack burst open and the poison flow out, the slaughter would start again, but I don't think that it will burst. The times when the little neck sacks burst in droves are over. Circumstances changed. I could convince myself of that when I travelled to Belgrade a couple years ago to get things out of the apartment that my family had lost in a 10-year lawsuit against the state. I had gone to Belgrade just to check if there was still anything worth keeping in that ugly pen for people where I had spent my childhood, and as soon as I entered the apartment, I recognized the scent of childhood, a mixture of Domestos detergent and stale dust, and this scent revived old, forgotten allergies. My eyes watered, a clear liquid ran from my nose. It looked like I was crying. I went through the living room, the bathroom and the other rooms, and since I couldn't find anything that was important to me, I decided to smoke a cigarette before I said goodbye for good. On the crowded balcony, my foot bumped against a light object. I looked down and saw an old metal bowl covered with dried, petrified bird droppings. One glance into the center of the epidemic on the balcony of my childhood, which had once been encircled by swarms of pigeons, one breath of the fumes from the encrusted bird droppings was enough, and memories of my grandmother Marija were rising within me, they arose like thousands of soldiers in an epic movie, from all sides, with waving flags and corresponding music. The dry scent of the bird droppings in my nostrils abruptly catapulted me back into another time when the shit

was still fresh and floated on the water near the soaked bread in Marija's bowl on Marija's balcony. I even saw Marija herself with a broom in her hand as she talked to a bedraggled looking one-legged pigeon and sent it off to destroy the neighbors. "Coo coo coo roo. Get rid of the bastard. Annihilate Miletić." I can't remember the whole phrase anymore, but I also can't remember Miletić, so I can assume that the annihilation worked.

When I turned 11, Marija gave me a gold chain as a gift and invited me into her room where I had often sat and played with colorful strings, she served me a cup of coffee as a sign of my initiation, and began to teach me everything that a young girl, a young woman, a woman, a future grandmother should know. From then on, we practiced sewing and unravelling, lightning and annihilation, every day after lunch in her room. To her regret, already in the first days it turned out that I had no patience for tedious needlework, I didn't like to sew, and I was disgusted by the pigeons. She gave me a lampshade to embroider, but I didn't finish the job. She instructed me to summon the pigeons, but the pigeons didn't listen to me. I was far from lightning and annihilation. Every day, I sat on Marija's chair and reluctantly poked into material with a needle and repeated the phrases for calling the birds. At the beginning, Marija was patient. As far as it was possible for her, she took great care to explain the rules to me and impart her experiences, but my condescendingly indifferent facial expression regularly drove her crazy. She slapped me because I had forgotten to close the window and the pigeons had hurled themselves into the apartment. So I broke off any cooperation with her because violence was out of the question for me. Nevertheless, thanks to Marija's lessons, the basic principles of annihilation were burned deep into my consciousness, and when I was about 18 years old, I patiently started to experiment in the privacy of my room for weeks, and in doing so rather unintentionally set the magic free. Since then, it has taken off.

Stella's magical legal age. Magical holidays. Magical trips through the city. A short history of witchcraft. The Wizard of Oz. The nephew of the wizard.

While I was smoking, I thought about Marija and her magical powers and thought about how they compared to Rabija's. Hadn't Marija's magic powers also occurred as secondary symptoms of insanity? In contrast to Rabija who had visions and liked to have conversations with herself, Marija was mean, devious and senile. Ever since I had known her - although she was my grandmother, which means she was already an old woman when I got to know her - she preferred to talk to pigeons rather than people. For some reason, her powers worked best with

injured birds that were missing an eye or one of their four toes or even a whole leg. She called them her little invalids. She was gentle towards them, while she was cruel towards people. Even after her death, up until our fateful intervention it could happen that I would sense her malicious glance burning into the back of my head. For this reason, among others, I hated pigeons. I constantly feared that some of them could be at Marija's service and follow me to cast an old curse. Of course I didn't have any proof that they had cursed me, but I had good reasons to assume it was so. However, one day she committed the error of forgetting that she was human and jumped from the twelfth floor.

#Belgrade

It was summer on the streets of Belgrade. The people of Belgrade drank Aqua Vita and moved toward their future. The ministry for culture, information and information society ensured that Cyrillic script and the patriarchy were not getting lost along the way. Many people were coming down with sciatica, lumbago and rheumatism, visited chiropractors and physical therapists who straightened the spine and joints, calibrated blood pressure and treated them for chronic fatigue and exhaustion. Talented self-educated people resolved all pains, strains and blockages. Foreigners rented rooms for 10 Euros. The association everyonetokosmet.net organized trips to Kosovo and Metohija on the occasion of the holiday Vidovdan. The meeting place was the Church of Saint Sava. The travelers brought shampoo, soap, toothpaste, toilet paper and razors with them for the families in Kosovo-Pomoravlje. The travel group looked at monasteries and went to masses for Vidovdan. People crowded onto the bus because the number of seats was limited, and the trip only cost 25 Euros. It was summer. Chic, shock, baroque. New Belgrade was on the outskirts of the city. Former good students were employed as translators. On the bank of the Danube, cultures overlapped with each other and merged together (in the course of a romantic bullshit) into a majestic European network. The people of Belgrade loved the Danube because it was the fateful river of European unity. On Saturdays and Sundays, the people of Belgrade drank coffee near Princess Ljubica. The underground Belgrade held many secrets. Absolutely no one worked on Sundays. Smoking was prohibited. A statutory fine had to be paid for violating the prohibition. But at the same time, smoking was also allowed. Smoking was allowed and tired people drank energy drinks. Certain groups claimed they would operate in

