

HOUSE IN THE SUN

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The offer was in a shiny bluish envelope. I tore it open, tossed it to the floor, where it went on gleaming, aggrieved, and read that my application has been accepted. The news didn't stir me, it rather left me cold. Naturally, I was pleased. But I was also pleased about the naturalness with which I received this news. My status had been acknowledged, that was how I took it. And my life was over.

A neighbor scurried past into the stairwell, didn't greet me, didn't respond to my own *Hello*. Why the residents of this city, especially in the poorer neighborhoods, are so ruthlessly unfriendly, is something I've never understood. I picked the envelope back up off the floor, held it to the light, and observed the brilliant matte blue, which twitched in time to my pulse. Then I closed the mailbox.

Upstairs, in the ruined apartment with the drawn curtains and the walls smeared with paint, I sat down and took a lukewarm sip of Coke. For a long time, I was addicted not just to medicines, but to Coke. Now, without trying, I'd weaned myself off the black poison, my addiction just went dormant, and I only bought it out of helplessness and indecision. The Coke I was drinking just then tasted like a weak, faded memory of my darkest times: sticky, chemical, undistinguished.

Again I picked up the letter and observed it: precise, sans-serif letters on textured paper. Enclosed was a small-format envelope with a website address and a numeric code. There, I read, I would find further instructions, in addition to a long survey that I could fill out in the next two weeks. I wanted to wait at least three or four hours before complying with this request and going online, because they would certainly log my IP address. And I didn't want to appear too needy or enthusiastic.

Normally I smoked, the same way others breathe: without thinking about it, without a pause, without a thought. Automatically. The cigarette I lit this time was different. I smoked it with a certain ceremonial torpor, cherished every drag as if it were my last. Through the dissipating smoke I looked around as though through others' eyes. Cigarette smoke had long since turned the whole room yellow, not just from my manic and depressive years, but from the normal ones, too; in the corners hung cobwebs sticky with nicotine. Paint was everywhere. There were lots of boxes I still hadn't unpacked—*still* referred to a point in time that would never be reached, especially now, after the offer. The boxes were and would remain closed. Not that there were so many of them. My belongings I'd sold off again in recent years, who knows where it had gone to, it was I who had done it, and unwillingly. I was living here on call, sitting amid a few boxes, which

I would just schlep elsewhere, anywhere, to the next station. That's what I had assumed so far.

But now I knew the boxes would stay behind, gathered in the corner, and would eventually be cleared out. No longer would their owner be found.

2

Because the catastrophe had come again, and this time longer and more intensely than before. I hadn't thought it could even happen, let alone that it might be worse or still more devastating than before. Every mania takes something, even takes too much, but this one, this last mania, has taken everything from me.

I'd hoped my book about bipolar disorder would bring some enduring order to my life, some closure, and in some way would tame this monster of an illness. Couldn't someone who's confronted its symptoms and signs, linguistically and reflexively, hope to be somehow sensitized and immunized against them in real life? No? While writing the book, I had once again gathered all my forces against the illness, and I'd lost. My talent wasn't enough for my illness, in the end, the illness had been stronger, had struck me down again wantonly, despite my medication. And as for me—there was nothing I could do. I was run down and run over. Again, the floodwaters carried me away.

This mania lasted more than two years. Two years when I lost my friendships and my money, ruined my reputation, destroyed my home, committed crimes. All of it was just like before, all of it was a little bit worse. Annihilation raging in the costume of a wicked clown. When you remember that mania usually lasts a few weeks, you might ask yourself how I happened to pull this ridiculous years-long ticket. When my turn came, I always went longer and wilder than the others. And this time, the catastrophe was so complete that I basically had to close my eyes before it. The details were too painful.

Even just the paint. I must have been covered in paint myself once, for days on end, maybe. I started painting mad, wild paintings, like the painter I had suddenly become, leaving more and more blotches all over the room. And then I must have been struck by the impulse to paint myself. Paint on my head, red, brown, like a psycho in some horror film. I guess I also tried to rinse the paint off, I think, but just barely, heated, driven by the restlessness in my head. I guess I also rushed outside and I found this coloring, these marks, were just natural, more natural than anything before or since. I'd been marked since birth, I thought, and now people could just see that from the outside, garish, as it should be. Look at him: a marked man, really! Soon I had forgotten I looked like that and walked through the streets standing out, a madman.

Disbelief, at times, that this was really me. That again, despite all precautions, it had gotten hold of me again, that I actually had this illness. A thousand times grappled with, yet once again, I had taken off and crashed. Two years, and here it was again, the worst of it.

Two more years followed, of depressive agony, the shame and disgrace of being basically unable to live: persistent awareness of the losses, the countless shards, but unable to pick them all up, a lack of air amid mounds of debt, the absolute proximity of death. Months, years of complete incapacitation, neuronal collapse. The disbelief, the humiliation. All over, everything all over again.

