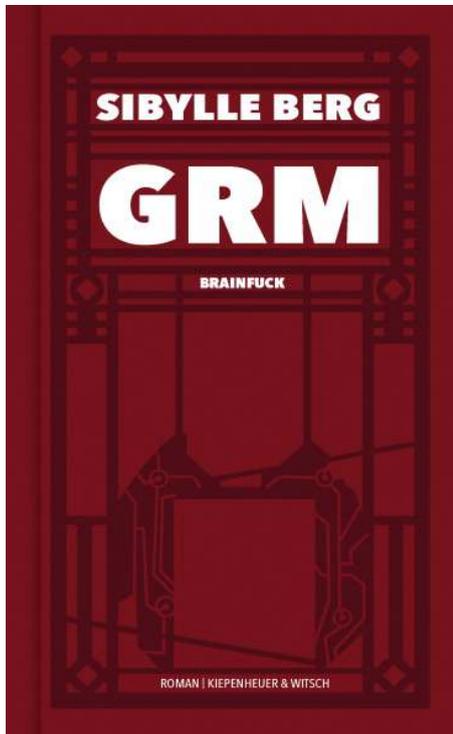


Sample translation (pp. 5-98)

GRM. BRAINFUCK
by Sibylle Berg

Literary fiction

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The Millennium

began lousy.

There was no Y2K bug.

There were no god damn catastrophes.

The thing is, the citizens of the Western world had been looking forward to something finally happening after the endlessly dull 1990s. Something that didn't have to do with a financial crisis that only offered a modicum of intrigue to investment bankers as their bodies plunged the last few meters toward impact on the pavement – Will my well-sculpted body splatter on the sidewalk the same way as a fat, white, loser's body? Or will it bounce back up into the air?

The new millennium had a title. It was. ADHD. And beneath the title, in cursive, was written: *We're reorganizing shit.*

It was the time when Facebook got big. When lots of older people thought that moronic site *was* the internet.

It was the time of the mass hoaxes, mass manipulation. Unbelievably quickly people became addicted to the Likes of strangers. Even more quickly, youth got addicted to a kind of arousal made up of a mix of bullying, violence, sex, and bullshit.

It was the time when genuine human cruelty was added to virtually.

When the yearning for understanding gave way to the rage of the ignorant.

Never before had there been so many conspiracy theories spreading like wildfire. The Vatican, the Koch Brothers, the Mont Pelerin Society, the Club of Rome, the reptilian elite, the flat earthers – with the com-

plications of the world seemingly increasing by the day, so too did the population's desire for a god of thunder.

It was the time before something.

It's always the time before something.

Later, after the new millennium had gotten warmed up a bit, there'd been a collective event that everyone found universally exciting: an airplane flew into the Pentagon and left a large hole in the building that looked like someone had dug a tunnel in a sandcastle with a wet hand. Two other planes landed in skyscrapers. The skyscrapers imploded, and people jumped out of windows again.

It was the millennium during which doubt came over the global population. And it became normal to mistrust the state and intelligence services, the press and academics, the weather, books, vaccines, scientists and women.

The new millennium brought an array of unbeatable benefits for people lucky enough to be born just then. Globally, life improved. So they said. People lived longer, more happily, education was better, the infants survived the infant stage. Markets had directed it all. Hooray for markets.

There were a few losers. They'd either had bad luck or hadn't tried hard enough to succeed. Everyone could make something of their life. As long as they wanted to. Super.

They extracted fossil fuels. They'd liberated the seabed from natural gas and oil with hydraulic fracking. Stuxnet—the computer virus—slowed down the Iranian nuclear program. Blockchain, which would render banks redundant, was invented. As was the e-bomb. The world was

reorganized, the West fought to retain its importance. In the East, China, Russia, Japan, and Korea united to reinterpret markets.

Spoken communication with computers was introduced. Machine learning wasn't yet talked about much. People had mobile phones. They took pictures of themselves. They had things to do. Nonstop.

This is the story of

Don

Potential threat: high.

Ethnicity: shades of non-white

Interests: grime, karate, sweets

Sexuality: probable homosexual

Social tendency: unsocial

Family relationships: 1 brother, 1 mother, father—occasionally, but mostly not

Her story begins in Rochdale.

Fucking Rochdale. A place that needed to be preserved and put on display in a museum as a warning about thoughtless development. Brass plaque: "Such is the manner in which people in the new millennium lived if not suited to market conditions."

A catchment basin for the superfluous is what the place was. A pool of non-GMO rejects.

So, Rochdale. A shithole near Manchester. Known for its unchanging weather. Bad, that is. According to evaluations Rochdale was the most depressing city in the kingdom for the fifth year running. . A bricks and mortar embodiment of brain damage is absolutely not conducive to consumption, so the city had found itself in a fight for its very

existence. For decades. Like thousands of Western cities that all seemed the same: brick buildings, crumbling streets and a derelict cinema, shuttered post offices, shuttered supermarkets. Nobody needs those things anymore, because it's the time of the Internet. Where you can stream any film. And buy all essential foodstuffs, meaning margarine and white bread. Delivered to the houses in cardboard boxes. Though the residents might as well have sprinkled wall paper with salt and eaten that.

Among the relatively limited circle of objectophiles, Rochdale was known for its seven public housing towers. Consequently you saw them creeping furtively around the towers, frantically licking the peeling facades. There was always something going on in the Seven Sisters, which was their unofficial name. And it usually had to do with the demise of a resident. Don envied the people who got to live there. They had more interesting lives. More interesting than hers, which took place in a totally ordinary public housing complex a few minutes away. In Seven Sisters the drug trade was run on a grand scale, family members killed each other, and time and time again people jumped or—let's say—slipped out of upper story windows. Don had never seen a dead body at that point and was convinced that the sight of one would reveal a great secret. Perhaps it would open its eyes, the corpse, and in the manner of a helmet-haired BBC reporter ask: "So, just what is it like for a young person" – pausing, considering the best way to phrase it – "to grow up here?" Don would act as if she were thinking the question over and then say: "You know, everyone regards the life they know as normal. You simply don't know anything else. I was born here and never gave any thought to the city and its shabbiness. It just is, like the poor weather, like the boring school holi-

days, I never think about the fact that there are other places. But I will say this. I do know from the Internet that other places supposedly exist.”

The corpse would persist: “Is your way of speaking really appropriate for a child?” before reverting to dead again.

Don was no longer an extension of her parents, but an autonomous person. She was no longer scared when her mother wasn’t around, no longer searched her face for signs of trouble, no longer asked herself how she could please her mother. In short, Don no longer asked herself what she could do so that she’d finally feel loved. Don did better without this total emotional dependency.

If she were older and aware of her importance she would have mumbled things like: “I can get by just fine on my own.” But nobody asked her, because Don was so young that adults did not yet see her as a person. Despite the fact that everything was already there. The feelings, the thoughts, the loneliness. There just weren’t familiar compartments into which to sort the feelings.

Don didn’t regard the early years of her life as having been awful. Maybe a little bleak, though back then she didn’t know the word to express that. Maybe a little dreary and restless, as is normal during the transition from childhood to youth, when you sense that something will change but you’re not sure what. Don had music.

Grime seemed to have been invented just for her. Don didn’t know who had invented it or out of what components – that was the stuff of discussions between young men who were able to project an aura of invincibility by deploying insider terminology – Don just knew that the music sounded the way she wanted to feel. Angry and dangerous. Grime

stars had the best sneakers, chains, and cars. They were someone. They'd made it. They were heroes.

Grime played all day in the neighborhood. The music suited the attitude toward life. Though children wouldn't talk about having an attitude toward life – it was just their life. When you're grownup you numb rising feelings with drugs, when you're young you listen to music. And then numb yourself with drugs. Grime was raging, filthy music for children leading filthy lives. Don listened to grime in bed, in the bath, outdoors. The great outdoors.

So—

In front of the window a lamp, rain or something similar, or maybe the window was just dirty. The apartment took up the first and second floors. If you'd lost your mind, you could call the whole thing a townhouse.

A very, very small, shabby townhouse. It consisted of two small rooms with a view of the paved terrace and a metal fence. Once while watching TV it occurred to Don that something was missing from all the foreign movies: metal fences. They only existed in such manic frequency in England. Every few meters. Red, green, blue, whatever, didn't matter as long as it was fencing and it was metal. Every god damn thing was separated from life with them – schools, parks, kindergartens, fire alarms. It was unclear whether they were supposed to make citizens feel safe, offering a sense of safe harbor in turbulent times, or whether they were just thrown up as colorful accents amidst all the gray. Don wished for a fence around her bed that would keep her brother away. Whom she wasn't particularly close to.

Beyond the fence, outside, there was a path along which, just a few meters from her window, other residents of the block moved as if they were using imaginary walkers. It was relatively dark, and oddly damp, but Don didn't notice back then. That there was always a draught seemed normal. Her mother was still somewhat together, she did her best to play family, though it was a bit awkward, as if she were building a dollhouse out of mud.

That it could all get worse didn't seem like a possibility at the time. Not to a child, since fear of the future is a pastime of the aged, who don't have any future anyway. Back then Don's world was fine, except for the fact that she didn't have a fence around her bed, or better yet: a little room in the basement where she could lock up her brother. The brother whined. He was probably pissing the bed again. Don could almost

Hear the urine running out of him and

Don was –

Furious.

Many couldn't manage it. To muster such quality rage. Most of the older people who hung around Don's city were numb and tired and squatted in corners and barely had enough energy to lift their heads. Once in a while they'd be fed. But their stomachs couldn't tolerate it, this solid food in an empty existence, and they'd throw up, only to be too irresolute to lift their heads out of the vomit. Most of the people Don encountered were old. That was no wonder at seven – or nearly seven. Or nearly eight, but of course older looking. Or at least believing she looked older. Don's hair grew straight up. Her eyes were crooked and dark, and Don was little, even for a nearly seven-or-eight-year-old. She was little and furious.

Don's rage was so ever present in her daily routine that she would never think of saying: "Man, am I pissed off today." She knew no other condition. She'd been furious since birth. Or at least as early as she could remember. She hated the world where she had to live. Which consisted of a few square meters.

She hated this world and refused to be friendly with it. She had no relationship with her place or rather the place allotted to her by virtue of her birth, with the preordained path set out for her, beginning with the looming poor education. In the event she survived that and didn't accidentally get caught up in a stabbing, an attempt to secure an apprenticeship would follow.

Not getting an apprenticeship, sitting around in government agencies and applying for welfare, getting no welfare because some document or other is missing; coming home to find her mother's hung herself, leaving the apartment, landing in some kind of shelter for young women, getting pregnant, getting beat up by someone for getting pregnant, giving up the baby for adoption, or not, it doesn't matter. She'd wait for an apartment in a public housing project, start to drink and smoke crack and watch TV, staring at other people's pseudo-life, or life as it's supposed to be. Light-skinned people who drink tea in their gardens and do honest work with their incredibly deft hands. They fall in love, the people on TV. And then it happens: fucking violin music.

Nobody fell in love in Don's world. The people in her city hated each other or clung to each other because of a sense of panic they all felt, and nobody could say where it came from, this agitation. They had apartments after all. Most of them. They had food. A kind of food.

Don read a lot, understood little, but still far more than an adult would think possible of a so-called child. Don felt:

Rage.

Are you serious? This pile of shit that you plunked down here? “Watch it! It’s what’s left. Not great, but it’s yours. This is the earth that we’ve eaten bare, this is your neighborhood, your city, which houses workers so they can efficiently produce some crap or other that nobody needs. Got it? It doesn’t require anything of the people in your city except to vote for rightwing nationalist idiots who always have an answer to the question of who to blame.”

When people know who to blame, they feel better, because then divine justice is restored. And there’s a target for their hate. In Don’s city you hated foreigners. Period. Don’s city, that she would never leave, where she would waste away her entire life. Where it would end, though actually it was already over even before it began, because she was born in the wrong place. To the wrong parents, and on top of it all the weather was wretched. Had anyone asked her? Had she asked anyone to take part in these proceedings, run according to rules that she had no say in? What human obligation was she fulfilling with her stay and her excretions among the eight billion – or, by the time the thought was finished, perhaps it was nine – who were crawling around looking to see if they could conjure up some sort of advantage somehow. Who all wanted – something.

Life was a gift.

Embroidered on pink wall hangings, this unbelievably stupid saying hung in the damp kitchens of the slum residents. What happened if

you rejected it? What if you just had no interest in this gift in the form in which it was intended for you? Nobody escaped their surroundings through work. There was no work anymore anyway.

It was impossible to attain better living conditions, there was simply no space available in a world where the few were intent on keeping the many at bay.