Smoking killed. Smoking killed. Smoking killed. Smoking killed. Erste Bank²⁵ gave out welcome gifts to their new customers, discounts on goods and services. However, these weren't always valid, and not everywhere. On 6/15, the director of the company Starbucks GmbH, Stevica Kostić passed the resolution to set up a storage chest for Nestle ice cream, in fact directly in front of the restaurant. Is that our new brother-in-law? The election team surrounding Vučić promised jobs for the people of Belgrade. On June 14th, people bought hair, natural hair, 35 cm long, and colored, 45 cm long. You paid by length and weight. The new club on Ada Ciganlija²⁶ was looking for promoters and organizers for parties, hostesses and promoters for drinks, young men and women to put up posters and distribute flyers. Working conditions were excellent. The misogyny unconscious. Immediate payment. In Belgrade, there was the city gate Stambol kapija, from which a military street once led to Istanbul. In the course of the liberation of Belgrade during the First Serbian Revolution on December 13, 1806, 3000 revolutionaries entered through the gate led by Duke Vasa Čarapić. On this occasion, Čarapić was killed in action for his ideals - for freedom and the creation of a Serbian state. On the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of the First Serbian Revolution, this plaque was put up by the foundation "First Serbian Revolution" - "Knjaz Miloš a.d." Arandjelovac on December 13, 2003. Lightning bolts struck conductors. The organization Freedom for Animals organized a podium discussion on the topic "Meat = Alzheimer's and Dementia". Many people in Belgrade asked themselves how it was even possible to keep their brain in good condition. Belgrade was tormented by blows. The residents of the city rejected the NATO summit. There was plundering, robbing, pillars collapsed, there was shoplifting, promises were broken. Ultra's pure style with local flavor. Someone was urgently seeking a roommate for the apartment in Kanarevo brdo²⁷, €110 plus utilities. As the sixth candidate, Jadranka Šešelj was running for president of Serbia, for an honest and strong Serbia and for the Serbian Radical Party. Students borrowed spy headphones for 10 Euros and took their tests with them. Rooms with separate entrances and shared bathrooms were rented to female students. Thank you for existing. Members of the Dveri movement had original trains of thought. Everyone is the same if you think differently! For Dveri. www.dverisrpske.com. Jelena Karleuša detested criminals. The people of Belgrade were

²⁵ Erste Bank is an Austrian bank - after the end of the Balkan war and the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, many Western businesses and banks started opening branches in the new states.

²⁶ Ada Ciganlija is an island in the Sava river that flows through Belgrade.

²⁷ Kanarevo brdo is a popular urban neighborhood in Belgrade.

healthy and happy. New rules of seduction soon prevailed. Even with amorous indiscretions, they had style. Their passion was cream pies and butter cakes. Staklenac²⁸ was under video surveillance. Open. People put their debit cards into the scanner in the direction of insertion that the ATM showed. If the card didn't have a chip, the citizens followed the instructions later on. They chose the language and put in the PIN code. They pushed the appropriate buttons and chose the type of transaction. For example, "Withdraw cash". Subsequently, they entered the amount themselves because none of the amounts offered suited them. They used the keyboard confidently. But the money didn't come out. The residents of Borča were devoted to the soccer team Red Star of Belgrade. The legislator gave a warning based on Articles 25 and 26 of the Working Hours Act: From 10:00pm until 6:00am it was prohibited to sell alcoholic drinks. The authorities were obligated to warn workers about that. SpongeBob SquarePants was the best employee in the world. That year, 7 out of 10 chocolate lovers in Belgrade chose Bambi with closed eyes. Smoking caused lung cancer, lip cancer, tongue cancer, cancer on the vocal cords, circulatory disturbances and impotence. Some things seemed important to some people. By buying gold jewelry at the jeweler Majdanpek, a buyer purchased a durable product of the highest quality, but that wasn't all. Through his purchase, he invested his money and actually increased its value. The facts were undisputed. The value of gold had been rising in the whole world for years, and this trend was expected to last for years to come. The people of Belgrade shopped with taste, they shopped smartly and safely, the jeweler Majdanpek was their friend. Exhausted people from Belgrade recovered from interest rates for six months with the Piraeus Bank. The bank took no fees from those who hadn't received their salary. Many were lucky to finally be able to vote for Dveri. The working class was in revolt, they didn't vote for the conservatives. The value of an object wasn't shown by its price but rather by the amount of lifetime the people were willing to give for it. Be with us and fight with us, Urban Cleanliness Belgrade. The cats of the rich people of Belgrade said: Meowmeow meowmeow meowmeow meowmeow prada. Some objects were protected with protective film. That summer, the Belgrade Post decided to continue not discharging their duties or any work until further notice. No unpleasant smells spread from the underground containers, and the trash didn't blow around. The containers were good for the environment and made the cityscape more attractive. The citizens took care of the underground containers. The water wasn't drinkable.

²⁸ Staklenac is a shopping center.

2.

The kamikaze attack on Sette Fontane wasn't the first action where the pigeons put themselves between me and happiness. Though these animals appeared harmless, the problem was what they did to you. They redirected every mistake you ever made, every horribly sick thought, and forced you to deal with the unacceptable parts of your personality until you were broken. They read you like a book and held the exact page that made you sick in your face and they made you feel useless and guilty. The pigeons broke your heart and shit on your soul. They were there to remind you that you earned just such treatment.

