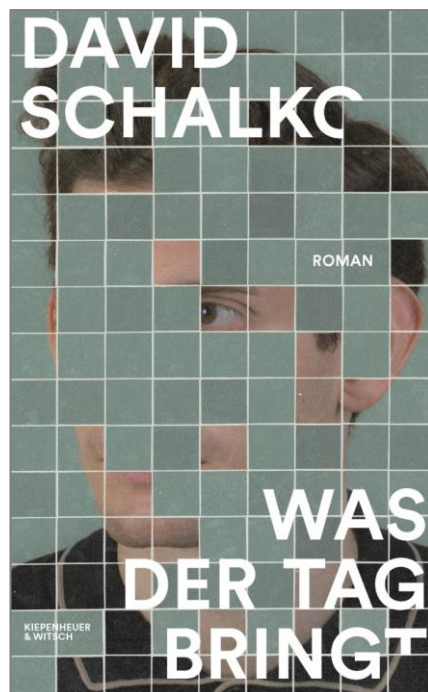


WHAT THE DAY BRINGS

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Felix got a telephone call. That was it. Nobody came to arrest him. Just the bank advisor on the line, telling him they weren't going to give him any more credit. But he needed to come into the branch in person.

– If it were down to me, then obviously not. But they, the others, no, actually it's the algorithms – there's nothing we can do.

The bank advisor clasped his hands. And Felix took off his glasses. To avoid having to look at him too clearly. To appear thoughtful. To respond to the seriousness of the situation with a serious gesture. To give a show of laying down arms.

– The calculation is very simple, the chirpy advisor said. This is the curve. The balance for the past twenty-four months. If that was your heart rate it would be goodnight! But we can see one thing: the facility was exceeded months ago. There's no more leeway. Now we've got to get ourselves back within the facility. The advisor's attempt to mime this with his hands.

– Obviously I'm not going to leave you in the lurch. Personal matters always trump business. I mean, it's not like we met yesterday.

Did the bank advisor wear a suit at weekends too, Felix wondered. He began cleaning his spectacles. A gesture of remorse? Discipline? Composure? Ignorance? Provocation? Resentment? Resignation?

– Never kill the messenger, the suit joked in English. No offence. We'll work this out. It'll be a doddle. You're thirty-eight, you've still got half of your life ahead of you.

Felix felt sick. No. Exhausted.

– It's time to show some fighting spirit.

A smile like a clap on the shoulder.

– Saddle up and ride on.

The question was, where? Presumably the advisor's curve was still pointing upwards. Felix had never been one of those whose bank balance grew in relation to the stage of his life. Who believed that life was like a video game. Advancing from one level to the next. And then were surprised to see GAME OVER flashing at the end, even though they'd done everything right.

So far Felix's bank balance had hit its peak when he was eighteen. OK, it was an inheritance. But he didn't owe his mother anything. Fifty per cent secure, fifty per cent investment. And he was still living in the apartment, wasn't he? Yes, still. She'd never forgive him if he sold the place where she grew up. Even though all evidence of that time had gone. He'd got rid of everything. Or rather, he'd put it all in the cellar. At least the important things. He hadn't had the heart to chuck out all his grandparents' stuff either. Instead this was in the cellar too. A sort of intermediate stop, for the sake of peace. Though what did it matter to them?

They were dead. All of them were dead. Apart from Dad. All of them lived on. And had embedded themselves in him. Whenever he looked in the mirror he saw his father. Whenever he closed his eyes he missed his mother. And whenever he went into the cellar he visited his grandparents. What would remain of him if he were able to expunge them all?

The bank advisor leafed through his documents. This must be part of the ritual. He was one of the first people Felix had met when he pitched up in the city. He came to open an account. And he wasn't lacking in ideas. *Carpe diem*. But that sort of facility had to be earned. The start of a friendship. Lowest level of care. A beer after work every few weeks. Never private. Always in a suit. After all he had potential. And capital.

When he turned eighteen he was finally able to assume his inheritance. It wasn't a pretty sight. An apartment like that decayed. The smell. At least as nauseating as cemetery flowers withering in stagnant water. After Mum's death his grandparents' apartment had been left to take care of itself. Then Felix had re-hired the old cleaning lady after his father had let her go years earlier. Why bother cleaning an empty apartment? He didn't see the point. It was like tending a grave. All those years his mother had only employed her out of a bad conscience. Svetlana's sulky look. If she hadn't been dismissed the apartment would have been in a very different state. Dad had got rid of Mum's things immediately after the funeral. There wasn't much dithering. Then they'd moved to the

countryside. How could he have resisted as an eight-year-old? Helga had appeared in Dad's life with striking rapidity. A local woman.

