

A WRITERS' COLLECTIVE



One House
many
stories

The International Short Story



ONE HOUSE. MANY STORIES.

A collective writing project.



Original Edition

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PREFACE

Hi!

It's great to see you found this book! We are Robin & Antonia from Germany and in case you are not familiar with this project, we would like to introduce ourselves and this project shortly to give you a bit more background before you start reading.

In 2014, we funnily enough met in Australia, and since then our passion for traveling and enthusiasm for crazy ideas has made us become pretty good friends over the years.

In April last year (2020), we were skyping in between Finland and Germany and dreaming about hypothetical travel plans and bouncing ideas back and forth about what to do with our new quarantine lives. We joked around about how much fun it would be to write a short story together, with each of us writing a page a day. The hook: We would only receive the last sentence of the other person's page before starting our next one, linking them together by only knowing this last sentence. One thing led to another and, shortly after, we were sending the last sentences of our pages back and forth. Nearly one month passed like that and when we finally put all the pages together, we were fascinated by the result. It might not have been obvious for someone else, but we saw each other's personalities and even our own shared journey reflected in this story and were immediately excited.

Spontaneously, this led us to the question: What would happen if we expanded the idea and tried to gather as many people as possible to join a similar project, writing a small book together?

Countries had just started closing borders, travelling became restricted and governments were mainly concerned with national issues, so we wanted to connect and create something together with other people across all national borders. We wanted to create a story about life and anything that inspired and motivated the authors. The limit should be the individual's imagination!

So we started programming a website, created a new concept so that every author would at least know the whole last page, asked friends if they would like to participate in this idea and then got the whole thing going! 🍌🤖

Everyone who wanted to participate assigned themselves a two-day-period and at the beginning of this period, they would receive the very first page of the story (written by us, containing some basics of the story like perspective and potential theme and characters) and the page written last; meaning the one written by the person before him or her. Then the author had two days to write their page and send it back to us. We would then take this page, send it to the next person and the wheel would start turning again. We adjusted the concept slightly during the months and published more and more parts of the story to allow for better continuation of the different plot strands.

Everyone was free in what they could write. We hoped it would ultimately reflect a part of themselves either through the style of writing, by weaving their daily life or today's thoughts into the story or through any other way. It was up to the author, if he or she wanted to further develop the storyline of the page before, start a new character's story or write some kind of excursion of thoughts. At the end of the day, it was his or her story as much as it was ours and everyone else's!

Well and now we are here: One year and 100 pages later, 40 authors from 15 different countries have participated in this crazy project and all together created this exciting story about love, hate, friendship, family, chaos, the high and low points of living and some big philosophical questions about life.

On every page it was fascinating to see the creativity, motivation and dedication of each author. We absolutely loved the entire process and got excited with every new page. We want to thank everyone who contributed something to this project! Next to all the authors, who are named together with their page, special thanks also go to Ellen Virkkunen who beautifully designed our cover page and logo for the book!

To everyone: THANK YOU!

With this being said, there is only one thing left:
Best wishes, stay well and have fun reading!

Toni & Robin

ANTONIA THAMM & ROBIN WULFES
GERMANY

It was a warm spring day and the sky was a bright blue. Only small, cotton-like clouds broke through the intense blue here and there. A bird was flying over the roofs of a residential area. A large, high up block with dozens of apartments was ahead, so high, it looked like the house was reaching out to touch the sky. In front of it was a big parking lot where many different cars and other vehicles were parked side by side. The pink Chevrolet Corvette of that girl from the penthouse was parked next to an old VW Golf that had more than just one little bump carved into its metal exterior exhibiting its age as well as the recklessness of its driver. Next to the little van of that family with the seven children from the fifth floor, one could appreciate a colorful and beautifully decorated ice cream truck. Its owner had saved up for years to fulfill his dream and buy this truck, quitting his desk-job in a bank to drive around town selling ice cream. Days like today were his favorites.

Scattered on the side of the parking lot were Jackie's skateboard and her playmates rollerblades. They had carelessly put them aside to build a sandcastle on the playground after racing around the block for an hour, practicing their tricks on the way so their moms wouldn't be watching from the balcony. Besides, then the cute boy from next door wouldn't see them fall either.