We had tried so hard so everything would be okay while cities/life streamed past us. Viennese life flowed by us in its chatty diversity, life flowed in Zagreb and Graz in its isolated branch, life also flowed in Belgrade in its attempt to bite off its own tail. The pink scars of wounds we had given ourselves made us itch as we tried blindly to pull ourselves out of the mud we had ended up in because of birth and immigration. We were dissatisfied. We came out of the filth, but we hadn't come to rush from one bad job to the next forever. You all misjudged us in this regard. We had come to live the life from the advertisements. I tried with all my power to think of something positive. For example, I loved animals who were dependent on me and people who laughed at my jokes. Successful communication motivated me, as well as success in general. But all that was a weak comfort in light of the many horrors. People plunged down steps and puked all over them. The pigeons used the situation to eat their fill in the yellow acid on the steps. They were the same steps that Mascha, Direktorka and I climbed up slowly, up to the middle class, but there was no end in sight. We wanted to reach all the way to the top of the Earth's surface so we could suddenly become completely different people, like larvae on the Earth's surface which lose all the organs necessary to pave their way through an underground tunnel and replace them with kitschy, banal, colorful wings. We could barely await the day when we would emerge as satisfied optimists. Our steps were in Vienna. We knew that it was absolutely necessary to climb these steps, but the stairs were steep and dangerous. We were careful. If you are a pigeon, you constantly have to be careful. Likewise if you are a person without support. We could die at any moment. We could die at any moment. It was this mantra

that besieged me during the 10-hour journey from Belgrade to Vienna. It was the same mantra that overwhelmed me as the night broke over that Saturday and over Sette Fontane.

We returned to our private booth before the concert was even over. As I looked at my papers, I realized that I was a little bit drunk. Once you break your daily routine, wild improvisation ensues, which is the highest art of living as well as the greatest danger. It was so smoky that you couldn't see anymore. Mascha said she had heard on the way to the bathroom that while Sette Fontane did have an air conditioner, it wasn't possible to turn on the air conditioning and the heating at the same time. "Just as it is in life," I thought. None of us were able to look forward to a bright future. It's hard to be a waitress, but it's even harder to be a waitress who was getting on in years. If Direktorka should simply carry on, eventually, she wouldn't be able to explain what had become of her and even less why she had stayed there. Mascha would burn out sooner or later. I would visibly deteriorate. I didn't have the courage to think our story to the end. It was about time that I escaped this hopeless situation. The moment that I had been waiting for the whole evening had come.

"I've already been waiting for this all evening," I said. Outside, the wind tossed and turned the injured bird bodies. I looked Mascha and then Direktorka directly in the eyes in order to detect potential prejudices or decisions that had already been made, but their faces were mellow from the beer and the little Belgrade sack on Direktorka's neck was in a relaxed state. "Imagine the following question," I said, "why do people like us sit on the foundation of their soul? Why does everything that we undertake merely lead us to entrench ourselves deeper into the mud we're already in anyway? Meanwhile the mud is up to our necks! How are we supposed to explain our hungry, nervous biographies?"

"I have no idea. What's the answer?" replied Direktorka. "Have you ever looked pigeons in the eyes? Have you seen how they devour everything with these red-black insatiable knobs: buildings, people, and dogs, while in all truth they do nothing other than peck at wet breadcrumbs? We are just the same. Our eyes are greedy, our lips narrow, legs thin, arms as good as nonexistent... I know your first impulse will be to reject my proposal, but I ask you to let me finish speaking and then first think about what I have said." Mascha and Direktorka sat up and leaned with their elbows on the table to hear me better. "It has certainly attracted your attention that I have been unusually anxious recently." "Well, more or less," said Direktorka, "a little more than usual." "I'm stuck in a tight spot. Nothing works out for me anymore. A couple

days ago, I had an interview, and when the man asked me to share something about myself, I burst into tears. But it's not just about my personal misfortune or self-pity. I am a walking catastrophe, and whatever I touch shorts out. In the meantime, I am afraid to use transportation..." I had the impression that the attentiveness of the two was decreasing, so I got to the point: "I maintain that Marija's curse is now coming true, and I think I represent a real danger for my extended surroundings." Direktorka looked at Mascha. "It's not impossible," said Mascha, "you've already said many times that the curse would overtake you sooner or later." I hurried to list a few examples. "In the beginning, I thought it was mere chance or pure paranoia that there were more and more ambulances in the streets. But soon, accidents happened right in front of my eyes. In the meantime, I have reason to assume that the incident with the drunk man on Margaretenstraße a couple months ago or even the waiter fever from this morning are only two of the many examples of the curse." I said that it had started gradually and had become unbearable over time. "Recently, people have been falling down in front of me, broken their legs, bled out of their mouth, couldn't stand up anymore. I had already considered taking a first aid course for my own peace of mind. But that also isn't a long-term solution." I told Mascha and Direktorka about the neighbor who had the bad luck of starting a conversation with me in the staircase a couple days ago. When I came back from shopping half an hour later, I saw him being carried away by paramedics. He was deathly pale. "Probably a heart attack," I said. "I can only sincerely hope that nothing terrible will happen to the two of you as well, in light of all the time that we spend with each other," I said and looked first at one and then the other. That was a subtle threat but neither of them got onboard. It bugged me that I had to explain everything. I knew that what I was telling them wasn't new to them, and I found it unfair that they weren't helping me along with head nods or statements of agreement. "Don't just pretend like you guys aren't noticing anything! The pigeons follow me and destroy everything." I said Marija's curse had to catch me sooner or later. But it was interesting that contrary to my previous expectations, the curse hadn't come all at once, but rather had gradually crept into all spheres of my life and brought me to that moment of hope and despair in Sette Fontane when my heart raced and the little green sack pulsed. I said that in light of the bad luck that persistently followed me, I had already started to pull back from my life. "I try not to leave the house anymore," I said. "Apparently Marija gave me this curse so I would become just like her. Taking away my freedom of movement is enough to weaken my body and my soul, and already, sitting around in

my room is leading me to be overwhelmed by wickedness, just as had been the case with her.” I said, therefore I was glad that we were here and talking about everything, and that the atmosphere was tense and the waiter had attacked me because all of that was only the introduction to my next proposal. “So,” I said, “I’m asking you to annihilate me.”