“Why did you do that?” you want to ask the old people. “Why have children you hate because they’re loud, because they’re losers – from the word go, because you can see yourselves and your miserable childhoods in them, because you know you’re going to screw it up, just like your parents did and your parents’ parents did, by passing on this hopelessness.

“What’s the point? Leave the children in their own urine at the foot of the bed where you’re passed out drunk or fucking somebody? You get off on their tiny bones that are so easily broken, on the feeling of finally having power over somebody who’s scared of you, and then you look at the children, your eyes glazed over, and hate them for their neediness, that’s so much like your own. You were never helped either, not by anyone.

“Your dull brains get some sort of satisfaction when you torment your children, don’t you? You’ll show them, eh? Those above you. The ones who turned you away, pushed you from the centers where they drive around in elegant electric cars and speak of an ever more prosperous future.

“You could go on strike. But what from, since you don’t do anything. Nobody would care. You could start an armed resistance, but – you

don't have any energy. Or weapons. And no idea whom to aim them at. So you just lie there. With your face in your vomit.

“Why are there still men wandering around freely out there who don't want to be fathers, they just want to turn up to fuck or to beat women, beat them to death, before they slump into the corner and say: This isn't what I wanted. You didn't want any of this? It just happened that it stinks outside and rains nonstop. And that from the very first moment everyone has to be afraid of everyone else, because they have this so-called survival instinct. Nobody can bear it.”

Don can't bear it.

And

Refuses to accept her preordained role as scum.

And

Isn't waiting for love anymore,

Isn't waiting for something like a future to sprout in front of her door. Nothing will ever sprout there, it's a desert left behind by the elderly, along with these living – living? – conditions. And yes, god damn it, Don was passive-aggressive, she was female, she couldn't do any better. Was she supposed to take testosterone injections just to get more enraged, was she supposed to shoot herself up with hormones to try to convince herself she was smarter than she was, and that she ruled the world?

People like her had been put on display in zoos in the old days. The thought occurred to her randomly.

When people have the opportunity to torture others, they do it. When they have the chance to take something away from others, they do it, this mechanism, or call it: this instinct. That they let guide them, with-

out thinking, that they give free rein to eradicate anything and everything that stands in their way –

Don hated the stupidity, the brutality, the shiftiness and deceitfulness, the stench, the hairless, sweating bodies and the slimy fingers that tested everything for commercial usability.

“You want war, you got war.”

Said Don. To herself.

This is the story of

Hannah

Ethnicity: Asian?

Sexuality: heterosexual

Interests: self-absorbed

Intelligence: proven

distinguishing characteristics: none

Family relationships: only child, loving parents

Before she met Karen, Don, and Peter.

When she didn't yet know what Rochdale meant, or tragedy.

To backtrack just a little:

Hannah lived in Liverpool, with two genial parents who were typical of the fading middle class. They'd rented a house with a shabby back garden, owned two bicycles, and were able to pay their electricity bills. Hannah considered love from her parents the normal state of things – that they would throw her in the air and caress her. That they'd hold her hand and be proud of her, that they'd sit with her at bedtime and come to her

room to check on her when she was asleep, all this she took as natural. Through the constant affection of her parents Hannah had developed an outsized ego as a child. Hannah didn't doubt herself. She was tall and thin and never looked like a cute little kid. More like a miniature version of an interesting adult. Hannah never wanted long hair or dresses or pink stuff, instead she studied old photos of Katherine Hepburn online. That's how she wanted to look one day. Aloof and instilling a bit of fear.

Hannah's home was located in a problematic part of a city that consisted mostly of problematic parts. But her problematic part of town was unequivocally the most problematic. You'd often hear shootings outside, you rarely heard sirens, the police had long since given up on the area. But Hannah didn't care. Nothing outside could affect her when she was in bed listening to her parents quietly talk to each other.

That sensation of being sheltered and loved would later save her from many things.

From killing herself, for instance –

Something which seemed to

Don

Completely incomprehensible – to be dead, gone, no longer enraged. The fascination Don felt about the dead ended the day of what was called the Massacre. There's been little experience in this country with this sort of incident – meaning: a crazy teenager shooting other teenagers – because there were hardly any fathers with well-stocked gun cabinets, at least if you disregard the hunting rifles of the upper class. Fathers in Rochdale had beer. If there were fathers at all, since Don's experience

with parents, as was true of most children, consisted mostly of contact with overburdened women.

Don hadn't retained much memory of the incident. Just shots, which sounded like New Year's firecrackers, screaming children that sounded like they were under water, and slow motion images of people all running or crawling in every direction. While lying on the floor, Don wondered about the way the killer must have made his intentions known online. Had he worn a hoody? Had he sat or stood with a gun and said something that included "system, disrespect, women, never taken seriously, and now I'll show you..."? What music had he played in his video? Slipknot? Something more thumping. Pitbull? He probably wasn't the brightest bulb, like most people here. Some of the children lying on the ground took pictures of themselves during the so-called massacre. Some of them had iPhones. The poorer fuckers had Chinese crap. The approximately eight hours a day they spent on the phones was supposed to make Don's entire generation into a bunch of unfocused idiots.

Man, oh man, thought Don, who on earth sticks fake plastic nails onto their fingers. Don was lying on the ground next to an older girl, staring at her nails. She'd never seen anything so awful. You could see the yellow horn through the backside of the fingernail. The girl was ten or thirteen and looked like a baby hooker. The downside of the grime videos. Which really weren't well suited for teaching positive lessons on gender and sexuality. The women in the videos showed a lot of breast and behind along with gold jewelry and fake nails. They mostly waltzed over to the passenger seat of some showy car that a gangster rapper had stolen or bought with his mad riches. Money doesn't make you happy, Don

thought randomly, and started laughing just as the police commando team came storming in. Then there were more shots. The dull click of the attacker's semiautomatic rifle faded into the rich stew of noise produced by the proper machine guns of the commandos. When it was over it was quiet and the shooter was dead. Along with a few girls. Don had finally seen a few corpses. It was less grandiose than in Don's fantasies. People were just lying there and no longer existed.

This is the story of

Karen

Sexuality: heterosexual

Intelligence: highly gifted

Symptoms: predilection to obsessive behaviour (licking light switches)

Market behavior: inadequate consumerism

Ethnicity: genetic defect

Family relations: two brothers. Single mother.

I'm alive, thought Karen. She didn't know whether she should be wildly happy about this. She wasn't the emotional type.

She was injured and had suffered trauma. Said the paramedic. "What's your name," asked the paramedic while dealing with Karen's head wound. "Karen," said Karen. And the paramedic's glance wandered past her, searching for a more interesting victim, someone with a bullet hole through which he'd have to shove intestines back in, or someone whose leg needed to be sawed off immediately, right here. Without anes-

thetia, like in the movies. Here, bite down on this, it's going to hurt for a minute. He would have saved a life and the severed leg would stand out against a background of spilled blood. The paramedic said: "You probably have trauma." "Normal," said Karen. "Can I leave?" The paramedic nodded. Karen removed herself without rolling her eyes. All children had trauma. It was a permanent condition. Karen didn't care. Trauma was her middle name. Karen lived with her mother, who was always on the verge of a breakdown, an older brother, who tortured her whenever he felt like it, which was often, and a younger, who would die soon, though that didn't keep him from being an evil asshole, all in an apartment that would have been too small for one person. Karen didn't care about that either. She was, as mentioned, not the emotional type. She believed in genetics. Her genes must have jumped generations. There must have been a scientist somewhere in her ancestral line. Because Karen was smarter than her entire family, probably smarter than all the residents of Rochdale put together. Her life took place in books and online. She operated in a wonderful world of microbes, genes, bacteria, viruses, and microorganisms to which she gave names. She dreamed about them. Karen's life only became uncomfortable when she had to leave her own head and do things regarded as normal. Like going to school, eating, washing herself. The only joy Karen took in so-called normal life was the weather. It rained so often in Rochdale that at least on the street she could use an umbrella. Beneath an umbrella Karen was invisible. She tried the trick at home. But it didn't work.

"For the love of god."

cried

Don's mother

In the next room. She'd heard about the incident on the news.

There were still news programs on the state television station, rain constantly blowing into the faces of sturdy blonde reporters. Who were always standing with microphones in their hands in front of police tape, commenting on catastrophes.

So Don's mother cried, "For the love of god."

"You kids could have died. You could have died," she cried.

And wrapped her arms around Don's brother euphorically. Her arms trembled with fear. Arms again. It seemed as if English women were made of nothing else. Don stared at her mother's body and was sure that masses of flesh like that could never grow out of her.

"Go on, bring him something to eat," ordered Don's mother – her son pressed to her breast.

So much for family structure.

Mass shootings and misogyny are siblings, Don subsequently read. And it's mostly young men who go crazy. Something in their lives didn't work out the way they'd imagined. Something to do with power. Or penis. They'd imagined that everyone would fall at their feet, the way they were used to being treated by their mothers. Don wasn't surprised. She knew a thing or two about weakness. She had a brother, after all.

And a mother who didn't particularly value any creature that lacked a penis. Nearly all the women in Don's orbit worshipped men and boys and scorned women. They were probably ashamed to belong to the losers, because the only thing lower than women were foreign women. The only thing that linked Don and her mother seemed to be their sense of

deficiency. A massive sense of loserdom that expressed itself in everything they did. Don decided very early in her life never to become a woman. At least not the kind Don new from Rochdale and from the videos. Not the kind who distinguished themselves primarily by playing up gender stereotypes with their clothes and painting their fingernails with glitter polish – victims. A man or boy, no matter how weak, would always be valued more than a woman, even if she was a professor or cyberneticist. And speaking of weak, Don's brother had a lot of shortcomings. Beginning with his way of walking. Don's brother always stepped forward with just his front foot and lurched after it with every step, giving him the aura of a complete idiot. He breathed too loudly, smacked his lips when he ate, his mouth always hung open – and

Don couldn't remember.

Her mother ever having hugged her. Or touched or patted, or that she had undertaken anything you'd see a movie mom do. But – at some point things not done become embarrassing to even contemplate doing. Perhaps her mother was dying to hold Don close but she'd unfortunately let the moment pass when it was possible to start. And anyway she was busy. She had to constantly run along behind her son to wipe his face, to pinch his cheeks, and to listen rapturously when he talked about his equally idiotic friends. Don's brother needed only to breathe to provoke elation in the mother. Don on the other hand she rarely contemplated, and when she did her gaze betrayed the same helplessness with which she regarded herself and her own life.

“I took part in the uprisings,” said

Don’s mother

Creditworthiness: none

Ethnicity: black

Intelligence: average

Hobbies: BBC television programs, the royal family, rummaging in thrift shops

Sexuality: masturbates to photos of Prince Charles

Family relations: 2 children, 1 absent husband often.

Don could never picture her mother as a Black Panther revolutionary. She probably exaggerated her role in the London street fighting. That was supported by the fact that Don’s mother used bleaching cream, straightened her hair until it hung from her head like sliced cheese, the ambiguous skin color of the supposed father of her children, and that she had no friends from these sorts of circles. She preferred to keep company with whites, she rhapsodized about the capital. That her parents left London after the unrest back then was a huge source of humiliation to her, since Rochdale was the brick and mortar manifestation of the fact that Don’s mother would never nibble scones at an English flower market with white ladies in twinsets. Don’s mother had learned a decent trade. She was a trained retail saleswoman, or something equally useless from the 1.0 era of the economy. She’d worked for a transport company, a supermarket, and an appliance store and was always replaced at some point by someone in another country, because the trend was to send jobs abroad, because the trend was that a handful of people wanted to make

ever more money to protect themselves from the end of the world. This desire had to be respected.

Don's mother was only able to find temp jobs. At a laundry, as a cashier, at a gas station. And, for long periods, none at all. She was scared during those phases. And she was scared when she had a job that she'd lose it again. She couldn't sleep, could barely eat, barely breathe, and always lost the job. Scared. Always scared of everything. She dreaded winter the most, because that was the time when the children got sick, which meant at least eight hours sitting around the hospital, which meant she'd be out a job once again. Then she'd have to go to the unemployment office, let herself be treated shabbily, and be forced to take a course, like for instance one on how to compose a properly written job application. Which, upon every gas station owner in town, most of whom are illiterate... – now, now, let's not be racist – naturally makes a huge impression. When the money from the unemployment office was gone and Don's mother still had no job, she had to go to the Christians and their food banks.