From that point in his life Felix was merely waiting to turn eighteen. When the day arrived he cleared out, painted and fumigated the apartment. He neutralised it. And made the place his own. Then he began to make the city his own too. He knew nobody. But he did the spadework, assembled contacts. One after another. The snapshot method worked a treat. At the time he wanted to be a photographer and never went anywhere without a camera. They were all flattered when he slipped them the photos. Having made sure, of course, that nobody appeared in a bad light. He wasn't a danger to anyone. The perfect audience. He was popular. The women slept with him so afterwards they could tell him everything. The men lent him their support to show off in front of him.

Eugen was particularly keen on the photographs. He asked Felix if he would like to be his chronicler. Eugen had grand plans. He suffered from brain diarrhoea. But then had become rich with bitcoins. Not rich. Well-off. These days he sold things that didn't exist. As the architect of a virtual city. *Create new spaces. No capitalism without colonialism.* His words.

Eugen was the perfect prey. According to Moira, he felt he only existed because of the photos. He needed the gaze of others to be certain of his own existence. Felix, on the other hand, was a ghost, she said. Moira didn't want to feel his gaze on her. She could see through his game. But

found it amusing. Moira's crooked mouth and her scornful expression. The two of them were known as the digital dream couple. But Felix fantasised about the analogue Moira.

– I'm not going to let you capture me. Every photo is a cage.

He'd kept them all. Had made a duplicate of every picture. He'd put the box with his grandparents in the cellar. For later. In case he ever needed them. Photos weren't only able to change someone's image. Often they were all that remained. Ruins. Even the self consisted of mere fragments. One big heap. The average person was made up of 10,000 objects. Felix had stopped counting at 2,432. Too many unanswered questions. Did a pair of shoes count as one object? Was the pencil lead part of the pencil. Did food count? How about digital purchases? A film, yes; a newspaper article, no; an e-book, yes; a subscription, perhaps. The cellar was now full to bursting. The heap had reached its limits. The entire self one big heap. Of things lived, achieved, befriended, loved. Of words. Of everything. Nothing must ever be lost. Everything had to be heaped up rapidly. Life one big production plant. He just couldn't stop producing thoughts. He was constantly awake. In the sleep laboratory they'd established that he had no phases of REM. Even when he was supposedly asleep he was wide awake. Which explained his permanent exhaustion. This is what drove him on, the quest to overcome the exhaustion. He heard his mother's voice saying: *Keep moving or you'll start taking root.* As a child he'd been terrified by

this image. No. She'd never forgive him for getting rid of her roots like weeds. And classifying her childhood as rubbish. But what was he afraid of? They would never meet again. Maybe in dreams. But not physically. He didn't believe in the resurrection of bodies. Didn't believe in zombie religions. He was an atheist through and through. But not a nihilist. He could still believe that his peak bank balance lay ahead.

The man opposite, however, no longer believed this. As Felix could see from his lowered gaze and rehearsed gestures. The bank advisor was holding himself by the hand. Right now wishing he wasn't an advisor. But he was more a bank advisor than anything else. For everything else had fallen to ruin. His childhood because of his parents' divorce. His own marriage, which had ended in divorce too late because of that first divorce and thus prevented any future marriages. Various friendships through various marriages. The relationship to his children through his own divorce. And the future, because nobody believed anything he said anymore. Least of all himself. Only in the bank was it different. There he was the creditor.

The advisor took a deep breath. As if he were about to dive down to the ocean floor. He put his fingertips together, forming a triangle. As if they'd been members of the same secret society. He said he'd been able to avert the worst. In a few months it would have burst the seams of any

facility. It would have been a financial Hiroshima. But the brakes had been applied at the right time. The fact that he'd been granted a facility like that at all was exclusively down to their personal connection. Because usually it was very difficult to get such a facility if you didn't have a career. He did have a career, Felix said. He was an entrepreneur. That wasn't a career, more a state of affairs. Maybe even a state of mind. In his case it was more a claim, if he might – as a friend – put it that way. For that was how he saw himself. As a friend. A career was something you brought to a conclusion. Which meant that he, Felix, had never had a career. He'd embarked on many things. But never brought anything to a conclusion. He, the bank advisor, would retire as a bank advisor. He was that and nothing else. And thus creditworthy. But entrepreneurs... Now, if he were a carpenter on the side. Then they'd have something that could be relied on. This was how credit worked. Reliability. In his case it was more an investment on the bank's part. Which was how he now had to sell it in-house. Was Felix aware that he was putting his neck on the line for him? After all his job was to give credit; he wasn't an investment banker. Which also wasn't a career in his eyes. But that was digressing from the matter in hand. And then that look. All the arrogance of the employee. As if someone like him had ever risked anything. As if he'd ever come up with any ideas himself. As if he'd ever been personally liable for anything.