The bird flew over this scenery, looking down for a split-second. What would it see? Would it recognize the wrinkles of concern that have sneaked onto the

young woman's face getting off the bus? Would the bird care if it knew that she had lost her job three weeks ago but hadn't told anyone yet because she was ashamed? Probably not. It most likely would see nothing of importance. It would not wonder about the people living here, all with their own unique story. Their ambitions, dreams, worries and moments of true happiness, relationships and friendships.

Did they know each other? How many times have these lives crossed during their time living here? And however opposed and distant some might seem, didn't they still have some things in common? Or was there even one thing everybody had in common?

We can just hope that we will find out more soon. Throwing ourselves into the living rooms of families, the kitchens of old ladies and the relationships and stories of these people.

After all, aren't we all basically one of them?

MAXWELL THURSTON
USA, NEW MEXICO

The sun pierced through a small hole in the blinds and glared off a framed portrait of a young blond-haired boy that sat on the bedside table. Ben squinted his eyes and turned over in bed. His biggest customers were still preoccupied with their Saturday morning cartoons, so he had time. He could hear the Jeffersons bickering through the paper-thin walls of the apartment.

"You never listen to me!" Mrs. Jefferson cried at her husband who had once again bought the wrong breakfast cereal.

Ben sipped his coffee on the small balcony that jutted from the back of his apartment, staring down at his colorful ice cream truck. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the warm glow of the spring sun illuminate his face.

When he opened his eyes, two children were standing next to the truck eagerly waving up at the balcony. Ben waved back.

"Time to get to work," he muttered to himself.

The boys' soccer practice was running late, and Ben's eyes were beginning to droop. He couldn't abandon his post early, though, as the parents of the boys were always willing to pay for a sweet treat after practice. Just as the coach put his whistle to his mouth, a thunderous clap boomed above the field. The rain came. It began with a pitter patter before, within only a minute, water was pouring from the now cloud-covered sky.

"Come on, boys!" Ms. Miller yelled, as lightning cut through the previously tranquil night.

Ben watched disappointedly as the Miller boys jumped into the pink Chevrolet Corvette and the car skidded out of the dirt parking lot. The other cars, filled with the rest of the soccer players, followed quickly behind. The colorful ice cream truck sat alone.

"Gosh darn it! Where did this storm come from?"

Ben declared, "I didn't even get to turn on the music." He hit the small red button above his windshield and an unmistakable cheery jingle began to ring out from the speakers on the side of the truck. Ben shrugged his shoulders and began humming to the tune as he pulled out of the parking lot.

The rain hammered against the windshield as the truck beat along the highway. Suddenly, a strike of lightning lit up the black sky. No, not lightning; this flash of light did not fade. Ben stared bewildered into the dazzling glow. The jolly ice cream jingle stopped abruptly as the truck's speakers sizzled into silence. A soft voice rang out from the whiteness.

"Papa?" the voice called.

"Liam?!" Ben exclaimed, startled.

The blast of a car horn roused Ben from his trance and he swerved the truck back into the right lane.

"What in tarnation!" he yelled aloud as the colorful ice cream truck sped along the rain-soaked road back towards apartment 309.

CHIARA SEIFERT
GERMANY

It was late afternoon when Liam left the after-school club as one of the last children. Packed with his heavy backpack, sports bag and full lunch box and water bottle, he did not seem to be in a hurry to walk home. He could barely eat anything at school. Even though he tried hard to play the cool kid at school, he did not feel like it on the inside, especially not when he was about to walk home.

He used to like it at home a lot, when they all played monopoly together until the time was running later than he was allowed to be awake. He liked it at home, back then when he woke up way too early in the morning of his birthday, running into his parents' bedroom to wake them up and yell, "It's my birthday!" – just in case they forgot; which they never did. Back then, when he got so excited about the holiday trip the next day that he could not fall asleep

while he was imagining the long car ride including eating all the time and adventures he would have with his sister. He liked it at home back then when it was filled with all the chatter and joy, when they were a real family.

Since his sister died three years ago everything had changed, even his home, although it still looked the same. It was not just his sister that was missing. The whole family was broken. The only thing left in the house was Liam and his mom. Less chatter, no joy. Liam had not seen his father since he left. He had never really understood why he had to leave but his mom kept telling him that it was the best for all.