Don

Hated the visits to the Christians. They meant: waiting an hour or two outside. And then standing in front of women whose teeth were too big and who smelled of old, wet kitchen rags, whose red faces had big noses with burst veins and whose yellowish gray hair was always matted down in the back. And here's a little something nice for the little ones. Beans. Please! Who were these people, who truly looked uglier than she did, what gave them the right to their condescending charitableness that was unable to distinguish between welfare recipients and dogs. Don al-

ways imagined going back to see these gracious people, she pictured herself with a machete and the Christians in their own blood, their skirts riding up, their legs twisted on the floor. And then Don saw herself leaning over the victims and for a finishing touch shoving tins of beans into their mouths.

Which was completely unfair, of course, since without the Christians who fed and petted the poor, most of them would probably already be dead. The aim of the state was to reduce social services to a minimum in order to stimulate the strong, hard-working social strata. As well as. Just to save money. As well as. To maintain the country's neoliberal course.

The contempt capitalists held for the poor had become institutionalized. Homeless, unemployed, those with disabilities, the sick, the feeble had to fulfill painstaking, incomprehensible, idiotic bureaucratic requirements just to receive a minimal sum that barely kept their vital functions going. The unusable part of society could lose all assistance because of small technical errors, and then they were just stuck. In their craphole places with no electricity or heat or food. And who helped them then? The Christians helped then, people who got their serotonin fix by dedicating themselves to the preservation of those unworthy of preservation.

Don started to hate almost everything around her. The police who shook down daily every kid who lived in public housing.

Out of habit, for fun, or just because they could. Stop and search. ← WTF? The children had to stand in rows, empty their pockets, pull down their pants, put their hands on their heads. Something about power

or respect meant that probably one or two million kids grew up knowing with all certainty that they were not protected by the state.

The police virtually never found any drugs or weapons, because, after all, what kind of children would be so stupid as to carry suspicious things when they knew they were being surveilled. The weapons were stored in the empty old factories. Same with the drugs.

Don hated. The worn-out looking people at the agencies who treated her mother as if she was just too lazy and stupid to keep her life in order, she hated the public housing authority's maintenance man who barred children from doing anything, from running, talking, laughing, breathing. She hated her father –

Whose influence on the upbringing of his children was negligible. Occasionally he sent money. Rarely actually. But when it happened, mother always gave a long speech about the goodness of this man, she said she'd be lost without him, then she cried. What Don had learned was: women took care of all the never-ending, practical, unpleasant things that were necessary in life. They stood in line at agencies, dragged their children to doctors' offices, and disappeared into their apartments to take care of some women's stuff until they eventually became mentally ill, which in their circles always meant depression, which in their circles always meant: mother laid in bed, cried, and didn't get up anymore. Women didn't accomplish extraordinary. Extraordinary accomplishments were male things. Interesting activities emanated from men. They stood beneath streetlamps, listened to music, smoked, drank, dealt drugs. Boys made the cool music. Back then there were no women who were im-

portant in the grime scene. Who were as dangerously angry and loud as the men.

Men were annoying

Peter

Diagnosis: psychologically peculiar

Risk factor: unestablished

Sexuality: heterosexual, maybe

IQ: unclear

Ethnicity: white, referred to as Caucasian, right?

Family relationships: no siblings

It was just dumb luck that Peter was born on a day when it didn't even rain. Something went wrong. It happens more often than you think.

On the day of his birth, when his mother saw the face of the midwife and then of this child. Which was luminous and clearly not from her husband, who was also then gone. The very dark haired, stupid husband. And Poland, that's right, in the countryside in Poland, do something while you're young, do something if the latent fascism there makes you sick, if you already know all there is – the cowardice of the people, the empty shops, the dusty streets, and, first and foremost, the absence of all hope. Do something with a luminous child who barely talks, who never looks anyone in the eye and spends hours staring at the ceiling or having silent conversations with his fingers. Do something if the ten moronic men in the village offer no sexual prospects whatsoever. So, England. There were already millions of other Poles there, and you rarely heard any com-

plaints. Lots of them found there on the island something they couldn't find at home. Jobs. Money. Change. Interesting foreigners and over time perhaps a vacation home back in Poland, which was undeniably interesting when it came to the landscape. That was enough for a new life. You could do that – if you weren't too discerning, and if folks from the East were anything, they were frugal.

Poor folks from the East, it should be specified. Poor people from the East knew how to get by, they were hungry. They were unsentimental. They could fight and weren't spoiled. Here's to clichés!

In the village where Pete came from, the place his mother wanted to escape, there was a Sand Street. In Peter's mind Sand Street was made of dirt and would open up at some point and swallow everything, but there were houses on the street that could seem romantic, at least when they were totally surrounded by snow. Old garden fences, broken windows, sagging doors, holes in the flooring. Of the hundred people in the village, almost all were over fifty and looked over seventy. Helplessness incarnate, people who'd never managed to make it to another city or flee to a foreign country. Scraps of meat staggering down the dusty street as soon as their welfare checks arrived to buy a stockpile of alcohol from the kiosk that, alongside alcohol, also sold pickles in dusty jars and oatmeal. The stuff alcoholics like.

Peter was hated by the men in the village. He was different. That was enough. He was always near his mother. Which was where the village idiots wanted to be. There were only a few other women in town. Anyone who could, left. And they'd be gone soon, too, Peter's mother often told him. Until then she wanted to have fun. And whatever she

meant by that, it always began with her walking down the dusty street of that Polish backwater in a short skirt, looking as if she were going to some sort of casting. Peter knew what casting shows were, he knew everything, because even in the far reaches of Poland they had the Internet. Peter found the way his mother conducted herself strange. She laughed too loudly whenever some alcoholic spoke to her, her skirt slid up to her crotch, and she forgot her son, that is Peter himself, as soon as a man showed up. Peter had no idea why she preferred the company of toothless alcoholics to his own company. There was nobody here who could appreciate beauty in any form. It took practice to recognize beauty, training that could never have taken place here. It was ugly in this hole of a town. Flat, no trees, no hills, just fields and houses like ruins. As already mentioned, most of the people had disappeared, Peter was the only one who didn't want to leave. He didn't care about the location. It was familiar. That counted. Peter liked his own company if he didn't have to talk to people or hear noises or squeeze under a gate that had just jangled shut, or if his mother was away. Being with his mother was the norm. When norms were disrupted, Peter panicked. He had no idea why. He only knew himself like this. Mostly he felt as if he was sleeping and wanted to wake up. His mother disappeared into their apartment with some alcoholic. Peter didn't like men.

There were too many of them.

Thought

Don.

Anywhere it was interesting, they were sitting around. When they showed up in groups it was unpleasant. The group in front of Don's house

– sort of a house – managed to lure over a little stray dog the other day. The cadaver sat there for several days.

Don didn't know why men did such things. But she knew you had to be scared of them. You couldn't provoke them. They could yell without screaming. They talked nonsense in broken sentences. But you wanted them to like you. You wanted to please the coolest gangster. Or serve him. So as not to get beaten up. Like Don's mother. Like all the mothers on the block, who mostly raised kids on their own because the men left as soon as they didn't feel like beating their women anymore. Among women, stress-induced depression was the most common disease in the country. Sort of a disease. Whatever. Women. The suicide rate among women over forty rose to an absurd percent, the exact number Don had forgotten. A lot of kids with depressed alcoholic mothers lived in constant fear of coming home to find family members lying dead somewhere or hanging or face-down in a bathtub. The coming generation, made up of psychotic former children of poverty, Ritalin-crazed psychotic former children of the dying middle class, and the sadistic former children of the elite, would be well prepared for the new era.

Apropos – back then witnessed the beginning of the movement of

The

Excluded.

Men.

Young and middle-aged throughout the Western world who found themselves in homoerotic unity under various names. Alt Right, Neo-Nazis, National Action, Aryan Brotherhood, White Nationalist Party,

League of St. George, Blood & Honour, Stormfront, Identitäre, Vigrd,
Deutsche Heidnische Front – the involuntarily celibate

Groups –

That gave them back a feeling of power that

Women

Had taken from them. Millions of white men emasculated. Right.

Wrap your head around that.

Fucking hell. They had too much testosterone or not enough, both painful conditions, and found themselves in a world that no longer needed them. Useless and angry. Not loved and not listened to. Doughy around the middle,

Women,

That is – individuals that you could purchase, as so-called police-women, judges, doctors. They were like foreigners with glasses. As if a dog were to become a politician. Women were something they could all agree upon as responsible for this malaise they felt in a world that was no longer comfortable. That had never really been comfortable, but at least you weren't confronted with it in the old days, god damn it. In the old days there'd been no Internet to tell you how uncomfortable it had become. It could really make you bitter.

Well, it was not proper to wander through the streets of the Western world beating women. So somebody else had to be on the hook. Foreigners. Same as women, just with bigger penises. With which they stole the women away from white men, the women the white men hated. Okay, it was complicated. Fuck it.

The excluded ironed their shirts, lifted weights, peeked at the penises of the men next to them, thought about all those penises in action. If you'd strung them together you could have fucked the world back into order. Linking up around the world they created a massive shit-pile of healthy, armed, radically rightwing, fascists hopped up on a fear of disappearing into human-imposed unimportance.

In

Don's

surroundings, there were no neo-Nazis or parties. The men around her were too lazy to gang up together. The sensation of uselessness had in the third generation allowed them to become flaccid, the once proud fishermen, construction workers, proud – whatever shit it was –, meaning they'd done honest work with their honest hands on some honest bullshit or other that made some other man rich. Whose family, now holding government offices, decided on the unemployment benefits of the honest workers. That a person who doesn't – let's just say – manufacture wire, is no longer of any value, and will get angry as a result, is understandable. And is in fact considered a mitigating circumstance if a man from the area lands in front of a court for beating his wife or child completely or only nearly to death.

When the women survived the morbidly predictable, socialized rage, they patched each other's wounds once the sporadically appearing, humiliated men had lost control. Subsequently the men withdrew, confused about the mess they'd created. Then there was peace, then the wounds healed, then the men returned and everything started over again: the women lost themselves in rapture to the appearance of a toothless man

who spent the entire day sitting in front of the TV with this hand on his crotch, until he went to the pub in the evening and sat there instead. Almost all women felt incomplete without a man. Or to put it in formal aesthetic terms: men livened up the scene inside the horrid apartments and in front of the houses.

Apropos

Don's surroundings.

Eighteen row-houses, two stories, brick, fences, concrete, nobody expected any trees or plants of the concrete. Here lived: refugees, unemployed, people with missing limbs, bad eyes, alcoholics, junkies, ever more of them arriving from London because their public housing units had been transformed into private owner-occupied apartments. Just not owned or occupied by them.

Don had never seen buildings surrounded by whispering treetops, had no experience of high-performance heaters, non-drafty windows, clean bathrooms, or fountains, as Rochdale was a very equitable city where things were equally shitty wherever you went.

If you left her block and went out into the city, which Don often did with Karen for lack of anything better to do, you found a main thoroughfare. The attractions of this main road were the thrift shops, where items donated or found on the side of the road were sold to residents of the thriving community. Aside from various bet shops and one-pound-shops there was a shopping center, where half the storefronts were empty, and a Costa Café, where they liked to stand out front and watch the tourists. That is, the two per month who mistakenly strayed into Rochdale because they'd read in some bad online guide about some food-and-drink-

festival or about Dippy the dinosaur in the natural history museum. Okay. These two people who then race down the main road dumbstruck with terror and in desperation visited the parking garage at the shopping center – they loved to watch these people. The tourists gave off a luster like gold. They could. Just leave after they'd downed their overpriced Costa Café and had a sufficient fright from the pregnant minors and all the young Pakistani men tromping through the shopping center.

They could disappear to places that were definitely better.

On days when there were no tourists to be seen, Don and Karen checked out the old clothes and morbidly sad people trying on old clothes in the thrift shops. Three-quarters of the residents of this city of eternal rain were unemployed. So they had a lot of time to examine the trash their neighbors dragged to the thrift stores and pawn shops in order to put the proceeds toward a bit of lager. Once, it was said, this had been a city bursting with prosperous workers. The empty shells of the formerly grand, bombastic, prosperity-giving factories stood all around, evidence of this distant, wonderful era. They'd been closed because nobody needed the crap they produced. In the new millennium you needed banks, financial services, and IT workers. They called it evolution.

These days the factories were empty and served as adventure playgrounds, as drug and weapons stashes, and as meeting places for sex in exchange for payment. Jobless old men fucked away their monthly benefits there, and young girls fucked there to get a bit of affection. Some went for a handful of homosexuals. Karen and Don often watched people having sex in the factories, which they found disgusting. When they weren't spending their time on the main road, watching grime videos at a

playground, or creeping around factory buildings, they got up to things that involved annoying passersby, stealing things, or fighting with other groups of kids. With the help of Youtube tutorials, Don had from the age of six practiced martial arts in Mandale Park, which was empty aside from a few homeless people who were too drunk to pay her any attention. It wasn't such a treat park. More like an indeterminate cluster of scrubby trees and shrubs. Don had gotten into Krav Maga. A technique that was very effective and helped ensure survival. Like the shooting courses Don had watched online and the tutorials by FARC fighters on how to kill or build a shelter. Don found it exciting to look at pictures and videos about armed resistance. Women who could assemble a machine gun in seconds flat or finish off an enemy with a quick jerk and turn of the head. She'd found something that made her burn with desire, something bigger than her. She trained hard, and her body changed and grew. Wider. Compact, like a pit bull. Thought Don.