Felix hadn't been employed at any point in his life. In his eyes employees were like children who were never left to their own devices. Financially speaking, they'd never cut the umbilical cord. Is that why they thought that nothing could happen to them? The advisor was sitting there like a bishop, putting his hands together pensively into that triangle that hinted at a trinity. Felix felt excommunicated. Even though he was an atheist. Adopting an insufferably paternal tone, this rulebook disciple was pontificating that he, Felix, needed to try something different now. Or maybe not try anything else. In his late thirties it was time he made it financially. After all he'd done everything you generally didn't need an education for. For which character sufficed. Although it had to be said that Wastefood had been a promising idea. He too had been wrong. He, the bank advisor, had also thought that the world was ready for more sustainability. He had no idea so much was thrown away. Just because a cucumber didn't meet the Brussels norm – so unbelievably vulgar; something had to be done to counter it. Maybe it shouldn't have been called Wastefood. After all they'd served up decent food, not cooked rubbish to a pulp. Wastefood catering. Too much explaining needed. Sustainability mustn't be a synonym for long-windedness. And yet to begin with it had gone really well. But nobody can do anything about a pandemic. The pandemic had thrown a veil over everything. In the last few years it had felt as if the world consisted of nothing but health ministers. But the pandemic couldn't be

held responsible for everything. Even though catering must have been hit especially hard, because events had been few and far between. He understood this. As did the bank. Even the algorithm did. But this period was over now and it was time to face the truth: Wastefood wasn't going to recover. Wastefood had proved to be a pre-COVID concept. It hadn't woken up from hibernation.

Felix nodded. Not only because there was something conciliatory in those words, and he sensed the prospect of absolution. But because he felt exactly the same. He hadn't woken from his hibernation. He'd simply stayed lying down.

When the pandemic meant the telephones stopped ringing, everything else went very quiet too. Everyone withdrew to their homes. Nobody got in touch. Nobody asked how he was. Even F stopped visiting him. Alright, what could she have told her husband? She had no reason to go out. She had to look after their child, after all. Eventually she stopped sending him messages. And didn't resume when everyone came back out. She'd disappeared from his life as silently as she'd entered it. When they kissed at the birthday party and started an affair that lasted months, which wasn't discussed either. F mentioned a time. She came to his apartment. They made love. Then she left. It wasn't F he missed, but her caresses. It wasn't other people he missed, but their presence. It wasn't work. It was the

structure that made the day a day. That suggested meaning. That made you feel time wasn't sweeping past idly. Now the days felt like freefall. It didn't matter when you got up. It didn't matter when you went to bed. It didn't matter what you made of the day. He'd often sit in the empty offices, gazing into the distance. How quickly you could lose all connection to certain spaces. The stale smell of absence. Similar to his grandparents' apartment – when it was still being cleaned. You just sensed that nobody lived there anymore. As if people were the soul of a space. This silence. He realised that this silence was always present; he'd just never noticed it before. It had always lain beneath everything. No matter how loud things were around. It didn't stir. As if it was lying in wait for you, endlessly patient.

When the voices awoke from hibernation and returned to the streets, he remained quiet. The virus had left him with chronic fatigue that he was unable to sleep off. There was barely any difference between his waking state and sleep. Had it been a sleep without phases of REM? He'd lost every ambition. The images had gone astray. The images and the will to hunt them down. At the same time he was seized by impatience. The fear of everything passing him by. Without feeling the urge to grab onto anything. A restlessness took hold. Which caused more exhaustion.

– Felix. I've made a list. Of things you could sell. That way you can keep the apartment at least. The bank employee handed him two sheets of A4. He skimmed them.