It was a long, long waiting for nothing. As January slipped past, from week to week, my mania slowly crumbled. February was a mere holding out against suicide, in the deepest, wordless depression. March was mourning. April was gray indifference. In May, I wanted to die again, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Then a year passed, amorphous and gray, and yet I was still alive. Then another year, viscid, and distant from all things. I had missed the implementation phase, and yet the decision had been made, and I was already dead, at least, that's how I acted, utter passivity, no more action, pathetic, paralyzed. A pseudoform or inner variant of Cotard syndrome, perhaps: the false assumption that one is already dead.

And the rhetoric was lost. When I tried to write, nothing emerged from me with the former rhythm or former rage; these superficially good things seemed like a lie to me, and eternally distant, as though produced by another person—and in fact, that was true.

And it didn't matter to me at all, because I didn't matter to me at all, because I would die, because I was already dead, that was the decision from somewhere inside or above, a decision by then long irrevocable.

3

Now that the letter from the House in the Sun had come, though, my depression was no longer so heavy and dark and bitter, it was more sober, more rational. And besides, since my last bout of mania, I seemed to have found a sort of peace. Or, to stick with the metaphor, I had surrendered, and they, the victors, were leaving me alone, since they had won anyway. I tried to leave it all blurry, somewhere in the middle distance, tried not to constantly remember. The shame burned less hot and less withering than before. It was no longer there minute by minute.

But what did I have to sacrifice? Was I even a person still? Or was I just a bundle degraded by disease, self-traumatized, scarred, that had bought its so-called peace at the price of dullness, because it quite simply couldn't take it anymore?

The total lack of connection was still there. I had no bond anymore with anyone, other than with Ella, maybe, and the way forward, the perspective on a future in which this might change, was lost. I was alone, and I would remain alone. I didn't want to be so alone, but I couldn't deal with other people much more, and anyhow most of them were gone, were out of my life, and some of them had even marched off with a nasty grin on their face. I had lost so much that it no longer made sense to try to get anything back. When I saw someone, I acted out a truncated version of the person I had once been. I couldn't do more. The person I really was (or the person I wasn't anymore) remained in the shadows. Somewhere in the dark was someone, but who, not even I knew. And he was no longer worth anything at all. Not to me and not to him.

Death had become second nature to me. I was gone, but I did finally begin to see once more a tiny, faint light, and the pain no longer burned so mercilessly. And yet, paradoxically, the better things went for me, the more sober and rational were the thoughts of suicide that arose in me. They were no longer attributable to despair, but to reason.

The next few days, I dawdled. I was told to inform those around me about an upcoming “rehabilitation effort,” to let them know I’d be staying in a project-supported sanatorium. That was quickly taken care of; my situation was evident. After the back operation, the doctors had recommended I undertake some kind of rehab, so my upcoming stay looked like a logical course of events. I dropped the news in conversation and commented on it with the skeptical disapproval that accompanied all my actions and remarks. Daniel and Laura, whom I was still in touch with, and Ella more than anyone, supported me and encouraged me in this plan. Every action, every measure, was welcome to them, what mattered was that something changed after this leaden, far too long period of illness.

Apart from that, I practiced vanishing and began to put in order what was left behind, hoping to get down to the bare essentials.

And that’s what was there in the boxes: a couple of cables, a couple of leftover books no one, least of all I, had wanted; an iron, papers, useless appliances, odd cups and plateware. Insubstantial hoarding. What else was there to organize? My footsteps echoed in the ruined apartment. Best just to throw it all away, I thought. But I was too much of a coward for that. I started to gather the paperwork at least, to sort the old leases, toss out useless bank statements,

reread and tear up years' worth of psychiatric reports. Slowly, there was less of it all, but the disorder remained. It looked like a worthless inheritance that nobody wanted to claim.

I limped, dead man walking, pro forma through the streets. Living with this near-death consciousness was a strange experience, but then, every experience I had felt, in the end, unreal, almost as if they'd all already occurred. I was no longer gathering real experiences, because the place around which these experiences would accumulate was now vacant. The person who was supposed to experience things was no longer there, his body was sitting around on call. There was nothing left that experience could or would grasp onto. Inwardly the person was gone, and outwardly the departure was only a matter of time.

5

"So I'm really not supposed to go visit?" Ella stirred her Yogi Tea morosely. Tea drinkers were always suspect to me, but I liked it in Ella's case, because I liked Ella.

"No, that's part of the concept, that you have to spend the first period there without visitors. It's the same way in nursing homes."

"You're not that old."

“I will be soon enough. You’re supposed to devote yourself to the program, integrate and all that. The outside world is just an irritation.”

“And that’ll help your depression? Is that therapy, or like...?”

“It’s a therapeutic package. That’s what they call it. I don’t really know so much about it myself.”

“I want to speak to the doctors first.”