This was the time when her brother wasn't just wetting the bed once a week but daily. Because of his trauma-induced feelings. That he could only express via urine. Don lay in the stinking little children's room, upset. She knew she'd soon disappear from here. Away from the scent of urine, the glare of the lamp outside, the shuffle of people waddling behind their invisible walkers. Don closed her eyes and tried to imagine a future. Though she never really succeeded at it. She didn't know what it smelled like at the seaside or in Bangkok, she had no idea what rich people in elegant apartments did. So she just imagined London. White, gleaming, and modern. And right in the middle of it, herself. Picturing this unknown world kept her excited until the following morning.

She held onto it until school, where of late Don was no longer laughed at as gay or cursed as lesbian. The other kids had begun to fear her. A development she liked. She'd been sneered at and derided for as long as she could remember. She didn't meet the standards of the average students. Her average classmate was white. Or Pakistani. Girls wore dresses or skirts. They began using makeup at age seven and had sex for the first time at ten. Boys smoked, drank beer, and wore hoodies, they were white with bags under their eyes, or they were Pakistani, in which case they had nothing to do with the others. There was no room for interpretation, no in between. In between there was only Karen and Don. The freaks. The ones you could beat up. But that was in the past. Now when Don set foot in the schoolyard with Karen, everyone looked at the ground. Like in the animal world, thought Don, as she swaggered across the yard like a fucking cowboy. Karen walked behind her, or at her feet,

Never fully there.

Karen

Sat in her room, which was actually a closet, with no windows, but at least a door. It doesn't take much to satisfy people. She read about Bajos de Haina, a city in the Dominican Republic that had been contaminated by a battery recycling company. City of freaks. They interested Karen, who wondered what it would be like if everyone in Rochdale would look like her. Or they all were interested in the same things she was. At age five, Karen had found a book on system biology and ever since been obsessed with microbes, blood, hormones, and computers. Those had become the worlds in which she preferred to live instead of on the shabby

surface of this so-called world. Karen ran her hand over the scar on her head –

After the incident, which, we remember, euphemistically described a mass shooting, when Karen's superficial wounds were being treated at the hospital, she had tried to imagine how surviving the shooting would fundamentally change the structure of her family. How she'd leave the hospital and her mother and brothers would be standing there, and they'd all hug, and then go together to McDonald's. Tears, hugs, and so on. That didn't happen. Karen didn't like to go out in the street on her own. Even though it was all she had ever known, now it bothered her to be gaped at all the time. It felt as if the stares were boring through her skin and into her organs. Stares. Scornful, disgusted, horrified, disapproving. Karen looked different.

She wore bifocals and could have used braces. Nobody around here had braces. Or good teeth. A lot of people had no teeth at all. Rochdale was a place where nobody sculpted their bodies with plastic surgery or in fitness studios, and there were a thousand forms of neglect to marvel at,

But Karen had really gotten it bad. A recessive genetic inheritance, a glitch in the production of melanin was responsible for Karen's white, frizzy hair, the light, freckled skin, the colorless eyelashes and eyebrows and the light-blue eyes. In politically correct terminology Karen was said to have albinism, but that didn't help her maintain a healthy self-esteem. Her mother and her older brother were dark-skinned and beautiful. At least in Karen's eyes. Everyone else was beautiful, and she looked like a dinner roll that you'd find under a dumpster. Karen had come to

terms with being an outsider. At least come to terms with it as well as a young, nearly pubescent kid who's reviled by nearly everyone as extraordinarily hideous. By toothless old fat sacks, by cockeyed foul-smelling women with lopsided heads and by pimply, reeking boys. Karen was the kid who stood alone in the corner during recess. She was the kid that smaller children stared at and adults made comments about. She was the kid with a dysfunctional relationship with her brothers. Even her little brother despised Karen, which was amazing since he had Hutchinson-Gilford syndrome. If anyone knew what that was, it was only under the name progeria. Most people just called her little brother "alien," and though he should have been a tiny, needy person he somehow was a malicious little asshole. Genetically speaking, something had gone wrong in Karen's family. In an English social-drama, the little fate-cursed family, could have been a haven of warmth, humor, and love. But unfortunately they were just people who happened to live in a public housing unit together and got on each other's nerves. Or beat each other, like on the day Karen came home from the hospital after the incident, disappeared into her room and then had to go to the bathroom at some point. Her brothers had partied the night before, meaning hanging out on the street partaking in a mix of drugs and alcohol. Afterwards the little brother would probably be pushed down the baby slide or used as a human shotput. Fun into the wee hours, at least to judge by the babbling voices from the living room.

The apartment was too small to provide even a modicum of anonymity. There was the bedroom for the brothers, the living room, where their mother slept, Karen's closet, a tiny bathroom, and a kitchen all

wedged into 43 square meters. All in ochre. That perhaps had been white at some point in the distant past. Or red. It didn't matter. Everything a bit – run down. The curtains were closed, the living room reeked of booze. The brothers sat on the sofa looking like a man and his puppet. The larger one good looking, the little one strange looking. They watched Youtube videos of people who glued their foreskin shut with superglue. Their brains were already irrevocably damaged by constant stimulation. The TV was also on, with the sound muted, showing catastrophic reports from Japan, which had just been hit by a massive tsunami. The idiots made jokes and Karen stared, frozen, as the old women squatted on a hill and gaped at their wildly romantic coastal town where a container ship had been washed in. The two dumbfucks Karen was supposedly related to squealed with delight. Fatalities. There were fatalities. Maybe they'd show a corpse. It never ceased to amaze Karen how many hours the two of them could waste just staring at something or another. Or drinking alcohol and talking nonsense. And how little time they devoted to things that might have made human beings out of them. Like reading something or even bathing. One of them noticed Karen and yelled at her to get them a snack. Karen knew there was no point in arguing and set bread and margarine out in front of the two morons. The older one kicked her, perhaps because he didn't approve of the quality of the proffered food. Karen fell to the floor. The younger brother screamed with laughter. Poor bastards, Karen thought. The brothers were bored with the emptiness in their heads, with the disastrous effects of the hormones that gave them feeling of rulers of the world. Testosterone kept them from seeing themselves realistically for what they were, two young men without any prospects of

a decent life. If you believed the statistics, one of them would be dead in a few years. The other would probably succumb to a gunshot would soon enough. Unfortunately the date of their demise wasn't fixed. Until then, they'd hunker down here with the joints that were supposed to calm them down.

Karen stood up at the moment her mother arrived home after a double shift. With burning eyes and tired of all the idiocy,

Just die already

Thought

The Mother

Ethnicity: black

Religion: Catholic

Attractiveness rating: 4

Political orientation: tired

Hobbies: sleeping

State of health: abused tranquilizers. Onset chronic stress-induced depression, cavities, osteoporosis

As she stood in the entry hall and looked into the living room.

And suddenly remembered. Karen's mother saw herself standing in the entry hall on another night, years before. The big difference was –

She'd still had hopes back then.

The difference was she'd been young back then.

Her youngest son, who was two and looked like a tiny old man, was sitting in a playpen in a puddle of shit. Her daughter, who always seemed like a left behind scrap, was biting her fingernails while the oldest of her children, who was distinguished by a monstrous appetite for destruction, squatted contentedly in front of a pile of broken glass, which had previously been some household item or other. The open doors of the cabinet, the absence of male clothes, and the non-existent rainy-day jar gave away the fact that it had been too much for her boyfriend, the father of the children. He'd obviously been overwhelmed. One must understand. He was a musician, talented, still young and undiscovered, and couldn't squander his life raising children with various defects.

Karen's mother knew at that moment that the course set out for her life would have been easier to bear if she just let herself fall out a window. She was twenty-six then, and had just begun a continuing education program to become a surgical nurse, a program she quit the day after she realized she would be alone with three children.

Even if her husband hadn't contributed much to the bottom line, actually nothing at all, at least he'd looked after the children.

Karen's mother began working as a night nurse, a retired woman next door looked in on the children every half an hour. Unfortunately she quickly gave up after she was repeatedly hit with thrown objects.

Karen's mother paid a babysitter from then on, ended up in arrears on the rent, her hair fell out, she had panic attacks and lost her job. The unbelievable stroke of luck that came of this unpleasant situation was that she was allotted an apartment in Rochdale by the welfare office.

Which is where she was standing now.

In the entryway, years later. And no longer as an actual person. Karen's mother no longer existed as a sexual being with dreams and hopes; she had become something devoted to just one task – keeping herself and her children alive, even if it wasn't clear to her at times why this was a good thing.

Probably due to her chronic fatigue, she had the feeling that nothing was real. The family lived in one of the seven residential towers that looked out over nothing. Karen's mother was a night nurse. She tended to the consequences of boredom in the area. Young men with gunshot and knife wounds, boys whose hands had been blown off by fireworks or whose eyes had been damaged as a result of some dare. Men who'd stuck their genitals in vacuums and doorjams, in animals or freezer compartments. Men who'd inserted bottles and fruit, drills and hammers into their asses. Men who'd drunkenly fallen over, run into walls, or plunged into water. Men who'd sawn into a body part or been pinned beneath cars. Children who'd been fucked or beaten half to death or worse. And women after aborted suicide attempts. With half their faces blown off, quadriplegic after jumping from an inadequate height, organs burned after drinking drain cleaner. Sometimes when she came home from the nightshift to the apartment she didn't even recognize the three people waiting there. Karen's mother didn't have the time to imagine how her life might look. She just wanted to sleep. And forget.

Everything

Is what

Hannah

Wanted.

She had survived her mother. She would manage the rest. Probably. Hannah had been born at the seaside. Well. Sort of seaside. In Liverpool, as we mentioned, the proud city of longshoremen and the like. Though automated cranes had long since displaced all the longshoremen, demand was negligible after the textile and steel mills disappeared, people hadn't had work in years and drank, children joined gangs. That's what the city had become known for in the interim: for being a factory for armed child criminals who murdered each other in order to bring a bit of intrigue into their boring lives among radical right-wing, nationalist, or just helpless parents. Weapons are the work of the devil. They make it easier, however, to realize the fundamental human desire to eliminate other people. It used to be that children were drug mules for big dealers. They'd fly to Holland or Spain on Easyjet, buy drugs, smuggle them in container ships. But. At some point the children realized that the only thing the dealers had over them were the weapons. So they got their own – you could get a nice 8mm Luger for 350. Small fully automatic machine guns cost 500 pounds. Whoa, fully automatic machine guns. A dream. The children began to shoot people. First the dealers, then the rest of the adult criminals. Then they terrorized their neighborhoods, shot kids from other gangs, and finally themselves.

Hannah's parents were Indian Jews, the third generation in England. People loved to ask, What, there are Jews in India? when they felt the need to have a conversation to demonstrate their openness, because people loved to show openness in England – at least they did before the situation escalated.

Hannah's parents had run a photo business in Liverpool. Photo business? Yep, that's right. It wasn't a particularly big earner, to be precise, it didn't earn anything at all anymore, and Hannah's father made a little money working by the hour for the Liverpool Jewish council. At least they lived in a house. Well, sort of a house. A cramped, drafty thing. Two stories, downstairs the shopfront and the kitchen, upstairs two little rooms, creaky stairs, tiny dark backyard.

At least they had enough food to eat. Well, sort of food. Hannah didn't care that it consisted almost every day of some form of potatoes or noodles with tomato sauce. She was a kid and loved noodles with tomato sauce, and like most kids she appreciated the predictability. Hannah's parents were very friendly, and so, until the day she would henceforth always think of simply as THE day, her childhood was perfect. That was not a given. Not a week went by when a new kiddie porn ring wasn't exposed, the corpses of children weren't found in flower beds or freezers, badly abused children weren't discovered. Children were the future, it was said. Not many believed in the future anymore. QED

Hannah had no idea what future meant, but in this term which was meaningless to her, she would always experience pain whenever she thought of THE day, pain as if someone had stuck a hand into her body and ripped out an organ.

THE day consisted of what you could call a confluence of unlucky coincidences.