The offices and furnishings. The car that he and Sandra had spent months driving through Europe. The picture they'd bought in Amsterdam. The picture they'd bought in Paris. The picture they'd sacrificed a trip to New York for. A copy of the photograph of Duchamp playing chess with a naked woman. Even as a teenager he'd fantasised about being in this picture. He certainly wasn't going to part with it. What else? His mother's jewellery. His father's camera collection, without which he'd never have met anyone. The Moormann bookshelves. The books. If he were only allowed to keep one of them, which would he choose? The records. Answer: Bill Evans, *From Left to Right*. The box-spring bed he'd bought after Sandra moved out. The butterfly collection. Were insects going to increase in value now that their numbers had been decimated? His grandfather's smoking paraphernalia made out of real silver (ashtray, lighter, cigarette case). A Deyrolle stuffed fox. Laptop, stereo system, mobile phone. He felt like ripping up the pieces of paper. All he could see on them was the bank's meddling. But not any effort on the part of the advisor. He knew exactly what there was. What Felix was made up of. How much of him would they leave? What was he to cover his monthly costs with? He couldn't think of anything. From now he wouldn't earn money anymore. He would acquire it. But not earn it. He would no longer spend his days engaged in meaningful activities that would also earn him a living,

but rack his brains every day about how to get hold of money. From now on everything would be different.

– And what am I supposed to live on?

– You could rent out your apartment for a few days each month.

That might be enough if you cut down your outgoings. Then you'd be independent. Have a think about what you really need. The advisor looked at him. Lips pursed. Nod of the head. Confidence. Think about it. They can take everything from you. Just not yourself.

He felt almost sorry for the bank advisor. In the man's vicarious embarrassment Felix could sense his fear that he might find himself on the other side of the desk one day. Of course they could take his self away. A faint shiver ran down his spine. Felix wished the advisor had been a woman. A woman who now would take him in her arms.

Felix had packed his bags as if going away on a trip. He'd spent two days cleaning the apartment. Svetlana had polished everything. Until nothing smelled of him anymore. He'd aired the place for hours. For days only used the toilet for peeing. He'd taken photographic evidence. According to the contract everything had to be as he'd left it. Unease at the thought that two strangers would be touching his things. Which records would they pull out? He bet they would rummage through everything. Leaf through his books. Maybe even with damp fingers. They would put things back in the wrong place. Picture what his life was like. Maybe even make fun of him. They would copulate in his bed. Sniff his food. Eat with his cutlery. Use his crockery. Forget to water the plants. Use his loo. Would things assume their smell? He was letting far more than his apartment. He was renting out his life.

Sunny four-room apartment close to centre. 75 square metres. Attic floor with small, charming terrace. Wealth of vintage furniture, large library and tasteful modern art lend the place character. There is a fire for cold winter days. The bedroom, which is beneath a small dome, offers a dreamy view of the old town.

Finding interested parties wasn't difficult. He could have rented the apartment for considerably longer than the eight days. But he'd calculated

it precisely. With the money he would make ends meet. No. In fact he wouldn't have to do without anything. So long as he didn't incur excessive costs in those eight days.

The apartment had character. His character. The couple who'd be ringing on the bell any minute had chosen the apartment on the basis of the photos. A target group was a community of faith. People knew each other. Without knowing each other. In the larder he'd locked away only the sensitive things. Personal effects, as they were called. Although he didn't know why a book should be any less personal than a piece of jewellery. It must be more a case of things you removed from harm's way. After all you mistrusted the clientele. Grandfather's smoking set. Mother's jewellery casket. Photo albums from his childhood. Documents. All clothing. A half-filled memory box. The sum of his personal effects took up less than half of the room next to the kitchen, which also served as a store for Wastefood's remaining jars of preserves. With a shelf life of several months. It would be a shame for all that sustainability to be fed to tourists.

He could invite friends over when he got back. Fill the apartment with his own energy again. Felix had lots of friends. Never lost track of them. Right now Milan was cooking fish soup. Heinz was going to a concert. Pia was showing off her kitten. Georg was getting worked up about right-wing extremists. Christian about America. Hanna about Russia. Thomas about

everything. Jonas and Melanie were postponing their wedding. It was Barbara's birthday and she was celebrating it with her children. Florian had changed his status to single. Akin was photographing people hugging trees. Veronica was holding the cover of a Finnish classic up to the camera. Norbert was singing karaoke. Felix had a good friendship quota. At least a quarter of them would respond to his message within an hour. But he would only ask four of them for a place to sleep. Eight days was a long time. For both sides. In the end he opted to stay with Eugen. Probably because he felt he could tell him the truth.

– Eight days, you say? And you believe that? These would be the first builders ever to finish on time.

– They look pretty reliable to me.

– They'll smile and tell you it's going to take longer. If they say it at all. Mostly they don't say anything. And just leave. Sometimes they come back. In-between they merely keep smiling at you. Builders are the true masters of the modern age.