Liam kept walking the streets not being in a hurry at all. Even when it started to rain he did not seem to care. He did not want to be home, being locked inside the house watching the other kids on their rollerblades and skateboards. Every day he was sitting by the window seeing the others having fun outside until the sun set, knowing that he had to stay inside so his mom could be sure that he was safe. He did not want his mom to be worried about him. She had too much trouble with all the work she did to effort living in this apartment, which became way too big for only the two of them.

"I don't want you to feel like everything has changed my love," was the answer she gave Liam when he asked why they were not moving. In fact, everything had changed.

While Liam was walking in the pouring rain, far away he heard a cheery jingly from the ice cream truck. He was never really into ice cream unlike his sister who could never have enough of it. To his surprise, he was walking faster and faster towards this sound, not really knowing why. He did not even notice that he

was running until he was running onto the street and his heart started to race. It was as if he had seen his father. But that was not possible since he had moved to another country.

Suddenly, a young woman pulled him back on the sidewalk. It was Nora who was torn from her thoughts about how to tell her parents that she had lost the job.

TJAŠA OCVIRK
SLOVENIA

“Whoa, Liam slow down, where are you headed to in such a hurry?” Nora asked concerned, “You nearly ran into me.”

Liam was taken by surprise. He wasn’t expecting anyone to interrupt his thoughts. All he wanted was for everyone to leave him alone and just let him be for this brief moment. But Nora wasn’t the one to look away. She was a curious and extroverted person who would always engage in other peoples’ lives which is funny because nobody would ever ask her if she was okay. Always smiling yet hiding under the constant worry, she had fooled her friends and family that she was fine. Nobody had even guessed that she was let go from her job in a café and honestly, she didn’t mind. She needed some time to figure out how to pay for her cooking classes. That was the only thing that brought her joy after she was forced to leave the university. There was just something special about different recipes from all sorts of cuisines and whenever she was cooking she felt an instant connection to a lost friend. Julia died three years ago and she was the one who had always been the star in the kitchen. For that reason, Nora kept

her hobby a secret and she vowed not to tell anybody, or at least that was what she thought.

“I am sorry, I was just...” Liam tried to come up with an excuse but didn’t manage to find the right words. Nora had always seen Liam as Julia’s little brother, even though at the age of 16 he wasn’t so little anymore. They had never been particularly close but that changed when his sister passed away. At the beginning, it was hard, as nobody really knew what to say or how to behave, now that the most cheerful person of the residential area was dead. Nobody wanted to acknowledge that Julia was gone, they just pretended everything was fine. But not Liam and Nora. They would keep running into each other outside, when they were just thinking and trying to make sense of what had happened. Eventually they started talking and a bit of hope had returned into their lives. Nora could see Julia in her brother’s eyes and Liam felt like he could talk to Nora like he used to talk to his sister. It was their little secret, sitting on the bench, watching the sky and relieving the memories of when Julia was still alive. They have never talked about the bad things or tried to reason her death, instead, they talked about the goofiest, craziest and most amazing adventures they had shared together.

But that day Nora knew something was wrong. She had to say something.

“It is okay Liam, to say that you miss her. It is okay to feel those things. But you don’t have to play the hero and pretend like everything is alright. You know, pretending always backfires.”

Liam was taken by surprise. They have never talked about the real things, about life and how they are doing. It was never about them, it was about Julia.

"Like you are pretending not to take cooking classes? I am fine, I just want ice cream," Liam snapped and kept walking towards the ice cream truck. He didn't know where that came from since he wasn't even upset that Nora was cooking like his sister. It actually made him happy. But Liam was not good at expressing his feelings. It was always easier to put on a brave face and pretend everything was fine. Except, it wasn't. He wanted to talk to somebody but he felt so lost. For a brief moment, he wondered if Nora would come after him.

MIGUEL SCAGLIOTTI OLMEDO
ARGENTINA

Nora felt that Liam was hiding something and that was why she decided to follow him.

Suddenly she said, "I didn't mean to bother you!" So he turned around and answered, "I'm also sorry for being rude to you... Come on! Join me! I will invite you to an ice cream!" ... so, she agreed.