“No. I want to take it alone this time.” I almost added: *I don’t need you to rescue me.*

“I don’t like it when you shut me out,” she said. “Are you taking your medicines?”

“For the tenth time: I’m taking them, like clockwork,” I said. “I was taking them before the manic attack, too. Why won’t anyone believe me? Why do people want turn me into my own scapegoat?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“It is, though, this acting like it’s always my fault. You want some simple explanation, and somehow I’m guilty. But I’m not guilty.”

“I believe you. But who’s this *you*?”

“Just everyone, all of you,” I said, and waved my hand through the air, and we both had to laugh. “And that includes you,” I added, “rules are rules.”

“Okay. So you’ll be alone. But can I visit after like three or four weeks?”

“Yeah, something like that. But there’s got to be a clean break, a before and after. You have to be plucked completely out of your normal life. Ugh,” I groaned, “I just hope that time away will finally give me some structure. Internally and externally.”

“That would be nice. You’re already on the right path.”

“I’m doing what I can,” I said, and it was like being at a therapist and offering up a few prefab phrases to satiate him. Ella seemed to recognize that.

“Is there some kind of long-term therapy that goes along with it, once your stay is over?”

“Yeah. If I want.”

“A couple of weeks of therapy won’t do much.”

“Sure.”

“Please take this seriously.”

“I am.”

“You know what I mean. And this program, is it physical, too? Physical *and* mental?”

“Yeah, it’s a holistic approach. The whole routine.”

“It’ll be good for you. Strengthen your back, get rid of that belly. Though I do like your belly.”

“Thanks. What about my bald spot?”

“You’re a long way from being bald. But I love it.”

“You’re actually just happy I don’t have a chance with anyone else.”

She had to laugh, and I laughed along quietly. With her, I could still talk lightly, even carefree, no matter how heavy my heart was. I tried to suppress the thought that this could be our last meeting, but I didn’t manage it. I was going to die, and most likely, I’d never let Ella know. Guilt pounded in my chest.

“Hopefully you don’t fall in love there.”

“I can’t fall in love anymore.”

“Thanks a lot. How charming.”

“You know what I mean. Again. I can’t fall in love again.”

“Well. I just hope so.”

It was time to pay. We had a punky looking server who threw our check down brashly. I gave him a generous tip. We stood, it was hard for me not to lose my balance. Then we unlocked our bicycles and kissed each other goodbye.

“I’ll miss you, anyhow,” she said.

“I’ll miss you, too,” I said. “Same as always.”

That was true, even. We missed each other constantly, and right away after every separation. And yet, the time together wasn’t without its difficulties. In seconds, we got on each other’s nerves, turned defensive, sighed with relief

once we were apart. Then we missed each other. *With or without you*, basically, like in that corny old song by U2.

I waited until she'd crossed the bridge crowded with bored tourists and turned and blew me a kiss, then I left myself, relieved and bewildered as always. *With or without me*, that works better, I thought. It was impossible for me to live with myself, and without myself (because what were the phases of mania and depression if not loss of self?) as well. I just can't live, I thought, and stepped on the pedals.

6

Ella was all I had to hold onto for a long time. And I'd clung to her in my heart, and she'd often clung to me, too. She knew well what we could be, what the possibilities for us were. I no longer did. I just didn't. Objectively I did, as an image, but I didn't believe in it, or I hardly did, because I no longer believed in myself.

And yet, she was my joy, and one look in her face was enough to bring me relief, however, briefly. The humor was still there between us, little jokes, tiny moments of ease. And I could make her happy and show her tenderness and love. Still, that could not be the only thing there was left. And yet it was.

Why was I holding on for? I didn't want her to suffer. And perhaps I held on from the tiniest hope. Or maybe it was just habit. I was dead though, already. I had always been dead, no matter what other people said. And this time, there would be no building me back up, I was standing at society's furthest edge and couldn't find my way back.

Or could I? Sometimes I thought I might still manage one last time to find again some way of living that consisted not just of persistence and pain. I could manage it. Everything couldn't be that bad. But I had the sense that I'd already said or written those words many times before and this time they no longer meant anything.

7

Was I punishing myself by not living? I didn't even allow myself to go to the movies, and social anxiety did the rest. I couldn't manage anything: no more fancy meals, no more chitchat, no more joy. The undertow was too strong, I couldn't work my way out. Something nice, something nice, the others, those still there, used to say, something you like, but I never found such a thing. I wasn't allowed to, and I couldn't.

The so-called impenetrability of depression, its resistance to representation: it's not true. I wrote a kind of diary and I could have kept on

writing, thousands of moments in which the smallest actions were wrangled from an immense, dark resistance. Altogether, the result was a monstrous catalogue of total emptiness, dejected and deathly dull. It was there for all to see, but it was impossible to read.