Hannah's father had taken her to a football match. Like all the male residents of the city, he was crazy about football. Football was an important means of mass distraction to stave off revolution. Almost as

important as conspiracy theory websites, filter bubbles, Nazi sites, falsified reports, manipulation, porno sites, and the hobby of flooding the internet with stupid faces and shitty commentary. Alongside all of that, it was football that kept the mass of socially weak, the current and future losers, the second generation of educationally deprived and the older generation, the rejects of capitalism from hanging themselves or looting or thinking. The stadium had cost a few hundred million. It floated above the sagging rooves of Norris Green like the wing of a guardian angel. The football club gave tickets to little gangsters or let them practice there some afternoons to keep them off the streets. The players hugged – in a very manly and simultaneously authentic manner - child killers for photos. How sweet. Everyone in the entire country was crazy about football. They could be junkies, homeless, sick, as long as their club won the world was alright. The euphoria lasted for a week. Until the next match.

The so-called rebellion of the Excluded would only take place if football were suddenly banned. But why would anyone do something so stupid. It would be like banning smartphones. Or alcohol. Or the royal family. Even the various terrorist groups that through a series of murderous attacks had for years slowly set up the country for a wave of fear didn't dare touch the stadiums. A terrorist attack on one of the homes of the sport of the gods would have meant war.

Hannah's father wore a green and red scarf, he was part of a large, strong, not humiliated troop of men if a game was won, and if their club lost, then the men could finally cry about their lives. The football fans were one of the last groups where an individual could briefly muster a feeling of sympathy for someone else. The stadium a site where men

wrapped their arms around each other and cried together. What sort of indomitable power might they generate if they joined together in their directionless misery outside the stadium. But they didn't. They killed each other. After the match. Or threw acid in each other's faces, which was the hot shit this season.

When Hannah and her father arrived home after the game, two police officers were standing in front of the door. Whispers. Unfortunately they had the painful duty to inform you that your spouse.

And so on. It whooshed into Hannah's ears. Mother had strayed into the line of fire of someone, probably child gangs, and was now in the hospital.

It didn't look good. Said the police possibly, or maybe Hannah imagined it. Why did they live in this fucked-up neighborhood, they were upstanding people? Why did they live in a quarter the police only dared enter in convoys? And so on. Probably only imagined sentences that didn't add up to anything. Hannah's memory only started again at the hospital. Where she stared blankly at the mass of people crowding the waiting room.

They were waiting for their
Vaccination.

A wave of Japanese encephalitis was looming that year. Every day there were reports about the horrible threat. Inducing fear of the disease and its expected ten thousand fatalities. The government had ordered vaccinations from China. China or Japan, whatever. The vaccinations were mandatory. Hannah remembered getting hers. It had been administered directly to her head. Which was rather horrible. It had been three days

before. Hannah had cried, but her mother had been there, as she always was when she cried. Or laughed, or when she was sick or hungry or nervous – her mother was always there.

And now

Her

Mother was

Somewhere in the bowels of this hospital. At the mercy of people of people with covered faces. This hospital, which had recently been cited for acquiring rusty cannulas to cut costs, a revelation that caused no uproar in the media. This hospital that had supposedly removed organs without consent in numerous cases. Father, said Hannah, waiting for him to look at her or hold her or do something else that could have contributed to improving the situation. He was an adult, after all. Adults were supposed to know what to do in cases like this.

But

As always happened when Father had a problem, he forgot that Hannah was a child. That a child isn't so good at solving problems on their own. That a child always imagined the world coming to an end if nobody said everything would be fine. Nothing would be fine. Hannah looked with panic at the commotion spilling out into the waiting room from the surgical wing. Activity. Nurses. Blood supplies. Always at the end of a commotion in a hospital stood a young doctor, who with a practiced look of dejection on his face said: We did everything we could. We're still awaiting details.

The details

Should have been known to

Dr. Brown

Intelligence: average

Potential for aggression: high

Ethnicity: pink

State of health: onset dementia due to chronic fatigue

Creditworthiness: not available

Sexuality: S&M with tendencies toward rape

The emergency surgeon had been working for 23 hours.

And he knew: it was the universe's punishment for attending the wrong university. And not having connections. The rest was the fault of the system. The system, as you know, had to shoulder the blame for most botched lives. At Brown's age, parenthesis 44, you had to be a head physician, working at a private clinic, plastic surgeon.

Or.

You didn't have any connections and were a failure and worked at a municipal hospital in emergency surgery. Which meant: overtime, modest pay, and a very good chance of having a heart attack. On that particular day there were just two shooting victims laid out on the examination tables. A white man the same age as Brown with a single bullet hole in the lungs, and a nondescript swarthy woman with multiple holes in the chest region. Both were stabilized, and then Brown had to decide, of course. One after the next. He couldn't be both places at the same time, after all. And who does one opt for? The person who resembles oneself, or the one who, in skin color and texture, in gender and most probably in social status, is wholly and completely beneath oneself? One must necessarily be judgmental in a situation like this. But. While the dark-skinned

woman died on her table, while Dr. Brown operated on the man who on aggregate resembled him. Nobody noticed Hannah, who was standing in the operating room. She tried to hold her mother's hand. She tried to commit Dr. Brown's face to memory. And at some point was pulled outside by her father.

Unclear is how

Hannah

And her father got home.

How they survived that first night,

If indeed they did.

Forgotten. Along with the subsequent period, that all muddled together into a blur without a beginning or an end. Following tradition, the funeral followed quickly. A rabbi and a few congregants, the gravestone, and still it wasn't the moment when Hannah broke down and finally cried. She had to comfort her father. They sat Shiva at home for a week. A few acquaintances came over with food, then nobody came.

The two who'd been left behind could have helped each other alleviate the feeling of being alone against the world, but they weren't up to it. Hannah didn't realize that the photo business would be definitively closed now or that her father was at first stoned every day and then moved on to other drugs because he still felt too much when he smoked marijuana; she didn't notice that money got tight, that an eviction notice arrived, and that the remnants of the family were allotted transitional accommodation in Rochdale. "It'll be nice," said the father in this new voice that always sounded as if he were underwater. "It's a peaceful little city, and there's a lake nearby. They have a Victorian city hall, a dino-

saur, and a very good football team. Rochdale AFC.” Said Father. Then he cried. Hannah thought it hit her father harder to leave his football team than to leave the house where Hannah had spent her entire life. Hannah hunched over her mother’s old clothes, which she had laid out on the bed. In a new city there wouldn’t be any places she had been with her mother. She would lose all the paths they had ever followed together. If her mother was still around somewhere – she’d be unhappy because she wouldn’t be able to find Hannah anywhere.

The last memory of what Hannah would stash away for many years under the heading of home was a fat woman from the charity shop who looked at the clothes laid out on the floor with slight disgust. Her mother’s clothes. That still smelled of her. That she could still see her in. That then disappeared into boxes and were carried out by two men.

Then they moved. They squatted in the bus with two duffel bags and two backpacks, surrounded by people in threadbare suits, who rubbed their dirty plastic shoes on their pant legs as they gave updates via their phones about their location and condition. Almost every single one of them had on a fitness tracker. Almost every single one had a guilty conscience because he or she had invested too little effort into the regeneration and expansion of their own resources. But they were so tired, the people, after long rides to their places of work or to two or three places of work, and the teeth of so many of them were rotted, as bad teeth were the calling card of the losers back then. Everyone on the bus ground their jaws as they sat in the bus. Except for Hannah’s father. He was dead. Or looked dead.

Hannah had had enough of adults.

She'd had enough of the bus rides through shithole landscapes, enough of situations she'd like to simply disappear from. For the first time Hannah felt how humiliating it was to be a child and dependent.

When they finally arrived in Rochdale, it didn't look any better than anyplace else. Than Liverpool. Just a smaller version. Just shrouded in rain that apparently never let up. Victorian. Dinosaurs. My ass.

A few weeks earlier Hannah would have thrown herself to the ground and kissed it like the Pope, and her parents would have laughed. Now she found herself with a completely absent father and had to motivate him while pretending she had a clue.

Using Google Maps, they walked down the main street, which was empty and terminated in residential development that had apparently been expunged of actual residents. Hannah rang the bell of the super.

A fat old man, in parentheses 35, opened the door and, if you were to attribute anything to the open fly of his pants, had probably been interrupted while visiting a pedophilia site. The super took them to the lower level of the building – and just look at what they'd been able to do with a simple cellar. The rooms were painted in neon colors, laid with wood-grain linoleum, fitted with Wi-Fi and cable TV. A team of well-compensated city planners had hit on the idea to address overcrowding in the metropolitan area. It had turned out terrific. Windows – well, okay, there were no windows, but what was to see outside anyway?

“When the furniture arrives...” said her father. It didn't seem to matter to him where they were or why. And what furniture, anyway?

“Here's the communal kitchen,” said the super, showing them a communal kitchen. There was a refrigerator where each resident could

put their lockable food container, a gas stove that could be operated with a cash card. Same for the laundry machine, “here’s where you get the cards for the warm shower, and here,” said the super, “are the cards for the TVs,” which were already installed next to the beds in each room. “You have to put money on them. Good day.” Said the super, then he went back to the people he loved.

“Well at least there’s a TV,” said the father, dropping himself onto the bed. A dust of old skin particles danced in the fluorescent lighting, and Hannah was too dumbfounded to come up with a solution.

She could try to get the ball rolling. Get flowers, a poster of a horse, and sheets. Or say: “Hey, come on, we’ll go register at the welfare office so we can get vouchers for the soup kitchen.” Or: “Let’s go explore the city. Dinosaur museum, cafés, whatever else. We can hang out and meet friends.” Or: “I saw some great thrift shops, we could go check them out.”

It didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered. “Maybe the agency won’t pay the rent,” said Hannah, “and we’ll be put up in a dumpster.” In earlier times her father would have answered: “That’ll be great. There’ll be rats, highly intelligent animals, we can train them. And dumps are usually quite tranquil. There’s food there, old clothes, we can build a house. As for the odor, well, there’s just an odor.”

But her father didn’t talk. He just sat there, staring off, for so long that Hannah got angry. She was the child, damn it. And rather than say something injudicious, it would be better to explore her new home. Labyrinthine subterranean hallways, on the walls graffiti, fluorescent lights, a

few doors standing open, inside faint signs of life. Lots of old men, a few single mothers who'd worked in industries that no longer existed, sat around, all their functions cranked down to a bare minimum.

And suddenly

Don

Was nervous. Her brother wasn't there, he was probably in the basement playing with decomposing pets. It had just happened. She had just begun to observe herself and her surroundings as if from the outside. Since the vaccination, to be exact. Now she wouldn't get encephalitis, but she'd also never manage to reoccupy her body. From one day to the next, Don had her contentment. As if she had needed a pair of glasses that had now been paid for by medical insurance, bit of a joke there, because there were no glasses for people on welfare, which had led to a drastic increase in the number of rear-end collisions and illiterates. Don had also begun to notice the smell – a mix of cheap food, insufficient ventilation, damp clothes, mold, and carelessly washed people. Outside was the absolute vacuousness of a Sunday night. Don felt so utterly bored that her body started to itch.

Don figured it would be easier to die than to live on with this sense of unease.

The problem was

Don had discovered her sexuality. That's what you'd say if you had a screw loose. Don hated everything about herself. Her muscles, the stockiness of her body, which made her look like a little wrestler, her skin, her too-big mouth, her crooked eyes, her too-high forehead. Don walked around the apartment, sat around, went out onto the street, and

every activity ended with her flopping down in her bed trying to remember Karen's lecture.

"It's not bad," Karen had explained a few days before. "It's puberty. Hormones. It's like they've swapped you out for an alien. Do you feel like that?"

"Well, let's put it this way, I never used to think – wow, this is me. But now all I can think is that I'm no longer myself. You know what I mean?" Don had answered.

"I understand. Chemical processes. It would overwhelm you if I described the exact processes. Or do you want me to?" said Karen full of hope to be able to deliver a long lecture. "No, let it be," Don answered.

"Fine. So," Karen continued. "Puberty is like saying goodbye to a dear friend. To yourself. At some point you'll be healthy again, like after a cold. It just takes a few years. During which time it's essential not to make any mistakes." That in theory Don knew everything about her bodily condition helped very little. She sat on her bed with nervous fidgety legs and began to get interested in the world of pornography. She saw: man-fucks-woman porn. Many-men-fuck-woman porn. Man-fucks-bound-woman porn. Man-fucks-dog-and-chicken porn. She found the films unsatisfying on various levels including in the area of language. After the bestiality category, Don landed on hot lesbian sex. Don was fascinated. To put it in a neutral way. She began to fantasize about women. To be more precise, she illustrated her awkward imaginings exclusively with

Hannah

Whom Don had met upstairs in the 1.0 world. The way children get to know each other. Don was standing in the yard, watching the new Stefflon Don video on her phone, Stefflon Don being the person our Don, whose actual name was Donatella, had named herself after. Stefflon Don rapped about diamonds and a Rolls Royce. Hannah came up to her and said: “That’s shit music.” Shortly thereafter the two of them fell to the ground fighting.