Although she accepted the invitation, she only did it because she suspected that he was hiding something... That evening everything changed, for the better? Who knows... It had been weeks since Liam started to be introverted and act weird around Nora. As she had no desire to lose another close friend she started to pay more attention to his actions. They were chatting as usual about his deceased sister when he suddenly fell silent... and then a minute later he asked her to teach him how to prepare his sister's

favorite pie. Of course Nora agreed, and they continued chatting until the sun set. Just imagine her... him... chatting and admiring a strong orange sunset... What a love scene! But... love? Who talked about love?

As the night was coming, they just decided to end the chat and they returned to their homes to have dinner with their families as usual. That was a long night for Nora, the night seemed endless... To add to her insomnia, uncountable thunder and lightning collapsed in the dark sky and transformed it into an incredible and frightening scenario at the same time.

During the following two weeks, both Nora and Liam weren't in contact. Like some sort of agreement where each one decided to have personal space. Things turned great for Nora in these weeks, as she could tell her family that she had lost her job and she got a lot of family support. She started to feel alive again.

Unfortunately, things didn't turn out so well for Liam. He spent a lot of time searching things on the computer and being locked in his room... He only ate once in a while and his face looked as if he hadn't slept for years... Maybe he had a Machiavellian plan in mind? Maybe he turned crazy and could not bear that Nora was just his sister's friend and not herself?

After two weeks of no contact, Nora and Liam met together to prepare Julia's favorite pie... Liam invited her to his home as he was alone... But Nora didn't know that...

FAMILY VÄRRI
FINLAND

Nora knocked on Liam's door. In her left hand she had a bag holding the ingredients for the pie she had promised she would teach Liam to bake. Together with her was her friend Ellie, who had also been a friend of Liam's sister. The young women had an imprecise plan of going out after having baked and eaten the pie with Liam. Both were full of joy and waiting for the evening to grow.

Liam opened the door, with a smile of anticipation on his worn-looking and tired face. Someone could have sensed a slight change on his face when he realized Nora wasn't alone, but the two women didn't. This would also not have been easy, as the light in front of Liam's door had gone out, mercifully covering the dust that covered the furniture in the hallway. The two women followed Liam into the kitchen and laid out the baking supplies on the kitchen table. "Would you like some wine?" Liam asked and moved to the kitchen cupboard to get a third glass from the shelf.

"Thank you, we'd like that very much," Ellie replied as Nora measured flour into a bowl Liam had given her.

As the pie got baked, the atmosphere in the apartment didn't exactly become any more relaxed and easy-going, quite the opposite. Ellie tried to make conversation with Liam, but his short answers didn't really make the discussion flow.

'How tired, sad and somehow closed he looks,' ran a thought through her head, 'he has changed a lot after

the early school years, maybe his sister's death still has an effect.'

Ellie noticed the black piano and electric guitar in the back of the room, also covered with a thick dust layer. In earlier times, Liam had played in a band or sometimes even two or three. That all seemed to be a distant memory now.

As the tension wouldn't ease during the following hours, nobody really felt obligated to continue the evening together after the wine had been drunk and slices of pie eaten. Nora and Ellie promised to take the leftover pie to the old lady living next door to Nora. Everyone felt a bit relieved as the two women left Liam and headed to town. Liam stood in the window, watching Ellie and Nora disappear slowly in the slightly darkening evening on the other side of the parking lot. He still stood there a quarter of an hour later, when the downstairs neighbor's dented Golf drove into the parking lot from the darkness, the exhaust pipe banging twice as loud as the stereo of the car.

NIC ZEIMET
LUXEMBOURG

After he pulled into his usual parking space he turned off the engine but his car radio remained on, the speakers blasting at full volume. He leaned back into the weathered leather seat, closed his eyes and let the pulse of the fast-paced punk anthem run through his body. As the melody faded out he smiled and let out a deep, satisfied breath.