Quiet please. Burning & looting. To solve one individual inner problem means to solve hundreds of external problems. Plunge into the world of consciousness, learn more about yourself and gain different ways of entry to the inner world which is full of peace, fortune and happiness. To solve one individual inner problem means to solve hundreds of external problems. The key to inner and outer harmony. Republic of Austria, Federal Ministry for Interior. The inner awakening. Secrets of the inner life. Be happy. True inner happiness is self-made, it doesn’t depend on external circumstances or external achievements. A moment of peace can and will save the world. Hemp museum. Melodies for raising awareness, spiritual teaching. Yo yo yo yo peace!

3.

Direktorka lit a cigarette. “You’ve always been jinxed,” she said. “Why do you claim it’s a curse and not simply your life?” I laughed. I was prepared for such questions. I took out my folder and laid the sheets of paper on the table. I showed Mascha and Direktorka that I had been keeping a tally on myself for two years. I had measured and recorded my moods, as well as health data, the coefficients of hope and anything similar. The diagram that I had created from the data of two years of self-tracking clearly showed a dropping curve. Parallel to that, the curve of pigeon activities was rising exponentially. “As you all can see, the data doesn’t lie,” I said, “and the graphs lie even less.” Mascha stood up and came over to my side in order to see better.

“Unbelievable, that we’re interested in the same things,” she said, “I have also recently been busy with self-tracking!” Mascha and I immediately dove into a conversation about which apps we were using and whether some of them wouldn’t also be useful for our column. Direktorka stayed silent, her lips narrowed. She hated it whenever Mascha and I bonded over topics that were unfamiliar to her. Although she was the most organized of us, she still hadn’t jumped onto the self-tracking train and only made analog notes of everything. For diplomatic reasons, I immediately changed the topic. I said it was no wonder at all that the two of us had emerged as

amateur trackers, which would eventually be a worldwide trend. Mascha smiled absent-mindedly, her gaze was aimed at a point in the distance. She was targeting something. Now, since everything is over, I imagine that in that moment I felt exactly when Mascha took control over the further developments of the evening. Certainly, that is one of those insights that you only gain afterwards. In any case, Mascha left the topic of tracking without argument and returned to my fate. “People like you earn a break from their own mistakes. You can’t carry the whole world on your shoulders forever. You’ll get a hunchback,” she said. Multiple times, I tried to uncoil her words in my head. I needed about half a minute in order to understand that Mascha had just said what she had said. I was very surprised. I hadn’t expected such a direct understanding and such unconditional support. Her words hit me in the middle of the soft parts of my personality and, as embarrassing as it is for me, I have to admit that I broke out in tears. “I wonder how you could have survived at all for so long,” said Direktorka. “These are no times for sensitive people who are under pressure.”

“Moreover, my nerves are weak, they break uncontrollably,” I said through a waterfall of tears. “It’s time that you break free from your inheritance,” said Mascha. “And that you come down a little bit, old girl,” continued Direktorka. Surely, Direktorka’s pointed colloquialisms were supposed to lighten the solemn mood of the situation and give the impression that it was an everyday event of the least importance because Direktorka was bothered by my crying. I understood her well, particularly because I myself felt bothered by my own weeping at this obviously very solemn moment. I had waited for this all day, I had already started with the preparations months and weeks ago, by extension you could even say that I had prepared for this my whole life long - and now it looked as if the miracle would finally materialize and my proposal would be accepted. While Direktorka raked around in her purse to get out a tissue that she wanted to stick to my face to stop the flowing stream of self-pity, I looked at the reality that was distorted by the water in my eyes and stammered some goodbyes. I said if it were a normal relocation, I would miss them both very much, but since after the annihilation I probably would no longer be aware of ever having lived this complicated life, I would surely realize my abilities elsewhere. I told Mascha and Direktorka that I appreciated them very much, even if it was the wave of migration that had more or less pushed us together like logs and forced us to become friends. Even if we hadn’t chosen each other but rather recognized each other in our social status. But Mascha interrupted me: “It’s time for radical actions, right?”

4.

I waited for Mascha and Direktorka to finally approve my annihilation. I nibbled on my nails and breathed shallowly. They whispered for an eternity and took notes. Mascha explained something, Direktorka looked confused. I couldn't stand it anymore, turned to Direktorka and asked what was up. "You won't believe it," she said and pointed at Mascha. Mascha closed her notebook. "Isn't it true that we try all the time, but that our lives still remain uncertain and unbearable?" she asked. Direktorka and I nodded in agreement. "Isn't it true that we actually don't expect much, and that everything that we're missing can be expressed in one word?" "Which word?" asked Direktorka. "Money, of course," I said. From a previous conversation, I already knew Mascha's theory about money as the common denominator of everything that we were missing. Mascha subsequently asked whether we thought our lives would become more bearable if we were to win a lot of money by gambling. I furrowed my brow. Mascha pulled out three white cards from her back pocket. "Christmas vouchers from Casinos Austria worth a hundred Euros. Only valid for one more week," she said. As it became clear to me that she had fooled me, my face changed color and my little sack swelled so large that I couldn't breathe or swallow. The pigeons flew low over Siebenbrunnenplatz and moved into a circle. "I can't believe that you're coming along with a counterproposal at the last minute, now, when I had already thought I would be saved. I wonder if it was your goal to humiliate me," I said and stood up as a sign of my protest. "And you couldn't come up with a more normal way for how we could get money other than gambling?"

Mascha replied that she had thought through and checked all the options three times and that there was no other way for all three of us to get out of this vicious cycle. "Insanity," said Direktorka, who had no desire to go to the casino. "How do you know that we will win anything at all?" Mascha smiled and laid her phone on the table.