Like architects, thought Felix, who was allocated a lilac sofa in front of jade jungle wallpaper. The sofa was already kitted out with mauve bedding. Felix got the impression of being in a boutique hotel, which the two of them probably confused with hospitality. There was nothing about the rooms here to criticise, but nor was there anything that had a connection with Moira and Eugen. Felix divided up the things in the apartment. What

would belong to whom if they separated? It was impossible to work out. Even the hosts must feel like guests here. Felix couldn't find a single personal item that would have to be locked away in a larder. A perfect apartment to rent out. Even the blemishes like the patinised walls, scratches on the floor, stains on the table and notches in the doorframe looked curated. Nothing was in the way. The emptiness of the rooms radiated calmness, poise, serenity and determination. It was the apartment of people who knew what they wanted. Who had a clear opinion on everything.

Eugen had always been one step ahead of his time. Just one step, but this still allowed him to be hailed as a visionary. Felix hadn't understood the concept of virtual property until Eugen put the VR headset on him and took him on a tour through the architecture of EUGENIA. His vertigo was even worse on top of simulated skyscrapers than real ones.

– This here, Felix, goes beyond the mere imitation of reality. This is creation. We're not just talking about new colonies here, but a new world. So-called reality is wasting away. It's stale and banal. Here, on the other hand, everything you can think of is possible. Here, all boundaries of growth are crossed. Here a person becomes a person.

Maybe it was Eugen's creative power. Maybe it was people's limited capacities. But it didn't make much difference to Felix whether a house was in the form of a plant, if buses looked like flying fishes or if mountain pistes were prepared with candy floss. In the end it was imitation.

Not even being able to assume forms that corresponded to your inner state – Eugen declared Felix to be a wind being – changed any of this. It was simply a gaudier form of reality that would likewise wear thin. Maybe at some point the analogue world would have to be adjusted to its likeness. Maybe it would end up consisting of nothing but empty spaces. Even the self was a heap of components that could be put together in infinite mutations. None of the elements was new. Each had existed a billion times before.

Even virtually, Eugen was still Eugen to the core. The rimless glasses with lenses that changed colour. The bald head. No hair was allowed to sprout from his body. The baby skin. Despite his forty years. That was what was called character. There was work in it. Whereas Felix's face was easily forgotten. No. Mistaken.

When Felix handed him a yellowed photograph, which showed Eugen lecturing, he was completely moved by himself.

– What horrific glasses, he smiled.

– A different time, Felix said.

– A different person. Of course you can stay as long as you like.

Moirá will be just as happy to have you as me.

Her face had become doughier. Her crooked lips and scornful expression looked as if they'd been fixed with too much hairspray. As if she'd left herself behind on the way. As if she were her own avatar. *Since*

the operation she'd finally looked like the statue that had been made of her.

Moira, a memorial. And Felix scanned his memories of her. The old Moira. Who he could evoke using the avatar Moira.

– So nice to have you here, Moira said. Both of them were effusive. As if Felix were the first hotel guest since the opening.

It was impossible to shake off the feeling that they needed an audience for their relationship. Felix was a good audience. People liked him for this. He rarely spoke about himself. He was a good listener. Who bestowed approval rather than criticism. His temper was like the weather at the equator: the same through all the seasons.

But on his first glass of wine he said:

– I've learned not to take life so seriously anymore. Otherwise it ends up being a big heap of disappointments. You have to let go of certain ideas. You're only free if you no longer expect anything. Life is like an unreliable friend who only ever gives a toss about you when it suits them. Once you've accepted this you can have fun with them.

Both Eugen and Moira were worried. Instead of putting an audience on the sofa they had a tragic actor.

– What's up, Felix?

Eugen was secretly hoping that his old friend would say something like: *Not worth talking about.* Instead Felix refilled his glass as if he needed some Dutch courage.

– I’m renting out my apartment. For eight days. Every month.

Eugen raised his hand, signalling that he didn’t need to say any more.

– No need to be ashamed.

– I’m not ashamed, or I wouldn’t be telling you this after one glass of wine.

– Why the builders?

– No need for such a long explanation.

Eugen nodded contentedly. Felix began to behave like an audience again. When he explained the circumstances to Eugen, surprisingly he wasn’t offered a job as a caretaker in EUGENIA.

– This is a huge opportunity, Felix. You’re Human 2.0 and you don’t even realise it.

Felix nodded even though he thought it was something he shouldn’t do as Human 2.0.

– You’re exactly where lots of people are going to end up soon. Your day will no longer be structured by work. But you’re lucky. You’re not on the edge. You have an opportunity. You’re a sort of mini capitalist. And you can rent out your capital. It’s slightly inconvenient, I mean, it’s the place you live. At least you sense it as your intimate space. But why? Because it belongs to you? You’re confusing property with yourself. I know what I’m talking about. Property always means incorporation.