The sun had almost set and the buildings' long shadows were slowly fading. Instead of heading straight

for his apartment, he took a detour around the corner of the block, seemingly looking for something on the floor. When he found the skateboard, he picked it up and gave it a closer look. The griptape and the wheels were quite worn down, the deck however was in a surprisingly good shape. Jackie must have been taking very good care of it. To his surprise he noticed some long straight scratches on it, which he could tell were slide marks. He was impressed by the progress the young girl had obviously made since he first saw her skate. He ran his hand through his hair as he always did when he was thinking, shedding some leftover sawdust on the ground, when he was interrupted by a voice coming from behind him.

"There you are! You're late," his friend said with a big smile from ear to ear, the sound of his voice not reflecting the accusation of his words. They greeted each other with a long, warm hug.

"Sorry. I lost track of time. You ready?"

His friend nodded his head excitedly.

"Good times, eh?" he commented, noticing the skateboard, his eyes glowing in reminiscence of past memories.

"Is it going to hurt?" his friend asked, more intrigued than worried.

"A little bit. But you know that already."

The two young men were now sitting at a small table in a two-room apartment, the furniture's wild mix of colors and styles an aftermath of a failed attempt at replicating a Caribbean flair. Spread out in front of them in a slightly chaotic manner were sheets of paper, some fresh and some wrinkled but all covered by the same motif in different stages of completion. As one was putting on rubber gloves and preparing a

tattoo machine, the other was looking at the framed photographs found in his friend's living room: cherry blossoms, a dog, a woman.

He was interrupted when the machine awakened, a rhythmic buzz now filling the room. He calmly put his forearm on the table in anticipation of what was coming next. The needle danced fluently over the bare skin, eternizing the artist's movement, whose rolled-up sleeves now revealed tattoos of his own: a blue-eyed bear, a planet, a tree, a name.

Late in the night they squeezed through a small window to access the fire escape, climbed to the rooftop and sat down at the edge of the building. They sat there observing the stars, until the first rays of sun brightened the sky and revealed the two friends' finished artwork.

It was an astronaut.

GRETCHEN REYNOLDS
USA, NEW MEXICO

The lemony rays of that same rising sun slanted through the blinds on Martin's bedroom window, lighting his face and driving away the final wisps of sleep. Blinking against the light, he blearily checked his watch, sighed and rolled out of bed, trying not to wake his wife. His toddler twins would already be awake and flinging toys, pajamas and, possibly, the cat. The older twins would pull blankets over their heads and pretend not to hear when he said it was time to get up and the three in between would grumble, mope and yell at each other and their dad through the lone bathroom door.

Martin sighed again. Since losing his engineering job, he'd been playing Mr. Mom, while his wife worked extra shifts to pay their bills and he'd had no idea that his family's life was so chaotic. It required all of his engineering and executive know-how to get the kids up, bathed, fed and fitted with the right backpacks, homework, phones, lunches and after-school cleats, balls, swimsuits, tutus, ballet shoes and scheduling instructions.

He rolled his eyes now as he slipped another slice of bread into the toaster. He could hear the kids screaming as his wife stumbled into the kitchen. He handed her the warm thermos of coffee he'd gotten ready for her and an apple and cookie for later in the day. She stared at them, stared at him and then, wordlessly, kissed him before heading out the door.

The kids, all seven of them, tumbled into the kitchen, grabbing for energy bars, bananas, milk and the bread he had carefully toasted and buttered. Crumbs and bar wrappers dropped on the floor. Milk sloshed. The older kids elbowed each other aside and knocked over the smaller twins, who howled. Someone swore. Martin muttered, "Don't use that language." No one listened. Finally, the older kids tore out the door, like a tornado sucking away oxygen and leaving devastation behind.

Martin glanced down at the little twins, looking up like owls, waiting for him to chauffeur them to pre-school. He sighed once more, gathered their miniature backpacks and led them toward the car. There, he bundled them into car seats while they squirmed

and fought him, until, done, he leaned against the car, eyes closed, and breathed.

“Here, I think you need this,” a voice said. Martin’s eyes popped open. The kind man who owned the ice cream truck stood six inches away. Martin had bought masses of his popsicles and ice cream sandwiches since becoming the kids’ caregiver. His kids behaved when he bribed them with ice cream.

“Thanks, but...” Martin began and stopped. The man was holding out the largest ice cream bar Martin had ever seen. For some reason, Martin’s eyes welled suddenly with tears. “I can’t...” he started again, but the man just smiled at him.