They’d been friends ever since. It made everything bearable for Hannah, because now she had a daylight life and a cellar life. Speaking of which – whenever Hannah thought she had mastered the layout of residents in the cellar apartments, they’d be swapped out as if overnight. Only her father was always there, as if stuffed.

Since he’d discovered the net, he never moved. He showed Hannah cat videos. Just picture it – two people in an English basement which a real estate ad would probably describe as a “charming pied-a-terre with cable TV in the heart of the city” looking at videos of cats in boxes made by people in Asia who were probably also stuck in some basement. The net – what a magnificent, world-embracing invention. Where people could self-actualize.

Hannah, for example, took dozens of photos of herself every day. Her dark hair fell to her hips, and impressive cheekbones protruded from her face. These things needed to be documented. She let a weather app determine what she wore, she found her way around the city exclusively by Google Maps, tracked her physical activity, her body fat ratio, and sang grime to a playback app. In short, Hannah grew accustomed to the new conditions. She was a child, and they grow accustomed to any kind

of shit, because they lack comparisons that would allow them to recognize the wretchedness of their circumstances. Even grief becomes a normal condition. It's not always focused and sharp, it just became a background noise, always there, somewhere in their brains. Hannah could laugh and look at grime videos and talk about boys, and yet the grief was still present and made Hannah feel as if nothing was real. A laughing Hannah avatar made its way through the day, but at night it was cold. The nights, the ones when she couldn't sleep she thought of Dr. Brown. Whom she would kill someday. The nights, when screams came from the cellar.

When

Hannah's Father

Ethnicity: Asian

Hobbies: cat videos

Health: endogenic depression after loss

Political inclination: none

Commercial viability as consumer: nil

Couldn't sleep. Like so many. Millions were lying in prisons, in dark holes, in shanties, lying next to their decaying mother in bed, in slums where the stench was the most comfortable aspect of the place. Many no longer knew why they should stay alive, they'd love so much to no longer exist, but how did one go about that, how does one die. It's not easy to kill oneself. Where to get the energy when life already feels as if you've taken sleeping pills. You can't just feel your way along the wall blindly. The futility of every motion caused bodily pain. The way to the

kitchen through the basement hallways with their flickering light and the neon colored walls, and behind the doors always someone sitting there engulfed in madness. Surrounded by promises made by some office to give them hope. To make them believe they can make it. Which in this social system always involved a yacht.

Life in the cellar was like a halfway point between life and death. There was a marked slowing of thought and increasingly hazy movements, an apathy that gripped every part of the body. This was very helpful for Hannah's father, because in every life-sustaining measure he saw disgust-inducing evidence that he wasn't yet dead. He began to hate even Hannah. Because she was there. He hated himself for his hate, but was too tired to examine it.

He saw his dead wife everywhere. She stood next to him. Sat next to him on the bed. Hannah's

Father knew that he would die here, because he would never again have the strength to transport himself and Hannah anywhere else.

He discovered the

Dream-Island-Forum

By accident. Well, sort of by accident. It was what happened when one typed "How do I kill myself" into the search engine. *Dream Island*. Now also available as an app!

Hurrah!

A platform for people like him. Tired of life. Too cowardly to die. He had found friends. They talked together. They cried together. They

encouraged each other. Traded tips. They supported each other in their death wishes and accompanied each down the last path, so to speak. Since Hannah's father had been part of the community, a young man had hanged himself. One girl had jumped from a roof, another had overdosed on pills. The group had watched them die online, they'd sung and prayed until the goal of their fellow members had been reached.

After the departure of a Dream Island member there was a moment of silence in the forum. The ones left behind lit a candle and

When

Hannah came home one night her father wasn't there. Nice, she thought, that he seemed to have shaken himself out of his stupor. After an hour Hannah went into the bathroom. Where her father was lying in the bathtub with open eyes and open wrists. He was smiling.

On Dream Island, people cried, hearts flooded the profile picture of Hannah's father.

Hannah knelt beside him.

Now she was
most definitely alone.

Closing the zipper of the body bag did in fact generate the dull noise like on TV shows. The transporters of the body offered Hannah neither attention nor sympathy. Hannah had stood for a moment in the hall, looking at the stairs as her father was being carried up them. Then she'd packed her things and gone to the playground. There she got from the other children the address of a squatted building. It was on the outskirts of town. Which sounded farther than it really was, because in Rochdale everything was on the outskirts of town. The building itself

seemed solid. Thanks to the boarded-up windows. It looked the way you'd imagine a building full of street kids would look if you weren't into American movies. A bit squalid. From inside and out the building looked rusted and covered in mold. If there was something like that, then here, and the children who lived in these ruins weren't carton punks, they were just dirty children. The water had been shut off, so barrels in the back garden collected rain water. Electricity was stolen. And the twenty homeless youth slash children were constantly sick, coughing, lying in the corners like dogs, freezing. Children nobody was looking for, nobody missed. Hannah took up residence on the ground and stopped going to school for fear of being remanded to an orphanage. In which case a wonderful future among the majority of society would stand at the ready for her. She could sell shoes in a thrift shop. Or get pregnant and go on unemployment. Or die.

Hannah knew that in theory she had no more parents. And that she was supposed to be sad. But there were no feelings. She thought. How to develop feelings which would inevitably end in sadness, when nobody was there to develop sympathy. Nobody to comfort you. It didn't make sense even to cry.

Hannah was nearly twelve and looked older because of her build. She had cut her hair to 2 centimeters in length, her eyes were heavily ringed in black. And of course she'd given herself a few facial piercings, it's what you did back then.

And outside it was summer.

It was too light out.

Which is why

Don

Saw her brother too clearly. He was sitting at the computer. Either he was in school staring with an open mouth at pornos on his phone, or he was sitting at home looking at it. Don didn't care what he did. Her family didn't matter to her one bit. People didn't matter. She considered them an aberration. What could be said against the planet simply flying through space decorated with rocks instead of this biomass?

Speaking of which, Don's mother took sedatives in order to forget that her life had been completely botched.

As long as we're talking about the subject of mental illness,
Don's father,

Was either still in prison or back in prison. Don had visited him once. The room where relatives meet men they are unfortunate enough to be related to was full of specialists in every criminal discipline. Tattooed, muscle-bound men whose stupidity sent chills down your spine. Don was full of hope that her father would at the very least become a more accomplished criminal during his stay. He was in for the second or fifth time, and at some point it'd have to make something sensible out of him. But if that ever happened, the little family would never taste of the fruits of his new-found talent, because as soon as his release he turned up to get his things. During a visitation day he'd met a woman. She was fat and blonde and lived a few houses away from Don. "Goodbye, Father," said Don as the uninteresting little man departed. Don's mother took a fistful of tablets.

Don's father's fat new woman subsequently gave birth to a fat child, and Don was indifferent about the whole thing. Once in a while he

came for a visit, first there would be fighting, always about the money he had invested in his new family, whereupon the father felt aggrieved, as he'd not managed to become rich, and this, naturally, caused him to become aggressive. Then the parents screamed at each other and drank alcohol, subsequently Don would hear noises from the mother's bedroom that, thanks to porn, she could identify as the sound of fucking. Afterwards the parents screamed at each other again.

And

Don looked out the window at the sky. She wanted so badly to fly away. To a continent free of families. At least the sky looked like home.

Peter

Had arrived a short while before.

It was sometime before sunrise. Had been.

The ride had felt like it lasted 100 days. Peter's mother had managed to make things easy for herself, and whenever she awoke she'd taken a slug from the vodka bottle she'd brought along, quickly looked to make sure Peter was still there and the bus driver hadn't dozed off before she slumped down again. Peter had stared numbly straight ahead. His pupils didn't move, he wasn't fixed on any point, everything he saw blurred into an amorphous wash. Peter felt watched. And for good reason. The occupants of the bus who weren't sleeping or drunk were staring at Peter. He was one of those people who gets stared at. Uninhibited. He knew he looked like an alien, but he was sure that people stared at him

because of his repulsiveness. The way you'd marvel at a particularly disgusting insect.

People had gotten used to him back home.

Now there was no more home.

There was just the bus, the night that was coming to an end, his sleeping mother who wanted to get away. Anyone with an ounce of sense wanted to get away. Away from a place that looked like eighty percent of the places in the world where people lived. And all of them yearned for TV cities. Someplace where people sat on stoops in front of townhouses, whistling, drinking coffee from paper cups while bent over their phones.

And so, England. It was as good as any other country one didn't know anything about. The English prime minister had welcomed well-educated Polish workers. But, come on, not so many!

Since then it was more than two million, and they were hated. Poles. It was their fault. And the Muslims. Or hedgehogs. Some group of poor idiots had to take the blame so there was a vent for the impotence of the masses that resulted from the overestimation of their opportunities. And so on. You know how people are.

Peter and his mother had no idea about the attacks on Poles, the imminent Brexit, the Nazis. They had other things to worry about. Had. That was then.

Hello, England.

Hello, idiots, did you really think we were waiting for you? Then take a look around! Around the bus station it looked as if a war had just been lost. There were fire pits, campgrounds, plastic tarps and hundreds of people standing against the walls of buildings and squatting on curbs.

Peter had learned that it didn't help things to follow his impulse to throw himself to the ground and scream, so he walked behind his mother, staring at the ground he'd liked to have been lying on.

Peter had wanted out of himself ever since he could remember. He was imprisoned in his own body, and it was impossible to make contact with those outside. The situation made Peter so angry that he occasionally slammed his head into walls or began to scream. He wasn't angry at other people but at himself and his inability to break out of this millimeter of skin that separated him from everyone outside. From people who laughed. For instance. He never laughed about anything that was beyond his own self, he laughed only at jokes he told himself.

A little while later Peter and his mother arrived in Rochdale, where some acquaintance of some drunk from their village had been living for the past few months. Rochdale was a place that with its bad roads and dilapidated buildings was only marginally different from their village in Poland. Their. Ex-village.

The address they had with them belonged to a former school, or maybe it was an insane asylum, with a large hall where dozens of Poles had spread out their suitcases and bags, their children and clothing, among their mattresses. A mattress cost fifteen pounds per week, and Peter's mother signed a promissory note to a hairy Polish man. Back home his surroundings hadn't mattered to him. They didn't bother him. But this was unbearable. Loud. It smelled of food and people and poverty. Peter couldn't sleep. He listened to his own heartbeat, which didn't calm him. He yearned for someone to hold him, and knew he wouldn't be able to stand being held.

Peter's mother disappeared early in the morning to find work in Manchester, there was a strip where day laborers could cheerfully offer themselves to various idiots. All Peter's mother had said was, "Wait here." Before she left. She'd given up talking to Peter. The mother-child bond left a bit to be desired, which was Peter's fault. Like everything. War, poverty, the weather – all his fault. Peter looked at his hand. He ate cookies that his mother brought home each night, and didn't dare at first to go out into the streets. During the first weeks. After a while, when he'd had enough of the stench of the hall, he stood at the door for a few days and stared out at the nonexistent trees. A few days later he made it to the first cross street, and then at some point Peter wandered around the neighborhood. Through which from then on he took the same circular route. Sometimes for nine hours a day to calm himself.

Peter spoke to nobody.

Something wrong with that boy, said the people who should know. Who watched him walk past. Who had nothing wrong with them whatsoever, stand-up folks who never thought about the fact that they were freaks of nature, primates who despised each other and fell out of windows, fell down stairs, hung themselves during sex, took pictures of their toenails to post them online, who believed in the vote and in the queen who loved to wave to them as she rushed around in her gilded carriage.

Speaking of which,

Peter had looked at photos of his new home back at his old home. England. During the 70s of the previous millennium. Filthy children in dark alleyways, garbage in the streets, alcoholics in the streets, and what

he saw now resembled the pictures. Just a hint of color and some advertisements, otherwise nothing had changed. The dream of worldwide prosperity for all hadn't been fulfilled. Yeah, well. Still better than in the middle ages. Almost everywhere was better than Poland. The Polish men worked at construction sites in ten hour shifts, they traipsed in groups through the dead city center in the evening just to land in the sleeping hall, where Polish was the only language spoken, where there was Polish food and comfy mattresses. The women worked ten hour shifts on farms, cleaning streets, working in tailor shops, shoe repair stores, bakeries, supermarkets – they commuted up to three hours every day, to London, Edinburgh, and whatever all the various holes were called – in order to sell their limited abilities at market. Hail to markets.