Irrespective of whether something's virtual or real. The phenomenology is the same. And no, the virtual piano is not the phenomenology of the real piano. It's something I've thought about, of course. Ultimately it's all about claiming limited resources. Whatever. What's important is that you believe it belongs to you entirely. No. That it's part of you. And that nobody else has the key. Your personal retreat. Your mother's womb. Which you crawl back into. It's also a form of abortion, Felix.

Moira, who was sitting on the sofa opposite, sighed. She knew that this was only the beginning of a long one-way street. And she knew where it would end. Taking a cigarette, she shot Felix a particular look. Was it a conspiracy? Was it a second level, the chance to experience something different this evening from Eugen's relentless cascades? Moira's state of matter solidified. Her gaze was trying to fuse. Felix took a sip of wine. He decided to follow her. She was standing on the beach. The wind. The palms. No. She was the naked lady playing chess with Marcel Duchamp.

– You're lucky. You're free. You don't need to work anymore. You don't have to function any longer. Don't have to be a robot. The day has been gifted back to you. You can wait to see what it brings you. You've overcome the Homo oeconomicus. You've overcome Nietzsche. You're the purest existentialist. While others struggle to survive you can focus on life. Focus exclusively on what remains of the day when work disappears. Someone ought to write a book about you.

Felix climbed into the picture. He sat opposite her. Her queen was threatening his king. Soon he would find himself checkmated. There was no way out. She looked at him. Put her queen on the board. Resignation. Then she stood up and left. She walked slowly enough to make him understand he should follow her. On the walls were portraits of Eugen. She stopped. Looked at him. As if he were an invention rather than her husband. That skin. Like a self-cleaning oven. Like creaseless nylon. He stood behind her. Sniffed her neck. Her fingertips sought his. She leaned back. Stood on tiptoe as if she were wearing shoes. He took a cigarette and placed it between her lips. Light. Click. The indifference made him dextrous. Her sigh a lascivious applause. Every moment an offer he didn't accept. The nature of elegance. She looked Eugen in the eye. *A picture must be the result of a long observation. This is what makes it art.* She blew smoke in Eugen's face. No reaction. Only a painted picture was more indifferent than he himself. She took Felix's hand. King and queen left the board. When they moved away he felt the painted gaze on his back. He closed his jacket.

– Not having a job doesn't mean not having anything to do. You're free to embark on anything, everything. Nobody can tell you what you've got to do. Nobody's waiting for you. You have to work out how to deal with this freedom. Carpe diem, Felix. Can you design your days so that in the end you remember every single one of them? I don't feel any envy. I need the drudge. The exhaustion. The doing. But nobody's got anything on

you. You can say no. You can turn down bad jobs. You haven't got any stress. No pressure. Now there's no reason not to be a good person. Devote yourself entirely to good deeds. Altruism is a luxury you have to be able to afford. You don't have to please anyone. Don't need to fear anything. You can say the truth that nobody wishes to hear. You could make the world a better place. Like all of those people who aren't under pressure. I could think of so many things for you, Felix. You can look for work that nobody needs. No, sorry. Work that nobody's willing to pay for. You could fulfil the last wishes of the dying. Support refugees. Or simply travel. You'd have time for love. You could finally think about suicide in peace. What if everyone was in the same situation? Getting money for no work? A loving state. Would they lay down their unworthy jobs? Would a cleaning lady still clean? A carer still care? No humiliating queuing up for unemployment benefit. Everybody would be born with money. From day one enjoy the feeling of being worth something. Even people's mothers with dementia would have a basic income. Even a released prisoner wouldn't have to worry. They could ponder their next crime in peace. A junkie could buy drugs. There wouldn't be any maintenance payments because every child would have their own money. People might have ideas! Many would do nothing. But nobody would become inactive. Nobody would have to move out. A completely different situation. But comparable. You owe it to the day, Felix.

Moira sighed once more. She stretched out on the sofa like a prostrate Buddha. *Am I a human being or do I just experience the world as a human being?* She took a puff on her cigarette. A postcoital Ellen Barkin, Felix thought. There was even something comforting about her irritated tone. That sonorous voice.

– Does indolence have to be efficient now too? Do we always have to get the most out of everything? What has become of the beauty of flaws?

She blew smoke in his face. Felix had such an urge to fritter away his life. Only now did he realise that the naked Moira was hobbling in the gallery. Is that why she'd been standing half on tiptoe? She turned around and whispered in his ear: *You've got more character when you're dressed.*

Felix shook his head. Moira looked at him. Eugen looked at Moira looking at Felix. Felix looked at both of them. And took a gulp of wine.