“You can,” he said, “You should. Sometimes, it’s the right day to have ice cream for breakfast.” He handed Martin the bar, began to whistle and walked away.

JOONAS JAKKOLA
FINLAND

Holding the huge ice cream bar and now misty eyed and starting to feel choked up, Martin sat still as thoughts and emotions, a mixture of despair and relief, were running through his mind. Lifting his hand to swipe the welling tears from his eyes he noticed the twins, oddly quiet, staring at him.

“Daddy’s having a bad day,” he explained and let out a whispering sigh. The chaos that occurred every weekday morning combined with his wife’s absent-mindedness when she was home, granted she was working nearly double the time he had worked before his unemployment, was clearly about to get the best of him. On times like these the simple gesture

of the ice cream truck driver was overwhelming. Pulling back from his thoughts he glanced half-ashamed at the ice cream truck driver now walking away, started the engine and left the parking lot.

He was running late. The preschool would start in less than half an hour and the streets would be busy like every morning. Operating the car while holding the huge ice cream bar wasn't easy but he made it to the street without crashing into any of the neighbors' cars. At the next red traffic light he put on the CD player and the soothing voice of Simon and Garfunkel's *Sound of Silence* flowed out of the speakers. It was part of the routine he had with the twins; it helped him focus on the road by making them listen in silence. Dust rose to the sunny morning sky as their car slowly disappeared into the morning hustle and bustle of a city waking up.

Contrary to his negative self-talk, Martin made it in time to the preschool. He entered the parking area through the gate and followed the hand signs of the police officer, who looked as bored as every morning. He only glanced at Martin for a split second longer as he stepped out of the parked car with the huge unfinished ice cream bar. He opened the doors and let the twins toddle off to the swarm of young children playing inside the fenced playground. He lifted his hand in a greeting to the group of the teachers standing separate from the children. Most of them shared the same shabby appearance of the main building. Scanning through the group he found what he was looking for: there was the new trainee who he had seen only twice. That trainee had already set his heart racing and head spinning. This morning

especially, sensitized by the circumstances at home and the unexpected goodwill of the ice cream truck driver, he blushed deeply as his mind went overdrive. His vision blurred, he felt like sinking to the ground.

ANTONIA HORLACHER
GERMANY

At the same time, just at another place the reader knows as the sky touching apartment block with the big parking spot outside, a young woman stood at the window of her little one-bedroom apartment, which was, not considering the mattress, a couple of big paper boxes and a little kitchen that came with the apartment, very empty. She was already planning the interior of this apartment, in her mind she saw a lot of black and white photos, walls not covered in paint but in flowers and she planned on buying a sewing machine. For now, she was facing the outside world, holding a cup of instant coffee. She didn't have time or the money yet to buy a new coffee machine but as the instant coffee was not contributing to her happiness, she was thinking about getting a little pot and preparing Turkish coffee. Back where she grew up, a city a couple of hundred kilometers north-west from her new home, she had a couple of friends who introduced her to the art of making a proper Turkish coffee and even if she hadn't liked the taste of it in the beginning, she started to enjoy it after a while. Maybe she was just getting used to it, but whatever reason it was, this coffee turned out to be her favorite coffee, as it also brought a lot of warm memories to her wandering mind.

She didn't sleep much last night, as her apartment was close to another one, where she was hearing kids first running around, later, around what she assumed was bedtime for them, crying and screaming. She also heard a woman calling, "Martin! Please take the kids, I really have to work," and in her head she had made up a whole story about this family living so close to her without knowing each other at all. Well, how would they? She just moved in three days ago and hadn't talked to anyone else in this building block so far. She saw a lot of kids running around, some people skating and an ice cream truck stopping by. It seemed like a lively place, but for now she wasn't interested in the people. She only was interested in getting her life sorted, in finding a job to earn money and to stay out of trouble for as long as possible. 'Forever is a long time,' she thought by herself, 'but for as long as possible, that should work.'

Her mobile phone rang, she had set the alarm for 8:30 am but as she couldn't sleep, she had gotten up earlier, had a shower and put on a dress her mom made for her a few years ago, back when they were still talking. Even though she had mixed feelings about her mom, most of the time not very positive ones, she still loved the dress as it wasn't just all colorful and pretty but also made her body look really good and made her feel comfortable. It was important to feel and be comfortable today. It was an important day today, she had written a list with things to do the night before. She put down the empty mug, grabbed her backpack, phone and keys and closed the door from the outside.