It was the time when the majority of biologically British population sat paralyzed awaiting the downfall, too tired to think. They had phones, they were busy, and Peter could watch them undisturbed. It made no sense to him why millions from his old home had come here – there they'd sit down on a sofa after a day without work, here after a ten-hour-shift they'd sit down on an inner sofa, which is to say on a mattress, WTF. Could the end goal of a life really be to take out a mortgage on a drafty little house in an area that looked like Poland and subsist on the fantasy that somewhere a few hours away the queen lived, yes, that one might meet her on the street with her cute dogs, that one might breathe royal air, so to speak? While Peter walked and thought, her mother was driven to fields where she harvested asparagus stalks and strawberries and then finished her day working at a bar in Manchester.

After a while

While his mother was working the night shift, an event took place that had to do with a Pole. The Pole was named

Sergej

Intelligence: average

Potential for aggression: high

Ethnicity: white

Creditworthiness: not available

Sexuality: hyperactive

Political orientation: inclined to rightwing extremism

Family: somewhere

He'd come to England a year before. He was young and had believed that England would be waiting for him. At home in Pila – in that wonderful city with the exquisite manor house, people constantly told fairytale-like stories of young Poles who'd become millionaires in England. And now here he was sitting in a filthy hole after he'd found no affordable accommodations in London, doing wretched jobs in Manchester. Up and out of the mattress encampment at five, in the bus to the construction site, working in questionable safety conditions (2 losses in recent months, 3 workers severely injured, with no prospects of recovery, with no prospects of being able to pay for a bus ticket home, with poor prospects of receiving a spot in a homeless shelter).

So, days: perform steel work. Evenings back. Drink in a pub. Bye bye. On his free days (2 up to now) Sergej had checked out proper life. Well-dressed people strolling in the Radisson hotel, limousines driving

up. People who shopped in Selfridges, who laughed, who had a normal existence. He didn't understand the language or the people, but he wanted a life, too, since the one he was currently being offered was simply crap. And he couldn't think of finding a wife. The Poles wanted rich British men, the local girls wanted rich British men. Or women. Or peace and quiet. None of them wanted Sergej. And. That was no way for a young man to live, a young man with job training after all, not partaking in life, feeling invisible. Nobody smiled at him when he walked through the city in his work clothes. Nobody nodded or greeted him or said: "Thanks for doing our dirty work for us, you know our own unemployed are just too depressed to do it. Too tired. They've been told for so long that there's nothing for them to do that they've actually come to believe it. They've been shown for so long that they're not worth anything that they've come to believe that, too. Now they're too tired to get up, to make demands, to get upset.

It didn't comfort Sergej that he was one of a million Poles here on this unfriendly island. What kind of attitude was it, what kind of system was it, that imported workers only to have them sleep on mattresses and never be greeted on the street. Not so much as a thank you. And going back home is not an option. And going to America is not an option, there's no money for that. His money was too precious to spend on a prostitute. Money. It was the only thing Sergej could think about. The only thing that interested him. That it shouldn't be the most important thing or that it was vulgar to think about it was something only people with money said, people who'd never been hungry and who'd never seen life as a choice between just two options -- to die in your own filth with your dick

in your hand, eaten by a dog, a failure; or to make it. Anything interesting in life took money. The freedom not to have to work or to choose what job you would like to do. Maintaining space between you and other people, traveling to foreign countries, and a proper bed with privacy. God damn axe -- the moron on the mattress next to him again. Banging his head on the ground for the past half an hour. "Shut up, you idiot," said Sergej. Then again, louder. A few others in the room shushed him, annoyed. Sergej decided to shut the idiot up. Then he can whimper and stop smashing his head in.

Then Sergej grabbed

Peter

with one hand, holding his mouth shut, and with the other hand pulled Peter's pajama pants down, opened his own pants, and stuck his penis in Peter's rear. Peter didn't know what exactly had happened, he had no idea about sexual things, but it was uncomfortable. It hurt, and elicited in Peter, someone who was always lonely and didn't know how to make contact with others, a new sort of loneliness, one with added dimension of coldness. He stopped breathing and waited until the man withdrew from him and disappeared into the dark. An old man next to Peter had watched the entire incident -- if you wanted to call it that, because you didn't want to try to figure out a better word that fully encapsulated all the brutality that went with penetrating a child's body, ripping things in a child's in-nards, caring not about the fact that it was a tiny human being that one was rubbing oneself against -- the man had watched the incident and jerked off while doing so, then rolled over and gone to sleep. Peter sat swaying in a corner of the bathroom the next day and the day after that.

A few days later

Peter's mother came home from her shift at the bar. Home, such as it was.

She was excited because --

She'd been discovered. By a scout for a television production. Movies, series, all that shit was the last 1.0-based sphere where there was still ample work for wetware. People (without jobs) who still had time to watch television didn't want to see avatars being amorous. They wanted to see real people, with human emotions. It fell to the content providers to replace every aspect of life, including watching TV, with something similar to TV, creating series and films by the ton to keep people who were unemployed or marginally employed from having any thoughts at the end of a long day of work or standing in line at the soup kitchen. It didn't work. You had to make decisions on those platforms, which few were in any shape to do. So there was still television, but only kind of. With wonderful light entertainment. For all the various formats and series and programs, they needed, shall we say, performers. Lots of them. The viewers wanted to see new faces, it was enough to have to live with one's own every day. There were about three million performers on virtual reality shows and movies on the island, all of whom had just one goal: prepare people for their futures. Create habits so that changes in reality wouldn't attract attention. Just as the American dream had, through state-subsidized books and movies, been used to create a desire in people to consume and accept their roles in society, movies and shows like the Matrix, the Walking Dead, Terminator, and Big Brother had in the recent past prepared people for what the future held for them.

Almost all British reality shows were set in public housing blocks and concerned the foundering poor or gangs or teen mothers or sex slaves, so that anyone who had not yet landed there at the very bottom felt scared and kept quiet, and anyone already there saw themselves and were pacified. Nearly all television series were set in the country and concerned happy, confident domestic servants, edifying country doctors and police officers, all of them roaming through Oxford because it still looked the way everyone wished England looked, the way England had for the majority of people never been -- sophisticated, charming, eccentric. Nearly all movies were set after an apocalypse. There were always pulse bombs set off which shut off power. There were always fires, financial meltdowns, plagues, and people who were very fit, running around, because they were so fit, and managed for that reason to escape the calamity.

Peter reacted to his mother's new career the usual way -- not at all. He was occupied for the next few weeks trying to understand what had happened that night on the mattress. He couldn't figure it out. So he erased the memory of the incident. And filled the gap in his mind by thinking up the solutions to unusual problems. Time and again he developed approaches that could save the world by for instance promulgating bicycles capable of flying. Such ideas were the sort of thing one had during the night. Only most people woke up the next day and realized they'd dreamed up nonsense while half asleep. Peter never woke up. He grew. He'd gotten at least twenty centimeters taller during the months in Rochdale. Thanks to his savant syndrome he could already read and understand English perfectly, though his speech suffered from the fact that he barely

spoke, even in the school where he now had to go every day, where he sat alone in the last row. The extra twenty centimeters protected him from the bodily attacks he would have normally been subjected to as a freak.

Otherwise the life of the little immigrant family progressed spectacularly.

With the advance for her first role -- a Polish cleaning woman being made redundant by robots -- the two were able to move to a new little apartment which had its own bathroom and kitchen and a window onto the street, where Peter could sit after school. He stared at the street, at the god damn Poles sauntering to their construction sites and back again from their construction sites, and he waited for his mother. Who came home later and later.

Like on this day.

When Peter awoke, he saw her packing a suitcase. That's how you said it. Nobody had suitcases anymore, but whatever the it was she was packing it, quietly, as if not to wake Peter. The thoughtful.

Mother

Intelligence: okay

Sexuality: asexual

Hobbies: Danielle Steel audio books

market utility: below average

Fitness level: poor, encapsulated TB

didn't take much with her, there'd be all new things, bought by her new boyfriend, a rich, Russian something or other she'd met a week ago, at exactly the right moment. The jobs weren't coming anymore, the entertainment industry had already had enough of her in a short amount of time, a pretty profile alone wasn't enough to carry the load, her poor English made speaking roles impossible, the offers for Polish performers were limited almost exclusively to porn films, and now she was packing because her new boyfriend wanted her to move into his apartment in London, unfortunately without

Peter.

Whose head was totally empty. His body was cold. You know, I'm doing this for us, said Peter's mother, stuffing a pair of lace underwear into her bag. She did have feelings for her child, but. Not particularly strong ones. Not so strong as to turn down the Russian. She relished the image of herself in a large apartment in London too much. With staff. With clothes. And Peter would be taken care of. He'd take care of Peter. Perhaps a boarding school and then at some point,

but --

The Russian

Intelligence: excellent

Potential for aggression: high

Ethnicity: white

Creditworthiness: okay

Net Worth: only 8 million left

had in mind -- if at all -- to have a couple children of his own. His interest in a disabled son not made by his own sperm was negligible. The Russian smirked whenever he encountered the prejudices of people from the so-called West towards simple, primitive, corrupt, brutal Russians. He saw their contempt and at the same time the fear in their glances. He liked it.

He'd grown up in an elegant modern apartment in Moscow, the child of a pair of professors, spoke eight languages, had unfortunately graduated only "magna cum laude" in economics and psychology, and had never wanted anything else except success. None of the supposedly typical reasons for a desire for power and success applied to him. He was educated, loved, he just had no desire to put up with someone above him, he had no desire to have neighbors, he wanted to sue into oblivion anyone who annoyed him, he wanted to be surrounded by beauty, and he wanted to follow his natural inclinations. Darwinism. Be the tip of the spear, not the spear. The Russian didn't fetishize money in a sexual way. He just wanted enough of it to forget about his mortality. He dreamed about digitalizing himself before his demise. Perhaps, he thought at times, he'd have been less happy if he'd been taller and more handsome. If he'd believed the game was all about muscle definition and pulling the prettiest women. But he was short. And he'd already gone bald at twenty. At the beginning of his professional career he'd dedicated himself to the commercial use of the Aral Sea. Which in the meantime had completely disappeared due to the appropriation of water for industry and agriculture and so forth. The enumeration of his business activities bored him. They followed the simple pattern of growth. Unfortunately the Russian and his businesses got in

the way of an oligarch with government connections, who for boring reasons feared the businesses of the Russian, who had no close contacts in government, would cause a drop in his revenues. His businesses were frozen at the same time he was charged with espionage. He was just barely able to transfer a modicum of capital to Panama and flee the country. Now he was slowly doing better. Now he was doing well enough to fall in love. For the first time in his life.

"It's terrific." Said

Peter's mother

Who was finished packing and was gaining momentum as she talked. She stood there with her suitcase, which was a duffel, and wanted to leave.

"It's not for long, I'll leave money for you and I'll come visit every week, what am I saying, every day, well, every second day. You have everything here. Right." Said Peter's mother to the silent child. Who no longer looked like a child. "The rent is paid. There's food in the fridge." The mother kneeled in front of Peter. She had a tattoo on her shoulder, which identified her as an older person. Young people didn't get tattoos. How would they.

"It's not for a long time, and you're already..." said Peter's mother.

"Twelve," said Peter.

"Right, exactly," said his mother. "When I was that age I was already..." Peter would never learn what his mother had managed by that age, because downstairs in front of the door the Russian's driver honked, and Peter's mother jumped up, took her imaginary suitcase and left the apartment with a hastiness bordering on rushing. Finally Peter stood up,

something seemed to have broken through the leaded glass of his consciousness. Quietly he said: "Don't go." But his mother went, she didn't listen to him, she tried to shut her ears, she hopped down the steps, and Peter followed her, steadily mumbling "Don't go, don't go." The Russian's Bentley stood on the street and he was seated in the back of the darkened car. Peter's mother opened the door and Peter clung to her sweater. "Don't go. Don't go." This was quite a lot of words given his condition, but it didn't help. Peter's mother ripped herself free, the Russian gave the order to drive off. Peter ran a few meters after the car, fell down and remained sitting in the street. He didn't know how he would stand up again or continue to move at all.

Peter was so nervous that he had a complete shutdown of his system. Somehow he managed to make it back to the apartment. Somehow he started to breathe again. He sat motionless on the floor for a week in the apartment that was missing a mother. He didn't eat, didn't drink, wet himself. Nobody questioned why Peter wasn't at school. Hey, he was a Pole, he was a loser, he was a freak, so nobody wondered where a loser kid was when he didn't show up for class, which he wasn't going to learn anything from anyway. Peter had forgotten school, forgotten himself. He crawled around the apartment. The heat was shut off. Ditto the gas. The water still worked. His mother really had left money. With careful planning it would last for a month's worth of food. Peter ate ravioli from the can, he froze, and he looked out the window. The internet was dead. Nothing to read. Nothing to divert his attention. Peter waited without knowing what for, without missing his old life he waited on a new one.