– I could lend you the money, of course. But would that be a good idea? I doubt it. It would destroy this great opportunity. Because I'd want the money back. You'd have to retrain. But to do what? I'd force you to look for a job if after a few months I saw you were without any prospects. You're not one of us, Felix. You belong on the other side.

– Aha, Moira said. I had no idea there were two sides. Surely we're all in the same boat.

– Do you mean the state? That's true. It has to take everyone as they are. Inflexible, cowardly, xenophobic, lazy, untalented and primitive. But

the state hasn't existed for a long time. Someone's going to have to sort out the mess. It won't be people like Felix. Most aren't capable of anything anymore. They're useless for both war and peace. They're not even good at indolence. But soon we'll be back to the nitty gritty again. Sheer survival. In the end human beings can't deal with everything else. They get bogged down in democracy. And occupational therapy. They begin to think about trivial nonsense. To avoid feeling empty. But soon the days again boil down to whether you're going to survive the next few. Then life makes sense once more. So basically, the fact that you're able to fight for financial survival while the rest of us have to cope with the climate crisis is enviable.

Eugen gave Felix a haughty smile. *He looks like Hunter S. Thompson if he'd turned into a right-wing arsehole*, Felix thought as he poured Moira and himself large whiskies.

– I have a different relationship to money from you, Eugen said. I keep my distance. I don't confuse it with myself. For me money is like a plant you pull up. I'm different from you. I've lost all connections to things. For me it makes no difference if I've got a piano in my sitting room or just virtually on the internet. You have to break away from things. They mean nothing to me. You have to stop thinking that anything belongs to you. That you're entitled to anything. That something is just meant for you. Then you become free inside. I'm not frightened of losing anything. Because you can only lose things that belong to you. I wouldn't even care if you slept with

my wife. I can see your fantasies. People who lose their own territory often try to conquer that of others. Are you a cuckoo, Felix? Are you at war? Are you intending to capture me? Are you going to chuck me out of my own life?

– Please, Eugen, stop. You’re embarrassing Felix.

Only now did he notice Eugen slurring his words. The naked woman was standing by the window. Duchamp was sitting smoking on the sofa. His legs crossed. His suit without creases.

– Money may be a limited resource. But my wife’s love isn’t. It doesn’t get any less if she kisses you. Would you like to kiss Felix, Moira?

– Sure. Wanna watch?

Duchamp lowered the needle. A crackling.

What should we call it?

She didn’t turn around. The old song began.

My feelings are inhibited. They don’t like to be labelled.

Every word is a frozen thought, Duchamp mused.

What will her kiss feel like?

Moira stood up. She wandered over on tiptoes and stopped in front of Felix. She looked at him. She looked at him so that Eugen saw her. She wanted to be seen by Eugen. She wanted him to see her looking at Felix. The latter was unsure how to look back. Because his gaze was fixed by

Eugen too, whose own gaze remained inscrutable. The gaze of the viewer who pretends not to be seen. *We mustn't let the viewer get away unseen.*

– Close your eyes, Moira said.

Like the queen, the naked chess player lay on the floor. Might he push her hair to one side to see her face? No. The other way around. The king lay on the floor. He kept his eyes closed. He felt her breathing. He joined in with her excitement. The closeness of her lips. She opened her mouth. Her breathing was already inside him. The tip of her tongue felt its way towards his. Both of them flinched when they touched as if by accident. A minor electric shock before their lips eagerly sought each other, they locked jaws. Everything surrounding them disappeared in the blurriness. It had no access. Was condemned to stand and stare in astonishment.

Felix kept his eyes closed. Was totally in this moment. Not with Moira. In his head the women changed. But the kiss stayed the same. He'd never been able to tell anyone by their touch. For him a touch had no identity. But without touch he became brittle. Really dried up. No, it did matter who touched him. A touch could be physically repellent. But there was desire in this kiss. He wanted more. Not her. The feeling. He wanted to swallow up and be swallowed. It was like eating a dish. A kiss, please. Not that kiss. A kiss per se. Every second must be savoured. The viewer

intensified the moment. They sensed his gaze. It forced its way in, played along. There was a transference.

– I don't care whether your avatars fuck or your physical bodies. It makes no difference to me.

They sat side by side on the sofa in silence. They weren't touching each other. They weren't looking at each other. But they were. They were looking at each other. But elsewhere. They were wearing the headsets. They were making caresses in the air. A theremin. Moaning was forbidden. He pushed his hand into the avatar's crotch and could smell the wet pussy of the woman beside him. She didn't make a sound. Pulled him in the air towards her. He grabbed the back of her neck and yanked her roughly by the hair. She crossed her hands behind her back. He discovered what she liked. She liked what normally she wouldn't allow. After all this didn't mean anything. The avatars didn't even look like them. And yet the electric shock. In Eugen's brain. *That was good, Felix. We must repeat it when we get the chance.*

– Those who stay at home during wartime are always the most dangerous.