Summer's tale 2012. The Wishing Table! The fairy tale-like "all inclusive" weeks with I'tur²⁹. Now travel royally! On November 4th, 1989 there was the biggest protest rally in the history of the GDR on Alexanderplatz. Members of the opposition and artists lamented the state

²⁹ I'tur is a travel company.

of society. A liar is never believed³⁰. Open once for free and close again. Beauty is hidden, look for it in the past.

5.

Wasn't it strange how all three of us had started with our manipulative game on the same day even though we had met weekly before that? When everything was over, I wondered sometimes what had driven all three of us to such desperate and final proposals at the same time. The world was a confusing place, and it wasn't easy to come to clear conclusions. Certainly, it came to mind later that around this time we had heard rumors that the newspaper *Astroblick* was on the brink of closure. After Mascha had shown us the Christmas vouchers for the casino, one of those sensitive moments followed which actually happened in the past but will exist parallel in the present forever. Mascha will demonstrate the details of final magic for Direktorka and me forever in my head. So Mascha said that months ago, she had already started to make this plan because Rabija had visited her in a dream and warned her that Direktorka and I would soon go astray and betray the common cause. Mascha had placed a cuckoo's egg in the next (and next to last overall) issue of *Astroblick* that we - as it turned out - had unnecessarily prepared two Saturdays before our fateful meeting and which was supposed to come out on the Monday after our meeting. Therefore, in two days a lightning strike of fate was supposed to be published in this *Astroblick* in an unusual format. Instead of a couple smaller texts in multiple boxes, this time it was a whole page text. "One text in order to concentrate the energy of all of our regular readers on Tuesday evening," said Mascha. "One text in order to mobilize all available empathy," she said, "and to catapult us into the middle class of society." "You could have let us know," said Direktorka, pouting, but Mascha wasn't ready to accept the criticism. "You aren't strong, you're not smart. You only run away from problems, that's all," she said.

Mascha said the final magic would indeed bind us forever to our cell phone carriers and therefore to the place where we lived now, but that wouldn't mean that we couldn't travel. "You will stay here together with me to wait for our natural deaths in Vienna." She asserted, however,

³⁰ The original German text here is a truncated version of the proverb "Wer einmal lügt, dem glaubt man nicht, und wenn er auch die Wahrheit spricht" which can be translated to the English "A liar is not believed even when he speaks the truth". In this example, "never" was also included as a variation on the full proverb, resulting in the truncated English "A liar is never believed."

that luck would finally be on our side. She said she had found a way to concentrate the energy of the *Astroblick* readers, convert it into data and multiply it with the help of a simple application with the data of the customers of the phone company “3” whose name was a magical number. Subsequently, she could redirect this huge albeit artificial wave of energy toward us and our cell phones and bring us a night full of incredible happiness. Direktorka asked if it was a problem that she didn’t own a smartphone. “For bacteriological reasons, I don’t use a smartphone,” she continued. We decided to provide her with one for this special occasion. I admitted to still not understanding the plan. Mascha laid the vouchers on the table and said: “These are the casino vouchers that the manager of *Astroblick* gave me in December instead of our Christmas bonus. Actually, instead of everything we would have been entitled to if we had a normal work relationship.” She explained that with the vouchers we would be able to gamble without ante and the energy of the readers and the phone network would do the rest. “We will most certainly win. Unfortunately, I still can’t estimate how much,” said Mascha.

Only now: the magically affordable 4+ Rate ✓ 02 Network Flat ✓ Desired Network Flat ✓ Texting Flat ✓ Surfing Flat. Samsung Galaxy S3 new. In addition, only now: the magically affordable 4+ Rate ✓ 02 Network Flat ✓ Desired Network Flat ✓ Texting Flat ✓ Surfing Flat. Samsung Galaxy top offer for students. 5 flat rates + free landline nr.³¹ * Text gr.³² Network * 02 Mobile Communications Flat * Internet Flat * 1st Choice Flat * 2nd Choice Flat * Free of charge only €19.99 02 independent 02 summer highlights. Mobile communications, internet, landline and DSL internet. Socialize, send texts, with the new cell phone. Nokia Asha 303. Simply A1. Simply everything from one provider. Mobile communications landline.internet.television. Simply everything Telekom Austria. You can best surf on Republic Square with super fast mobile internet. T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile T Mobile. Landline number for cell phone. Scan the code with your cell phone.

A happy film took place before my eyes. Until then, everything had been shit. From this moment on, we were moving toward a happy ending. Thanks to the easily earned money, the story of black magic and of horrors from the past would suddenly transform into a story of personal success and shopping. With time, we would relax more and more, our ribcage would

³¹ nr. stands for number, as in phone number.

³² gr. stands for German, as in other German phones on the network.

widen, the victim philosophy would be behind us and gradually, a healthy social awareness would grow within us. The visit to the casino was supposed to bring us a couple years of middle-class life. However, I knew that the transition from one class to another never happened automatically. It was necessary to take certain steps. I wondered what we should do in order for us to be able to claim that we were leading a middle-class life. Skiing and regular shopping, travelling, monthly courses. I wasn't sure if a condo necessarily belonged to that. I thought the main elements would be yoga and visits to the theater (tickets reserved in advance), going to eat at restaurants, and it would also be good to have kids that you would take to gymnastics practice and piano lessons. A car necessarily went with the kids, but in that case, it would be allowed to forgo the theater forever. "Mascha, I don't know where exactly the boundaries of the middle class are, but I know that we would have it easier with money. We'd buy ourselves the right products that will invigorate us!"