Something would have to happen. Something always happened, for instance: the water was shut off. After a few more days, with the money nearly gone, an eviction notice arrived. Of course, after the previous invoices concerning the rent. An eviction meant the arrival of police. And police would suppose that, in Peter, the situation concerned a child, and then they'd seize upon measures presumed to be appropriate for children. So Peter packed the things he considered essential, a couple of books, an alarm clock, the phones, a sweater and a pair of pajamas, and closed the door behind himself. Out on the street, as always, indecisive. Peter stood there at a loss, probably like anyone else would stand there at a loss who did not have a home for the first time. Complicating things was the fact that Peter was not yet an adult and had no friends, because he didn't even understand what the term meant. He'd probably hit on an idea as he walked, so he set off walking. He wasn't frightened, because he didn't know what to be frightened of. Of the cold, or the night? Of death -- that would be ridiculous. Peter knew everything about so-called death. It was a condition like before birth. A condition as if he were sitting inside himself but unable to get out. Except not sitting.

He didn't feel fear, rather a great aversion to having to adjust to a new situation. One advantage was the fact that he didn't ask himself questions. Like, what would become of his life now, where he would sleep, what he was supposed to eat. Peter just walked. At some point after some two hours of walking, during which he had circled the crappy little town five times, he sat down at the entrance of the parking garage downtown and waited.

They'd be off any minute

Don

knew.

They had a trip ahead of them. In order to strengthen the mother-child bond, the little family was going to London. A bus ride. Dreamed up at some point while the legal guardian was high. It was, as far as Don could remember, the first trip in her life. Nobody she knew went on vacation. The daily life of the people in Rochdale was a never ending celebration of idleness. Don had for weeks been looking forward to visiting London. She was so excited she could barely sleep. Just the sound of the name of the capital city made her heart beat more quickly. She'd wandered the streets via Google, and what she'd seen was -- alive. In contrast to the prevailing sensation that in Rochdale everything that had ever lived had been boiled to death.

Don's mother laid out a thin dress that she sprinkled with water. Yes, she sprinkled it. In lieu of an iron, it was a good trick for smoothing out cloth. The family slept fitfully the night before the trip. Don woke up far too early, jumped out of bed. While she was in the bathroom trying on muscle shirts, the doorbell rang. It took a while for Don in her excitement to assign a name to the sad little figure at the door. It was her father.

He stood there crying. Bracing himself effectively with his arm on the door frame in order to absorb the trembling of his body. Don's mother came running immediately in her smoothed dress. Father was having difficulties with his new woman, as his bloodied eyebrow attested. Don's mother was totally out of her head with happiness at seeing the old bag again. Like a dog who found his master again after a long time, she jumped around the idiot, and the children stood mutely behind her in the

entryway, a feeling of disappointment welling up in them. In short: a little while later they were all sitting on the bus. Don's mother sat on her ex-husband's lap, kissing, while the children sat silently behind them. Don's brother threw up at some point, it was his first bus ride. It was Don's first bus ride, too, but she knew how to control herself. Her mother was so woozy from joy and from drinking from the bottle of liquor her father had brought along that she didn't notice the mishap. Don cleaned the brother up with his stuffed animal that he carried with him as a result of infantilism. Don's brother was no longer a child. He, too, was in the midst of puberty and already had fuzz on his upper lip, Don heard him jerking off in the darkness of the children's room. About five times per night. Don couldn't get the noise out of her head when she looked at the numbskull. Anyway --

Shortly after the family had left behind the outskirts of Manchester, Don's lust for travel had completely evaporated, and when the bus pulled into the bus terminal in London several dull hours later -- the moment she'd imagined would be so intense and incredible -- she just wanted to go home. She had perhaps never in her life experienced such a feeling of disappointment like that moment, because the part of her that was still a child had hoped that something miraculous would occur. When the bus driver ordered them to exit the vehicle, Don woke her so-called parents. Then they all stood there perplexed in the drizzling rain and the parents began to fight about the map. All around the bus station people lay on the floor with blankets and suitcases. Don saw a woman urinating on the curb and a baby lying as if dead on top of a duffel bag.

The group made it to the nearest pub. The parents drank on. At some point Don's father started to cry again, because nobody was taking care of him or he was alone or he was a failure. Don's mother fell off her stool. The children picked her up. And then they rode back.

When they arrived in Rochdale it was dark. Silently the family shuffled down the main street. Don lagged far behind, yearning. For something unusual that could save the day. For music, loudness, for love or a bank robbery. And then she saw him sitting at the entrance of the parking garage. The most beautiful person she had ever seen. A thousand times more beautiful than Beyoncé. He was slumped there, staring into the distance. Don stopped and looked at him from a few meters away. He looked so unusual here in front of this eyesore of a parking garage. As if a superstar had mistakenly wandered into the little city. Don had only ever seen someone like that in music videos or movies. As if lit from within. So perfect. So blond and thin. The boy looked truly astonishing. Here of all places. In total contrast to Rochdale. A few drunks staggered down the street, the businesses were all closed, the lights were out, no bars nearby, the Costa Café was closed as well. And the boy sat there without moving. Perhaps he was stuffed. Don sat down next to him.

"She's gone," said the boy after a while.

Don wasn't interested in who was gone. In her world someone was always disappearing. Usually it had to do with legal guardians who ended up in jail, psychiatric facilities, or the cemetery. Nobody here talked about their family situation. It was boring, since it was always a variation of the same story: adults who had failed at life.

It occurred to Don that the boy didn't look her in the eye. He wasn't particularly talkative, either. "Come on." She said, standing up and pulling Peter to his feet. Which unsettled him a bit. She took him to Hannah in the squatted building.

From that night on the group became a foursome.

This is the story of

Don, Peter, Hannah, and Karen,

who from now on spent all their time after school and on weekends together. They'd found their family. A place like a portable cave that was always with them. They'd recognized each other. As outsiders, as a fringe phenomenon, as outcasts, and this was astonishing enough because they didn't normally recognize each other, the people who stood around the edges of the school yard. They always looked toward the masses, the weirdos, the geeks, the nutjobs, the too fat or too thin, the gay or verminous, and never recognized themselves for what they were: strange. The ones that other kids, normal kids, would point to years later while looking at class pictures on their phone and say: "That one -- can't remember his name, what a nutjob -- don't know, he was just weird somehow."

A miracle happened with that little group, or maybe the weather was to blame, a quirk of the surroundings had brought them together, and it was unclear whether they were bound together by something other than the surroundings, other than the fact that the majority found them odd.

Because nobody had told them what was good and what was evil, they'd adopted their own law: nobody will ever hurt us anymore.

This was nonsense, of course, since humans were disposed to hurt each other. They couldn't do otherwise, humans, though this was not yet known to the foursome, who didn't even allow themselves to show the weakness of crying in front of the group once in a while because they didn't know any better. Because they were still children and sometimes just had no clue how they could manage everything. Establishing a life and reconciling themselves to the idea that nobody is waiting for them. And the daily grind. My goodness, just don't think about the daily grind. Ever longer lines at the soup kitchen, ever more bullshit at the welfare office, ever more knife fights at school, it can be overwhelming, as a child.

But --

They'd found each other and were no longer alone.

The four of them were friends and were sure they'd stay together until the end of their lives. Nobody would ever separate them. They thought.

One day after a few weeks,

during which they were so happy with each other it was as if they had just fallen in love, while sitting at the playground, between used heroin needles and some rusty swings, they swore a blood oath. "Any of you have AIDS," asked Karen, who disinfected her hand after any contact with objects or people. As she considered what infections could be carried by another person's blood, Hannah had already made a cut on her hand. Hannah had no more fears. She had lost everything that a child could

lose, and once in a while she cut her arms with razor blades just to feel something. Then she looked at the wounds felt ridiculous for engaging in this stereotypically female form of auto-aggression. Peter held out his hand silently and let Hannah cut him although he didn't understand what the oath was supposed to be good for. But he was happy in the group. Like all of them. The children who now placed their hands one on top of the next seemed to light up on the little playground. They were no longer weirdos. They were an entity.

Then it started to rain again, as it always did in Rochdale during the longest days of year.

It was summer

In the world of

Ma Wei

That meant

That the air quality would drop a little. Otherwise everything was the same as always. The conspiracy theory number 569, to explain the fast-paced change in the world, was as follows:

China -- and when we talk of China, we're talking about inside the so-called Party -- had adopted a forty-year plan thirty years ago. The plan contained the steps necessary to scale to the heights of world power.

First become the cheapest global producer for everything. Which helped the Chinese population attain modest wealth. And also served to gain access to the technical know-how behind all the products developed abroad, which were produced and copied and finally perfected in China.

The reports about the precarious status of the Chinese labor force originated at that time. Brutality, backwardness, and so forth. These doc-

umentations were all shot in Chinese movie studios in order to spread to the rest of the world an image of a backwards, third world empire. Artists loyal to the Party also reported abroad about the inhumane conditions in China. They accused. So to speak. And manifested the reputation of the country. Which in the meantime stabilized the currency. And increased state revenues. And with absurd speed, thanks to the mass of cheap labor and to the dictatorship, restructured the country. Everything old disappeared. New buildings popped up all over the place, shopping malls, cutting edge factories, infrastructure, ecology and environmental protections were perfected, the air got -- better. The western world outsourced among other things its industry and manufacturing to China. The markets, you know. Which led to step 2 of the plan. In coalition with Russia, Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and some Arab countries, the weakening of the West was tackled in earnest. Hacking, spying, vote manipulation, the electronic manipulation of the divisions within western societies proceeded efficiently, also because -- most phones and the bulk of the software they ran were made in China.

You know.

The countries of the West were increasingly ruled by absurd, fatuous dictators. Sad men who reeked of failure, who accelerated the collapse of the western system.

China bought half the world. Land in Africa, Pakistan, in the East, ports all over the world, businesses, buildings, mines, oil reserves, mining areas for rare earth elements. The native population had discovered the joy of consumption, they wouldn't give it up for anything. They could buy

new apartments, cars, and domestically-produced Apple devices and Gucci bags. They were

happy because they could consume.

So much for conspiracy theory number 569. Perhaps there was a bit of truth in it, perhaps not. Herr Ma Wei was definitely very pleased with the developments of the world at the beginning of this glorious millennium.

It was summer

which meant

the children

had summer vacation. The vacation consisted of days that turned to night without any transition after 198 hours. In the yard, withered grass covered with plastic bags as if to admonishingly remind the observer about the plastic waste in the world's oceans. Against the fences leaned bored children with no money to go to a pool. Of which there were none anyway. Vacation days began with a good breakfast -- which very few of them received because either their mother was sleeping off her depression or had left for the filthy jobs that you got as a single mother, most of them related to cleaning, prostitution, caring for old people, or the packaging of some machine part or other. Many got white bread. White bread always did the trick if you spread it with mayonnaise. Sometimes that wasn't available. In which case a stout gulp of water and then steal something later. From the yard came the constant sound of balls being mindlessly kicked against a wall. The bleakness made it so the body wanted to lie down again almost upon getting up, it couldn't lie down, though, because it was too nervous. At some point the children went out to be with the

others, to stand around or to kick balls against the wall. After a few hours, shortly before they smashed their heads against the concrete out of boredom, they left their block to go lean on a fence somewhere else and look at music videos. Their stars came from places that looked similar to Rochdale and had still managed to produce a life. Which meant gold chains, large cars, gold bags, Gucci, and collector's sneakers.

What the children understood as a life had only to do with money. Money was what separated them from those in real cities, meaning Manchester, which they visited once in a while. Riding public transport without a ticket to go look at people strolling around Selfridges. They all dreamed of living in Selfridges, and they hated the people who drank tea there and bought porcelain dogs. The children belonged to the newly defined Generation Z. The end of the alphabet. The end of the food chain, well researched, in order to better sell them products. They were the second wave of digital natives. Connected physically to digital technology, they'd become a performer-generation through lack of perspective. The more crowded the world became and the more interchangeable people became, the more desperate was the desire to be seen. But there was no point.

Don, Karen and Hannah and Peter

had of late taken only photos of themselves where they were unrecognizable, the idea being that they would probably become criminals later on.

Since then, only hoody photos.

Since the army had been permitted on occasion to intervene during demonstrations.

Since there had been discussions about privatizing the police and the army.

Which didn't matter. And which didn't lead to outrage among the populace. The British weren't inclined to public, vulgar displays of protest. Peter had read that in an article. Everything the children knew they'd learned online. They'd been born in the new millennium and didn't know anything else.

[END OF SAMPLE]