I had often acted out my own death, imagined it to myself, and even, alas, the few reactions it would provoke: a few people sad, a few others waving it off, a brief flash of nostalgic disinterest from former friends. Then back to the text of life, that's just how it is: lost, forgotten, nothing to do about it.

Whenever I took my medicine, I'd think: there goes another day. He's decided to go on living one more day. Little postponements, day by day, for months. And so, there was a brief relief when I took my medicine. It didn't have to be now. He could stick around a bit longer.

8

She didn't look at me at first as I walked into the room. Absorbed, she stared out the window, massaged her temple with a Stabilo pen, lost, it seemed to me, in a daydream. I had walked there from another part of the city, just to get a little exercise and counteract the muscle atrophy, and had admired the gleaming, immaculate façade of my destination, a magnificent building in the middle of a rundown, soot-stained neighborhood. Both the doorbells, upstairs and down,

opened the doors automatically. After two buzzes and a few steps I was standing there in the vestibule without being announced.

When she noticed me, she gave me a professional smile. I'd long had a weakness for the androgynous dress of bourgeois women, the elegance of the starched shirt collar under the cashmere sweater won me over. An uninterested, cool beauty, like in scenes by François Ozon. Her name was Sophia and she was, absurdly, a doctor, or at least that's what the name plate on her desk claimed. After all the toothless, wicked dragons, male and female alike, that I'd come across on my long, miserable march through institutions, she was a momentary consolation for the mind and senses.

Sophia said nothing, and I didn't rush to break the comfortable silence. Then she tilted her head.

"So?" No *hello*, no *welcome*, as an acquaintance might say.

"So," I replied with surprise.

She sorted through a couple of slim folders and looked, as she did so, at the even slimmer monitor.

"We're happy to be able to welcome you in," she said. "I almost said *finally*. To finally welcome you in." She smiled again, genuinely, without ulterior motives.

"Why finally?" I asked.

“It’s just a thought. Lots of people find their way to us faster. But if you’re here with us now, that means it’s exactly the right time both for you and for us.”

“Got it,” I said, without really getting it.

“Professor von Radowitz will be right with you. In the meantime, have a seat if you like. A coffee, maybe?”

“Please.”

“I’ll be right back then. Relax.”

She vanished into a back room. I sat on the black leather sectional by the opposite wall. Coffee table books were lying there open, art books and large-format biographies of important writers and filmmakers, lots of photos, not much text. Glossy magazines. Before I could pick something up to flip through, Sophia was back and set down my coffee, with lots of milk and sugar, as I liked it, actually. Then she sat down behind her desk again and typed away on her keyboard, barely making any noise.

I picked up an illustrated book about Lars von Trier and turned the pages. I was surprised that there even was a photo book about Lars von Trier. Most of the images were in black and white, which was fitting, just as it made sense that photo books about David Lynch would be printed in the gaudiest colors. The images disappointed me in their blandness, they seemed incapable of losslessly

transmitting the traumatic horror of the films. But anyway, my attention was already elsewhere. Over the edge of the book, I watched Sophia, who was now radiating lucid seriousness. A strand of hair glimmered in the halogen light of her desk lamp. She tucked it unconsciously behind her ear. Her gaze was blurred with concentration.

“So you’re a Lars von Trier man?” Mr. von Radowitz was standing before me with a broad grin. He had the face of an aged pretty boy.

I didn’t know what to say, and shrugged. “If you mean...”

“I do mean,” he said loudly, and smiled wider.

“I don’t know,” I said absently, trying to figure out if he was even being serious. Probably I had failed to understand once again that this was just small talk and empty chatter and not something to be argued about or weighed on its virtues. Whereas I was taking it all literally and I was stumped.

“Come on, we’ll briefly let you know what to expect from here on out.”

I woke from my absence, stood, and followed him. Sophia smiled at me, and I smiled back, revealing as little torment as I could.

He led me to a bright, clean office with a conference table that was far too long and wide for the two of us.

“So this is a total package,” Radowitz said. “You need to be aware of it.”

“I’m aware of it,” I said resolutely.

“Good. Very good,” he responded. He seemed glad, as he sat there diagonally across from me, and he struck me as very Bavarian, vivacious, tan, rational, rooted. “This is a big opportunity, being allowed into the House in the Sun. But you can only have this opportunity if you accept all the consequences.”

“That sounds conclusive.”

“It *is* conclusive. You’re the customer in a dream factory, and you must follow its laws to the letter. I’m saying this as clearly as possible to make sure you know what you’re in for.”

“I can only really guess at it right now.”

“No, you have quite a good idea. And you know that you’ve already decided to put your life in our hands to find out what still is possible.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Anyway, this isn’t some aesthetic project or anything like that. We might as well be clear about that. This concerns you directly as a human being. It concerns your life and has nothing to do with any further reflections from the farther reaches of the postmodern. There is no as-if here. We are masters of the aesthetic, but we’re reaching far beyond that.” He took a short, deep breath. “You are a valuable person,” he continued earnestly, “And you hear that from all sides. The only person who doesn’t believe it is you.”