The waiter came with the open wallet, laid a slip of paper on the table and began adding everything up. It was already getting light outside. He hesitated, made miscalculations, scratched something out. In the end, we added up to a couple coffees each, twelve small beers and three toasts and we laughed together with him. We hadn't forgotten the incident from the morning, we were careful, but there weren't any noticeable symptoms of the waiter fever anymore. He was accommodating and friendly. He said he was always happy at the end of his shift because every time he felt like he was let out of prison. Little Joe Licht was still sitting in the corner in his wheelchair. I thought perhaps he was waiting for the waiter because he really was Gollum, but I didn't say anything. An empty glass fell out of the musician's hand, but it didn't break. "Nothing. Not even that," he said. We collected our papers and jackets and checked if we hadn't forgotten anything under the velvet sofa. It felt strange to stand up after so many hours and leave. "All the best!", said Mascha. We waved to the waiter and the musician and closed the door of Sette Fontane behind us forever.

Part 5

1.

The casino was a calamity, a market of mismatched rows of fruit. Dried out figures leaned in front of the greasy, shiny automatic machines, trapped in the dumbest of all stereotypical fates. Luckily, we hadn't been aware of what we were getting involved in as we arrived at Direktorka's apartment the day after our meeting in Sette Fontane in order to research the rules of a visit to a casino. On the website, we saw pictures of people drinking champagne in expensive suits who didn't care if they lost or won. Direktorka had suggested that we dress up a little just in case, so they wouldn't reject us at the entrance, a fear which only amused us later as we saw what kind of atmosphere actually ruled over the casino. The vouchers were valid for evenings with no other programs. Mascha had even thought of such little things as she had written our last column in advance. At the casino, Tuesday was a day without any program, just people, money and simple automatic machines. I thought we would play poker, but Direktorka insisted on reducing the human factor to a minimum, and so our choice fell to one game where everything was left to chance. Furthermore, Direktorka suggested that we split up in order to attract as little attention as possible. Each of us was supposed to pull the lever on our own slot machine. However, Mascha wasn't sure if the magic would work if we split up. Eventually we decided on roulette. Mascha, Direktorka and I, who had never gambled before because we didn't believe in luck, considered the little white roulette ball as an appropriate instrument of an experimental group intervention. In the course of all of these hard years of life in cities that were black from tar and soot and stunk of leaked gas and oil, we had waited for a springboard to appear, but such a springboard didn't appear, quite the contrary, the middle class crumbled gradually, and it looked as if a whole social class of people with bearable lives would disappear before we would succeed in joining them. "It's important that we are medically insured," Direktorka had said previously, but we wanted more from life than a potential hospital bed. I had suggested to spare us new experiences and to play online roulette, but Mascha had objected, saying that the vouchers were only valid on-site and our magic wouldn't reach far enough in order to successfully force our luck somewhere on a server in Russia. As we planned the visit to the casino, for the first time all three of us believed that a door could open for us. At the same time, we started to fear that the whole thing would fail

because of some little thing. Mascha was visibly nervous and constantly played around with the phones. “You all agree to use the energy from the readers in order to help yourselves?”, she said. “That is a very risky endeavor.”

2.

At the entrance to the casino, we handed in our vouchers and in return received plastic cards worth a hundred Euros. While Mascha and Direktorka sipped on their welcome glasses of sparkling wine in order to bring their inexperienced gambling blood to a boil, but also in order to prepare our intervention, I mingled in the crowd of people. On every previous Tuesday evening, an unbelievable crowd existed in the casino, but only the security guards wore suits. People bustled at the slot machines and the automatic machines for digital roulette, and it wasn't easy to make eye contact with them. We thought we would play roulette like in the movies, but the ball rolled under a see-through plastic dome and all around there were seats for the gamblers where they could pick numbers on interactive screens. The croupier³³ belonged to the past. Next to every screen there was an ashtray, an opening for the plastic card as well as a slot for dollar bills. We took our place in the circle of other players. A woman with gray hair was sitting to my right, for whom everything could have gone much better if she hadn't gotten used to this simple game out of boredom and despair. A man was sitting to Mascha's left who didn't smile and only reluctantly showed us how to play and subsequently left the table. Two teenagers with mustaches in worn out joggers and with grim facial expressions sat down in his place. As another Arabic tourist finally took her place in the round with a bottomless bag out of which she took one ten Euro bill after another, the group for our first magical attempt was complete.

Mascha looked at the people at the table and at the slot machines and absolutely could not get over the addiction of these people. “Where is the joy here? Why don't these people go to the movies? Or at least do drugs?”, she said, while Direktorka and I again increasingly had the impression that nothing made any sense. “This here is sad and dirty. And above all, boring!”, said Direktorka. Our overall life experience up until now had indeed been proof that you didn't get ahead with so-called decent work, however the shortcut that these unfortunate people were trying to take led directly into the abyss. “None of these pale, young men and none of these

³³ A croupier is a person in charge of gambling table.

women full of shame will ever leave the casino with money,” I said, “and at the same time, I’m starting to fear that it is impossible for us to win and that the casino owner will throw us out or even kill us rather than allow us to leave their greasy, shiny carpeted realm with money in our pockets.” Mascha said for sure the casino owner would kill us or hand us over to the police if they could prove that we used unfair means, but that was just impossible, so she sincerely hoped that we could see this thing through without difficulties. We took out our phones in order to synchronize the app and calmly found that nothing had happened yet because the agreed upon point in time hadn’t come yet. The man from the security service reminded us that it wasn’t allowed to photograph the guests in the casino. He called them guests even though they were much more than guests: They were human resources and cash cows in the matrix, and they had sad dreams.