LUIS SANCHEZ

PERU

After all, punctuality is something she considered one of her best characteristics. When she reviewed the to-do-list, it was clear where she had to continue – she had already had her cup of coffee:

1. Breakfast
2. Go to the work interview
3. Buy groceries
4. Continue unpacking the boxes in the apartment

While she went downstairs, focusing on the day ahead of her, she suddenly lifted her head, when the slight smell of chocolate reached her nose. Something that could have been unusual, but she realized quickly that it came from the ice cream seller in front of the house, who was saying goodbye to his family.

“See you later, honey, don’t forget; 6 pm kids football practice!” Mrs. Rossi said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there for sure,” Mr. Rossi replied.

“As if I haven’t heard that before. Good luck!”

This surprised Marie a little bit, considering the cold weather here at the moment, she would expect a low preference for ice cream this time of the year, an obvious conclusion for anyone who is always cold. ‘Maybe people are just different here,’ she thought as someone who hadn’t travelled a lot in her life. ‘What am I thinking? This does not need to bother me.’

And while she quieted her thoughts, she noted the ice cream man closing in on her.

“Good day and welcome to the building! My name is Facundo Rossi. I hope the neighborhood has surprised you. In a good sense of course!” he said.

“Good day and thanks. I’m Marie Müller. Well, I have just had two nights here so far, so it is not like I have seen much. But it is quiet, so that is nice for me,” she explained to him.

“You will see. Well, I’m running late, I wish you a good day!”

“Thanks, you too. I wish you the same.”

‘Nice neighbor,’ she thought to herself but she felt that something didn’t fit at all. A nice and happy person but at the same time he looked like he was wearing a mask.

Enough. You already have a lot to do. Stop thinking about other things and focus on the interview! She reminded herself as she heard the jingle of the ice cream truck fading away and the sound being replaced by a more pleasant early morning quietness. She had the conviction that today would be a great day, only a croissant could improve it.

“OK, I will pass by the bakery...”

**JOST ROSSEL & HANNAH KLEENE
GERMANY**

The bakery was a small family-owned business; it smelled of freshly roasted coffee and pastries. Marie let her eyes wander around the interior, which could have been put together by her own grandmother.

The place was crowded and Marie wondered whether she would make it in time to her job interview.

As she was finally served, the grouchy look on the barista's face told her that he had had a far less exciting day so far. As she needed to be awake and to quiet the wailing sound her stomach was producing, she ordered a black coffee and a croissant to-go. The barista more or less threw the purchase in her face and grumpily greeted the next customer.

The grandfather clock informed her that it was 8:40 am. With 20 minutes to spare until her interview started and only a five-minute walk to the place, Marie decided to sit down and take in the rustical atmosphere of the bakery. While she tried to get comfortable on the ancient chairs the place provided, her eyes fell on a young woman two tables from her.

Her mouth gaped a bit, as she tried to take in the beauty of the unknown woman. She had brown, curly, shoulder-length hair which framed her round, freckled face wonderfully. Mia – according to the woman's name-tag – frowned a bit as she tried to concentrate on the laptop in front of her. Marie noticed the lather lines around her mouth and the fine-lined tattoo – barely visible on Mia's shoulder.

Marie always always knew she liked women but actually acting on it and telling her mother were no possibilities for many years. Her mother's reaction to Marie's outing a few weeks ago was less than encouraging and since then she hasn't talked to her mother, quit her job, and moved into an apartment 300 kilometers away.

Marie glanced at the clock again – 8:44, still time until she had to get going...

“Get it together Marie,” she whispered to herself, “now or never.” But she didn’t move, her coffee and croissant long forgotten, she sat still and watched the women in front of her.

‘Maybe I don’t need to get groceries, if I get a dinner out of her,’ Marie thought to herself, ‘but probably she’s not even into women,’ she pondered as negative thoughts overcame her.

‘Confidence, confidence, ...’ Marie repeated in her head like a mantra.