– What are you talking about? You're drunk.

– He's a cuckoo. You can't trust him.

– It's your game. You'll play it until I fall in love.

– Now he's lying next door, thinking of you. You've colonised him.

– You're sick.

– If I put my cock in you now, will you think of him?

– You repulse me.

– This is a game too. But you like it.

– I don't want him to be here. How can I look him in the eye over the coming days?

– We were drunk, we're grown-ups and–

– Just stop it.

– I want to fuck you.

– You can only get it up when other men want me. Is that why you invited him over?

– He's harmless. Or should I be worried?

– You want me to go, don't you? But you're not going to get rid of me that easily.

– Did you feel anything?

– I can kiss anyone.

– Will you crawl into his bed?

– You'd really like that.

– I'd be interested to see how far he'd go. After all he's under a friend's roof.

– As far as any man. You're all easy prey. It's so boring.

– Let's fuck. I want him to hear us.

- I don't need an audience.
- Tell me you belong to me.
- Be quiet now. Please.

Felix was lying on his back, wishing he would die. So he could be found in this very pose. To create an uproar. So he would need to be disposed of. To be in the way. He wanted to create work. The audience didn't want to leave the performance via the exit. It didn't want to go. It didn't want to applaud. Didn't want to get angry. It just wanted to be found dead when the lights came on. The audience wanted to create bewilderment. The audience wanted to have the last word. When the actors stepped onto the stage to take the curtain call they were surprised by a unanimously dead audience. The actors stood helplessly at the edge of the stage. One wanted to call the dead crowd *enemies of art*, but realised the potential faux pas. And stepped back. They kept going with the curtain call. Just in case the audience was merely pretending to be dead. *They've stopped breathing*, one said. How can you criticise the dead, another wondered. Does decency dictate that we ought to stay onstage until the undertakers have carried out all the bodies? That would mean being condemned to being an audience ourselves. A performance that would no longer allow for a review. It would be going against every agreement. In the future we could be playing to empty houses! But that would be different from playing to dead people, another

actor corrected them. But what if they stayed away, yet another complained. The audience causing a scandal amongst the actors.

He breathed in. And out. In. And out. But no matter how hard he concentrated Felix didn't die. He would have to wake up in this theatre tomorrow morning. He would have to suffer the shame of the actors involving the audience directly. Of them pointing at the audience. Addressing and ridiculing the audience. Toying with the audience. Would Felix summon the strength to leave the performance early? And, if so, where would he go? He would probably have to see it through to the end. They had him over a barrel. They would keep him hostage for the remaining days. And there would be nothing he could do to stop it. He was powerless. Because he was too tired. Because he just wanted to lie here. And then he did what, as an audience, was expected of him. He took the gun from the first act and carried it into the third. Typing was difficult. *You didn't deserve that.* SEND. He listened. No sound from the room next door. She must be waiting for Eugen to fall asleep. She had to be expecting a message from Felix. The looks she'd given him had been unmistakeable. The dialogue in the bedroom merely a front. She'd started it after all. She'd pulled him up to the gallery. What did she want?

He grabbed his erect penis. He held himself tightly. Despite the current. He moved his hand. What was he pumping into his body? Images of a life together. Breakfast in Taormina. Visiting studios in Miami. Parties

in New York. Wedding in Lima. He held the antenna. He pointed it in her direction. Reception. There could be no doubt. He just had to take the first step. That's what she was expecting. A question of dignity. Felix knew how they ticked. They were all the same. He pumped away his concerns. Sober, they all lived the lie. He would remain drunk forever. Tomorrow he would regret it. Everything had its legitimacy. He was just doing what was expected of him. She wouldn't answer him today. That wouldn't change anything. He felt this suction. *Fuck reason. Get things moving. Be completely unlike you. It's liberating. Resistance! Stand up. Against yourself. Prevail against your own will. Revolt against your own self. It's always trying to prevent everything. You want the leap. You want the sigh after the turbulence. Pump. Just don't come. With orgasm comes reason. Cowardice. Do it. Now. Before you squirt all over the sheet. Before you stain everything. Pump. Point your mobile at your penis. Before you come. Selfie-destruct button. Click. Send. Delete. Nobody saw the UFO.*

[END OF SAMPLE]