“And the state,” I added.

“The state? You need confirmation from the state? That’s a new one for me.”

“I don’t know what I meant by that. I just haven’t found my place in society, and I’m fifty years old. And the state hasn’t made it any easier for me.”

“Everything you are is thanks to the state. It’s absurd, isn’t it? Your education, your scholarships, your emergency rooms, everything. What we’re offering you is a state program. The state’s going to rescue you one last time.”

“To get rid of me.”

“That’s an option. And, as it happens, that’s your greatest wish.”

“I hate these kinds of scenarios.”

“What scenarios?”

“Here, this slightly...” I made that gesture I hated, air quotes, “Kafkaesque, dystopian, Orwellian brave new world. I detest it.”

“You’re always thinking in literary categories. But this is no text. This is your life.”

“Assuming I go along with it. Then it’s my life.”

“Your choice. But I’d have to think myself a hypocrite if I acted as if I didn’t know this decision was already taken long ago. You don’t want to live with your disease. You can’t. This disease has once more stolen everything from

you. And you have the suspicion that this disease, this last fit of mania, has taken away your creative and intellectual abilities.”

“That’s right. And I wrote that down in your never-ending questionnaire. So I’m not exactly impressed that you know that.”

“But we’re people who take this kind of pronouncement seriously. I know that there are more than enough studies about this. Mania attacks the gray matter, and cognitive capacities are strongly and persistently affected. Depression and medication take care of the rest. We are able to test that here. You will find we’re realists, not a bunch of blowhards and people who twist the facts.”

“So who pays for all this?”

“The state, actually, as I said. Everything it no longer invests in yearslong welfare benefits it now invests in the last dream. This is a model project for now. But it will turn out to be cheaper in the end, and clients will be happy.”

“But just for a while.”

“But it works. And in their normal life, almost nothing ever does. It’s a win-win situation.”

“And other cliches.”

“You don’t have to like my cliches, as you call them. You just have to be onboard with the concept.”

“How long do I have to decide, then?”

“You already have decided. All you have to do is sign the contract sometime in the next two weeks.”

He bent down. Even the lines in his forehead, which I could study just then, had a tasteful quality to them like drapery. “I know about your longing for death. And I know it’s unconditional—that sooner or later, you will kill yourself. So why not add a few moments of happiness to the mix before that happens?”

As I left the office, I thought I saw a trace of compassion in Sophia’s watery eyes. But maybe she was just tired. She gave a practiced smile, said *See you later*, and turned back to her monitor, not without nodding briefly when I turned back to her one last time.

9

I had given up on myself long before, and for good reasons. Illness had destroyed my life over and over, but despite all the losses, I always recovered, at least somewhat. And this time, the disease had left me in peace for ten years, and that had led me to hope I might be spared for the rest of my life. But then an episode came, so disruptive, so glaring, that I knew I’d never be the same again. Indeed, I knew I never would *be* again.

The disease had no cure. I had accepted that fact, but I was also shattered when it struck again. I'd always taken my medication, I thought, I had gone overboard in trying to deal with the disease, I had paid attention to myself and whatever symptoms arose, with the passage of years I'd worked my way out of debt, gotten a foot in the door again in the theater, completed an exhausting reading tour that included trips outside the country, did little jobs on commission, reliably, and managed to scrape together a decent financial cushion, I'd moved into a new apartment, had even ventured into a relationship with Ella. This was an authentic life that I was living. It would soon be ten years since my last episode, and I seemed more stable than ever.

But things turned out differently. The mania came and tore everything apart. A controversial article about Peter Handke's Nobel Prize and Twitter threw me off-course. I wrote it in three or four hours, just before a brief vacation. The article was published just as quickly, and kicked the hornet's nest of the already overheated discourse, especially on social media. That's when it started. I felt misunderstood and wanted to sharpen my interpretation, wanted to say something more, without abandoning my criticism of Twitter as a medium, and I looked far too often at my cellphone during my holiday, and what I read was idiotic, overwhelming, aggressive. It was stressful. I shouldn't have waded into it, I think to myself now.

In revenge, maybe, someone had made some nasty changes to my Wikipedia, had added to it incidents from my manic attacks that I had written about in my book and that reviews had recounted. For a person whose trauma consists of being unable to control their life in certain phases, these kinds of attacks really sting. Such a person wants to clarify and contextualize everything that happens. At night, I'd find myself starting arguments and kicking and screaming against others' tendentious remarks. By then, it was nearly too late.

Here, my memory falls apart into fragments, more so than ever before. Back in my hometown, I set up a Twitter account, since some people on the network asserted I didn't know how it even worked; and once I did, I found everything was exactly as I had suspected. But instead of letting things lie and keeping my mouth shut, I had to stay on there, becoming more and more active, because the stress pushed me into the underworld of wrong thinking and feeling, and so I suddenly started posting gnomish comments from Wittgenstein and ranting and raving instead of networking sensibly like everyone else.