It reached six o’clock. Our hearts were pounding in every direction. The phones started to vibrate. First, we could hear a noise that sounded as if a million people were murmuring at the same time. Then I noticed that I was also murmuring together with them. Now everything was clear to me for a second. I understood Mascha’s formula. I knew all cities by heart. Behind my conscious thoughts, sequences of words, inscriptions and prices appeared in my head from Berlin, Belgrade, Zagreb and Vienna. I could compare the traditional clothing of Vienna with the cocktails from Sarajevo and the ice cream from Belgrade. ja ✓ ja ✓ ja ✓ ja ✓ ja ✓ Calabria €599 Egypt €599 Sardinia €517 Budapest €246 Naples €530 Kos €589 Morocco €679 Dubai €692 T-Shirt €19.95 Tank Top €13.90 Shorts €39.95 Belt €20.90 T-Shirt €39.95 T-Shirt €9.95 Shorts €39.95 Belt €14.90 T-Shirt €15.95 Shorts €39.95 Hat €14.90 Alex Doner & Pizza Doner Kebab 3 Durum Doner €3.50 various types of pizza pita with ground meat €4 Filet Burger €3.89 Zinger Burger €3.89 Brazer €3.99 Double Crunch €2.99 Smacker €0.99 Wraps Twister €3.89 KFC salad €9.99 Grilled chicken salad €5.49 Filet Bites salad €5.49 Side Coleslaw €2.49 French fries small €1.59 large €2.49 Mashed potatoes & gravy medium €1.99 Corn on the cob half corn cob €1.59 whole corn cob 2.49 vitaminski koktel 135 jabuka, narandža, šargarepa 280 din ananas 0.2l sveže cedeni ananas pineapple 0.3l 340 din grejp 0.3l 280 din fresh yellow jacket 0.3l 280 din choco-banana sundae strawberry sundae 350 din jagoda kup 350 din banana čoko kup plazma kup 330 din teatar kup 330 din tropic fresh 0.3l ananas, nanandža kivi, limeta 320 din super detox cvekla ananas šargarepa jabuka dumbir narandža 290 din immunoelixir 270 din vitaminska bomba 0.3l 280 din tiramisu tiramisu 170g 270 din nova kolekcija m. majica 59.00 km m. majica 49.00 km

swarm of loyal readers. Every tiny hair is a receiver. Skin is shock resistant. Waves of data penetrated and corroded it. Mascha, warrior and nun of the order of the insignificant, the woman with the hundred talents, was in control of the roulette. “With my pigeon shit!”, she cried. And then she began to rave. “Now it begins... hhwzz... that it’s evolving so qui-quickly... this noise... I... hhn; ...am afraid... I don’t want... I can’t...:nff: ... I know. There is the wh-white ball:kurff: ... I’m trying to avoid it but it is:kuuh: it is:nnn: everywhere ... the voices come from all sides... they’re coming from... :nnnh: from inside! The world had become flat:kuchh: ... :ucch: ... the telephones... they’re dropping... :uinn: ... they’re penetrating... :nnnh: us. A sound like wu-wuh:hhuuzz... like a rattle... that’s me... that is:hurrrhh: the flow of data... with small teeth... millions of small sharp:fff: teeth that are biting me... gnawing up to the atoms and then putting me :karff: ... back together.”

Direktorka gave her a slap: “Fuck, don’t lose it now!” “My god, what kind of stupid ritual is that?! What do you want to achieve with that?!” I said. Immediately, I winced and thought Mascha’s idea could possibly be nothing other than dangerous nonsense. Because while I also had certain supernatural powers, I did stand with both feet on the ground and was convinced that no one had ever before succeeded in connecting magic and cell phones with each other. I consoled myself with the fact that at least we wouldn’t lose our own money. While Mascha talked, her words gradually formed sensible sequences and sentences. “I know that many people regard us in disgust and think to themselves that we don’t want anything better.” She said: “We can prove to them that they falsely restricted us. Transform the contempt of these people into pleasant admiration.” She said: “Join in, my agitated friends, together we will rise up.” And then we took a step. We understood the last and dumbest of all tricks. A step appeared. Before the ball stopped, it changed direction in mid-air and fell directly on the black box with the number 33. “There you have it,” said Mascha.

The energy from the readers was enough for the whole night. Already after half an hour, we knew that we would leave the casino as winners. One hundred Euros became two hundred. From two hundred to four hundred, four hundred to eight hundred. From eight hundred to one thousand six hundred. In less than one minute. Since there wasn’t a croupier, no one was watching our screen. No one kept track of what happened, and we took the money. For hours, our winnings multiplied, while tourists and losers took turns around our table. The total - after numerous attempts to contest our winnings by the casino employees who looked at us

suspiciously - that was supposed to be paid into Mascha's bank account was enough to catapult us significantly forward. When we were back on the street, doubts of whether the money would ever really be transferred to us prevailed. "We are in Austria," we told each other, "we aren't in Serbia or Bosnia. There is no reason to believe that our money won't be transferred," and nevertheless we were afraid. "Mascha, are you doing well?", asked Direktorka, and Mascha answered: "I'm doing great, like in a movie!"

The sky captivated me, it was beautiful and poison blue like it always was in the morning, but it wasn't the beauty that was why I looked up and why I couldn't avert my gaze away from the sky. I turned my head from one side to the other to mark out the borders of the sky. Facades and house roofs emerged in my field of vision. There, it immediately became clear to me that something big was under way. "In the beginning I thought it would be so quiet because of the morning dawn, but that isn't the reason." "What are you talking about?", asked Direktorka. "We came out of the casino, but we didn't notice the change. I discovered it by accident. Look around!", I said to them. "Don't upset yourself," Direktorka warned me, but I could get upset as much as I wanted, nothing was happening in the sky. No bird came fluttering down and lunging at his random victim. There weren't any more pigeons.