It was the same in real life: all my connections broke off suddenly and the ground beneath my feet started to crumble, the bedrock of my thinking turned to an abyss. A nasty paranoia once again took hold, I could no longer tell what I would do or say, the world had become strange, and I was overwhelmed with energy, which I channeled into the wrong outlets and actions, meaningless stuff,

for months on end, ebbing and flowing, for more than two years. I went crazy again, and I stayed crazy, and my life had no more basis: no more money, no more relationships, no more reputation, no more life. But I didn't realize it then. A disaster loomed over me, but in my manic inflammation, I hardly noticed it, even as the rain kept coming down, I didn't notice. The psychosis was dreadful, mad, bizarre, and more destructive than ever, and it finally broke me for good.

10

It took longer than usual to awaken: many days, even weeks. And even then, I wasn't really awake: no sooner had it dawned on me that I'd once again lost my mind than the pressing desire for eternal sleep appeared. I couldn't recollect all the details, there were too many, it was too awkward and embarrassing. And so I slept as much as I could, because when I lost consciousness, I had a brief respite from the scourge. I rarely got out of bed, rarely left the apartment, the awful state of which was only now becoming clear to me. Ella sometimes brought me something to eat and made sure I could still utter a few words. Depression was back, familiar, terrible, and the realization of the thousands of consequences of my madness that had occurred and would yet occur; the humiliation the illness had inflicted on me, the loss of self, the shame, the guilt.

It burned, it ached, I couldn't take it. I was a wreck, constantly sick at my stomach and drowning in grief.

For a year this went on, with no improvement whatsoever. Every morning, the second I woke up, it all came back to me, the debts, the losses, my actions, my madness. Pure darkness reigned, every step was heavy, my heart was ill, and over and over I kept longing for the life I'd lost forever. Every day I had thoughts of suicide, so many of them, and so lasting, that they soon began to feel real. I saw myself at the clinic, a hanged man, and knew I would actually do it. There was no alternative. But if I was certain that I'd do it, that meant I didn't have to do it right away. The fact that it would happen was enough. And then there was Ella, and I couldn't just hurt her. Every second that I didn't kill myself was a second I could spare her this trauma.

In other words: not yet, and not yet either. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a week. But sometime, certainly.

I also had fleeting visions of myself as homeless in the future. It happened over and over, and I knew that these visions would one day come true, that they came to me from the future, if I allowed there be a future. I didn't know how I could go on living like that, I wasn't equipped for life on the street. Like what did homeless people do when they had to go to the bathroom? Pissing was one thing,

but the rest? I hoped I wouldn't have to answer this question practically. When I saw the bum across the street, I realized people never thought about such things. He sat there in his broken office chair and sang and cursed. But how did he carry out his basic life functions? Sure, sometimes he ate something, half a kebab, a piece of bread he'd begged for. And when he needed to expel it, how did he do it without becoming a bother?

I didn't want to be a bother anymore. And even when I started to get better thanks to an outpatient program at a hospital and a change of medicine from Depakote to Lithium, the thought that I was already dead remained with me. The spark of life was extinguished. I was ashes. I was ashes, I was incurably ill, and the only thing that could heal me was my own death.

11

It was during an especially damaged phase of my life that I first came across the House in the Sun. I was sitting on a hard plastic chair at the job center with my nerves and existence frayed, dull with mourning and pain, waiting for my number to be called. This job center was supposed to be unusually kind to its clients, especially artists. I couldn't necessarily agree. My last caseworker, a young, strict governess, had pointed out to me curtly that "all this," meaning art, was apparently going nowhere in my case and that we ought to consider

something else. But my doctor's note made this *something else* impossible. She looked at the letter skeptically at first, then at me, as if I was faking "all this."

And now I was back again, in the waiting room, looking around. I couldn't believe what had happened. Really, again, after everything? You're back? You've gone crazy again? It was just too much. Wherever I went, if I did even go anywhere, I dragged myself through endless resistance, limbs in shock, mood black and bitter, and when I was back in bed, I stayed there, and I wouldn't talk, Ella told me later. First there was manic logorrhea, then speechlessness; first frenzy, then paralysis. And she tried to just be there somehow, even after mania had destroyed our relationship. She took care of me as much as she could. I was so thankful, and yet I couldn't express it or even feel it, because the pain and the shame covered any other feeling right away.

12

On the wall in the waiting room hung views of cities, fountains, bridges, buildings. The sight of them just dragged me down. My eyes wandered over notices and flyers, training opportunities, intensive courses, professional development opportunities. The thought of becoming a game programmer cropped up again. Leaflets were laid out in a jumble on the grated tabletops,

and I had to force my eyes not to stare at the utterly destitute couple sitting across from me, so I picked a few up and read them.

Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit, I sorted them one after the other: lawyers who claimed to want to help you get state money, professional development centers that were just trying to skim aid money, one lure after another for the desperate, and the greatest bullshit of all seemed to be the last flyer.

Can't go on like this? it said in bold betters. And underneath: *We do things differently!*

Sure, what is it you do differently, then, the depressed reader, naturally wanted to know.

The pilot project for life improvement, self-abolition, and making your dreams come true.

Sounded right. In a smaller font, the copywriters were more detailed, if not actually any clearer: *At our wellness center, you can carry out your life's dreams in utter seclusion. All that's required is you, the person, with everything you bring with you—and with everything you want to leave behind. Just tell your case manager.* If that wasn't enough, it also boasted government support: *In collaboration with the Ministry for Economy and Labor.*

This was obviously some kind of satire, maybe something from a humor magazine, maybe a squadron of humor guerrillas had dropped it off or some

socially critical art students. The word *self-abolition* was what gave this bullshit the necessary edge to stand out from all the other idiocy, like some kind of curio. I stuck the flyer in my pocket. Ella would find it funny, anyway. Maybe we would even call them, Ella and me, get some ominous answering machine message, have some superficial fun.

Footsteps echoed toward me, became clearer, slowed down. My caseworker came around the corner and called my name amiably. I'd pulled a number to wait my turn, now I crumpled it up as I trotted after her, the way you do when you have no say in the matter.

13

"I'd need to check if you fit the conditions," the caseworker said after I pushed the flyer toward her. "If so, they'll get in touch with you."

"So it's not a joke?"

"I thought that, too, at first. And I still can't quite believe it. But no, it's no joke. Is that what we do here, joke around?"

"I don't know."

"We don't."

"Do you know anything about it?"

“No. I asked the management upstairs, and they said it’s some official program. If you read it, it’s quite strange.” She grinned. “But it’s also tempting.”

“So then I’d... what? Give up my apartment? Go live there?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll pass along your question. That’ll get the ball rolling.”

“Yes, do that, then.”

“And so now you’re here for emergency assistance?”

“Yes. An advance.”

“So you’re broke. You want an interim payment.”

“Yeah. Here’s my account statement.”

“You’re broke, then,” she repeated. “How much do you need?”

“Two-fifty.”

“I can give you a hundred. And next time, there’ll be penalties.”

“Aha.”

“Yep. Not my decision. It’s just how it is.”

“Of course. Only a hundred?”

“Yes.”

“What can I say, then? Sure.”

“Good. I’ll go ahead and print you a card, and you can take it out of the ATM downstairs.”

14

To describe depression isn’t easy, as it means a giant uneventfulness, an eternal accumulation of sorrowful moments of nothing. Time weighs on your consciousness heavier and heavier and heavier. It never gets better. I had a long history of recurrent depression behind me, and when it came back, it seemed even worse than the last time. The memory that I’d survived it didn’t help.

Consciousness is blind and stupid as regards your particular condition. And so the malady became physical, I felt poisoned down to the last nerve fiber, sick, immobilized, and there was no release, no way out. And I really was destitute. I was supposed to be a writer, but I was unemployed, because I couldn’t get anything done, just a slowly growing diary that was stuck because I was stuck.

I had bet everything on the art card. My entire life. That had been an unwise decision, because with a so-called mental disability thrown into the mix like the one raging inside me, it was impossible to go on producing work. This illness is a kind of crippling of all of life’s functions, including those of the mind. My thoughts grew slow, stunted and unfree, circling around a painful

emptiness, constantly faced with their impotence and meaninglessness. What could come of that?

And my body didn't know what to do either. Every step took more effort, dragged itself against resistance over the asphalt. Even walking up the street seemed impossible. I sat a long time in my apartment with the curtains drawn and the blinds down. There was nothing left to see or feel. I imagined I could hear the neighbors whispering, but not like before, or so I thought. Depression is often accompanied by mild paranoia: everyone can see and sense that you're standing aside, that things are no longer working. That may be, but what's it matter, because after a brief moment of what might be pity, the glances turn away indifferently, concerned with their own affairs.

Sometimes I felt the changes in my head like waves briefly flooding my brain, an impulse from the cells that overtook everything, my thoughts, my feelings, my heartbeat. Then it turned glaring, I could feel the pressure in my body, in my brain, and the system panicked. I sweated and said nothing, throwing myself on the other side of the eternal bed once more as I could, but usually I had to get up, start walking, stumble through the apartment aimlessly for a moment, smoke a cigarette or ten, and then lie down again. But my back hurt from so much lying down. The truth is, I couldn't do anything.