I almost fainted. Since Marija had hung the family powers around my neck, and although it was clear early on that I had no talent for working with birds, the pigeons had always followed me everywhere and at times shown me their terrible actions. They reacted to my moods, and it later turned out that at the same time they had served as a navigation system for me for all those years. Their disappearance made my life easier. On that morning after we had left the casino, for the first time I saw a city with a normal concentration of birds, and I broke out laughing.

kakamuschi tittenmaus schnapstrossel haha

The people who decided on the future of the world were probably sleeping in expensive hotels or in their villas at the time and had no idea that anything at all had happened, while at that very moment, something important had happened in the whole city. I had lost the pigeons, this infected, ugly, feathered court of mine. I had lost the lightning and annihilation. The little sack on my neck had withdrawn. Later, it turned out that similar changes had happened with Mascha and Direktorka. Some evenings were better than others. Some mornings smarter than others. As we left the casino with the winnings that they still had to pay out to us, the relationship between character and background in our world changed. From this moment on, the residents of Vienna

had surrendered their fates, and the three of us began to get used to life without magic. The inherited burden that we had brought from our birthplaces and carried along with us for all these years fell off of us all at once.

3.

While we waited for the money to be transferred, we were already changing. Mascha slowed down. Direktorka abandoned her escape fantasies and surrendered to fate. I became softer and smiled more. The absence of the pigeons affected my sense of orientation, and I was even plagued by new fears, but at the same time got to know an inner peace that I would have never before let myself dream of when the pigeons were following me. I thought if I succeeded in writing all of it down, I could make some order in my head. We would never again think of the snotty kid, of Rabija and of Lili's son. Because something had happened that I never would have expected: Our lives weren't the same anymore. For years, we had incessantly worked on ourselves. We thought that we deserved a better life. I felt the desire to thank everyone that had supported us on this thorny path. The worst was over. A ceasefire had come. The cramp lessened. Furthermore, everything was indeed intense, but at least for a short time, nothing else had a fateful meaning. Never again would we be people of the lowest order, never again lice in the clean hair of another. Never again would we talk quietly. Never again would we have to be overqualified servers, people who provide illegal work under terrible conditions. Never again would we waste time on humility. We wouldn't worry anymore. Instead of swallowing everything, we would spit it out. We would scratch out the eyes of everyone who would try to look down on us from above. Never again would we allow someone to spontaneously trap us in a monologue. We would never be ashamed again. We wouldn't eat as readily as before. We wouldn't work for companies. We would be companies ourselves. We would do business in our own interest. We would put down roots until the walls broke apart. Never again would we waste our strength on self-criticism, we would say: Piss off! We wouldn't stand in our own way. We would go everywhere. And you wouldn't stand in our way because you would be afraid of us. Rightly, you would fear that we could bite off your head. Even if the money wouldn't be transferred.

4.

It's summer. We're in the supermarket. It's hot and we're sweating because the store doesn't have air conditioning. Steam rises from my skin as I contemplate what I should buy. I look at Mascha and Direktorka. How they look. They have the permanent smile of a stuffed fox on their faces. Our gaze falls on a steak in the freezer and immediately we know that we have to have it. We know we have absolutely no choice and don't try once to control our desire. Direktorka comes up to me. She gained a little weight, but her hair and skin are shining. She says: "Where is the goat milk yogurt? I only buy goat milk yogurt. I buy it but don't eat it. And do you know why? Because I actually don't like it. Goat milk yogurt is healthy, and I hate it. I'll buy it now, what does it cost? Stupid goat milk yogurt. Give it to me, in the shopping basket." Direktorka looks for the yogurt. I take a look at her and notice how she moves without fear, how she works like she has all the time in the world while she looks for the yogurt. Our bodies are now neatly massaged. We stand relaxed at the checkout and insert our debit cards in the Maestro device. After the casino, Mascha started dying her hair. The new hairstyle looks good on her. She says she would also like to stop by the pharmacy. There is a product there for strengthening your nails that seemed absolutely necessary to her. It's new and traditional at the same time, and it heals your nails from the base up. That suited me wonderfully because I also have to buy more of my cream at the pharmacy, which I can't do without and don't even know how I managed previously. "The change wasn't immediate," we say with certainty to each other, "everything had led us to this point." We learned to take up our well-deserved space, to listen to our bodies and do what's good for us. We constantly do something that does us good. We do Feldenkrais³⁴. We change in dressing rooms and look at our reflection. No doubt, our previously exhausted tendons have regenerated. Our skin now shimmers in healthy shades and is relatively smooth. Of course, everything could be even better. Later, when Mascha comes out of the dressing room, she's holding ten different sundresses in her hand. "It would be dumb of me to buy all ten," she said, "what do you guys think?" We support each other with easy decisions. "You can never have too many sundresses," I say. Again, we pay with our cards and don't worry that there could not be enough money in the account. "Recently I've been having pleasant dreams," says Direktorka

³⁴ Feldenkrais is an exercise method.

while we go through Mariahilferstraße³⁵. Even this street has changed and become tame, and it too adapted to our new life. I say: “I don’t want to talk about the past again, but you guys still know how before we always had to grapple with existential questions and were in no position to be interested in anything else?” “Fortunately, those times are over,” said Mascha, “now we can begin.” “What should we start?”, asked Direktorka, who was already going on in the direction of the ice cream parlor. “To be interested,” I say. “In space, politics or garden art.” That is our happy end, and we don’t intend to ruin it for ourselves by digging around in eroding areas of the soul. “That is real life!”, said Direktorka, overjoyed by the flavor of her ice cream sundae. Our shopping bags are heavy, but our arms are strengthened by many sports. We carry clothes, creams and cheese. We sweat. “What a wonderful day,” I say. “We could even still go drink a coffee.” The skin on Direktorka’s shoulder flaked because she laid in the sun too long. I have the impression that one of us smells a little bit like sweat. I hope it isn’t me.

³⁵ Mariahilferstraße is a major shopping street in Vienna.

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