Anhedonia: the incapacity to take joy in anything, to experience joy in any endeavor. Nothing was fun anymore, not even for a moment. Everything was gray on gray, touch, movies, meals, books, everything that had once had color was now only ever gray. I myself had become gray. I tasted gray and saw gray and thought gray. And many times, I had panic attacks, true panic, fear at the void, racing heart, panic in the now and panic for the future. If nothing ever gave me the slightest pleasure and boredom reigned for eternity and nothing would ever change, then would I be able to bear it? Wouldn't a person just kill himself from permanent despair? Wouldn't it be, yet again, absolute hell on earth? That's what it felt like, anyway: bitter emptiness in a sealed room, frenetic panic in a vacuum, every second another eternal misery. No way out, nothing, never.

The void was the biggest and most pressing problem here, not the despair, not the sorrow. What should a person like me do, who had lost everything inside? My intelligence was impaired, my expression, my understanding. I said the most banal things in the slowest tempo and hardly understood what I was supposed to understand, or understood it in a twisted way. I caught myself in crippled daydreams in which real images wouldn't even form. Nothing was interesting anymore, no debates, no articles, and everything people reported struck me as weird and wrong. A war broke out, and right

away, the debates came, and soon the debates obscured the war and all its atrocities. Nothing worked, just the emptiness of the internet, which I got lost in. And after weeks and months of escapist web surfing, I was just confused and confronted with cold nothingness. I wanted nothing, but this nothing turned against me, became a void that enveloped me, wrapped around my body and my neck. I had nothing to hold onto, no old friends, no books, no people, and I lost myself even further in this nothing without a center or an edge. How was I supposed to survive this, if I were to change my mind and did want to go on living? It couldn't be done. I had put off suicide for years, but somewhere along the way, doors I hadn't even seen had closed. I couldn't return to life. I was condemned to vanish.

15

You think the more it happens, the better you'll learn to deal with it. But the opposite's true. There is no habituation effect, the catastrophes and losses just keep growing bigger and bigger and more and more all-enveloping, and the shock is always new and gruesome.

I can no longer gather it all up and observe it, bring it together, put it in order. It's too much. The pressure takes over, the blurring, the forgetting, and when I meet someone, I no longer know right away what our relationship is,

how sick I've looked to him or her, how mean, how bizarre. Then I do recall it, often, and it's all the more crippling.

There was a time when I thought it was quite a feat, not killing yourself. Looking back, though, the very opposite is true. The feat is to kill yourself, and as early as possible. That would have been logical and consistent.

All these sad images of myself: blue and dark red, hanging from the doorknob, or with my head cut off and thrown in the gravel, or blown to shreds, or with foam and vomit in my mouth in a stiff cold bed.

The thought, in a dream, that I myself was walking on the edge of my brain, in a small gap between bone and mass, in miniature or as a probe, flickering out, and then the opposite thought: there was no gap, the brain was pressing against the skull, and I saw it as a pulsating tumor breaking through the bone like a birth. Away, away with these thoughts. In the twilight, a small, savage monster cinema, old glimpses from my departed life and more monsters, morphing together in part with the faces of old acquaintances—and always the thought, please kill me, cut my head off with a sword, squash me with a truck. And soon, please.

I packed my things, a little out of it. This was my last trip—what should I take with me? Personal items—did I have any? I couldn't think of any just them. Books? In a manic fit, I had sold most of them off. Photos? They were all digitized. Letters? They didn't exist anymore. With my episodes, I had scattered the past and its relics in all directions, and now they were lost. I tried to think of anything special that might accompany me on such an occasion, but I couldn't, so I just packed my suitcase as though for a very long but otherwise ordinary stay at the hospital.

It was light out when I finally made the decision to go to House in the Sun. I'd like to say I'd had some kind of flash of insight, but there was nothing of the sort. The decision was sober and unspectacular, and the inner darkness was still clinging to me. Only the light outside was glaring.

Ella had opened the curtains in the bedroom in the morning, and now, hours later, the sun was shining mercilessly on my face and warming me. I could have closed the curtains, but I just stayed in bed and even stared directly into the sunlight. The window panes were still smudged and covered in stickers and magazine clippings, there were streaks all over, traces of paste between half-torn posters. And in the middle of this patchwork of mania (one window

was shattered), the sun bored into my eyes, and I asked myself why I was still hesitating. My existence was basically over, there was nothing new to look forward to. On the contrary, I stood to lose more and more of what I had left, and I probably wouldn't be able to save the few ruins of what, for lack of a better term, I called my life. The disease had crashed into my existence with such brutal force that there was hardly anything left, inside or out. On the inside, I was a human remnant, with little in common with the emotionally charged and alert person of before, and on the outside, I was a pariah, broke and soon to be homeless. My endless suicidal ideation had found its answer, that's the way it had to be looked at. All that was left was for me to take it seriously, in the easiest way I could. So there was a click inside me, quite quiet, quite soft, and I knew that would be it. I wouldn't become a hobo, a case for social services, I'd go to House in the Sun and vanish. And that would be my decision. At last I had control again.

[END OF SAMPLE]