8:49 – ‘New city, new luck’ she encouraged herself, blew a strand of hair from her face and stood up.

“Here we go...”

KATHRIN ANDERLOHR
GERMANY

So now Marie stood there, not being able to take a single step, completely frozen. She could hear her heartbeat loud and clear and if she didn’t know better, she was sure everyone else could hear it, too. She took a long slow breath but her whole body strived against this moment. Trying to focus she realized she was probably staring at Mia a little too long, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of her. The young woman looked up and her lips formed a beautiful smile reaching her blue eyes. A few seconds later, with Marie still gazing at her, her face turned to an expression of confusion mixed with wonder.

‘Oh God, oh God, what do I do now?!’ Marie panicked. She nodded as if she was reaffirming herself

and took one last breath before she stepped towards the table Mia was sitting at.

“Heeeyy...” she stuttered softly, being nervous, excited and proud of herself at once.

“Hey there!” Mia grinned. “I thought, I recognized you. You’re Marie, right?” Without waiting for an answer, she went on, “You’re in the neighborhood because of the interview, aren’t you? I’m Mia!” While she stood up, she pointed awkwardly to her nametag and now Marie recognized the company’s logo. Slowly Marie shook her head being overly aware of how moist her own hands were. Mia sensed the confusion and clarified.

“Sorry, I’m your potential supervisor, Mia Shepard, and I was just about to get back to the office starting today’s interviews. But maybe you can pick up your order and we can do it here?”

‘Do it?! Do what? Oh God, right! The coffee and croissant!’ Marie was mortified and totally overwhelmed with the situation. After a short “Be right back” she turned around, unable to comprehend what had just happened. Back at her table she took a long breath collecting herself and gathered her stuff to get back to Ms. Shepard. She was undeniably attracted to this woman but as if it wouldn’t be hard enough to ask somebody out, her counterpart could be her superior and so she was, unfortunately, off limits.

Both women sat down and briefly looked into each other’s eyes. There was a little sting there and Marie was absolutely sure Mia felt it too.

“Should we get started?” Mia asked. “I see you moved here from far, this could be the start of something great.”

And boy, she was right.

MAXWELL THURSTON

USA, NEW MEXICO

The disgruntled barista peered over at the two women and almost cracked a smile, sensing the awkward but undeniable connection between them. A flashing bulletin on the TV screen diverted his attention.

“The gang calling themselves *the gelatos* pulled off yet another successful heist,” the report read. The frown quickly returned to the barista’s face.

In the alley behind the Rossi house, the ice cream truck sat idle. “Tell him if he doesn’t get me my money by Friday, he’ll be the next flavor of the month!”

A hooded figure nodded and scurried away into the night. In the front seat of the truck, the mustachioed man gazed up at the house behind him feeling a twinge of regret, knowing his wife and children were blissfully unaware of his late-night transgressions. A twisted smile quickly returned to his face, however, when a man arrived carrying a bloated bag stamped on the side with a dollar symbol.

“Here it is, Boss.”

As he reached out of the truck for the bag, the mustachioed man was struck on the side of the head with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. In a daze, he turned to see the silhouette of a man in an apron illuminated by the shining headlights of a colorful truck. An unmistakable cheery jingle rang out into the night.

“There ain’t enough room in this town for two ice cream men!” the man proclaimed. “I know who you are, Facundo! Let’s settle this the old-fashioned way!”

Facundo sprang to his feet and wiped the drips of vanilla ice cream from the tip of his curled mustache. “I thought you would never return, Ben.”

The two men faced each other like an old west standoff. Then, in an instant, their hands darted to the ice cream scoops around their belts and the flavors started flying. Ben threw scoop after scoop, but to no avail. Facundo dodged and weaved, laughing maniacally as he hurled whole waffle cones filled with ice cream. Ben was being overwhelmed; he could not keep up with Facundo’s devilish speed. In a last-ditch attempt, Ben reached into the vat of mint chocolate chip ice cream (it was always his son’s favorite) and pulled out a perfectly rounded scoop. He catapulted the sugary treat and it struck the mustachioed man dead between the eyes. Facundo tumbled and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Ben could barely hear the police sirens closing in on the Rossi house as he drove away, humming triumphantly along to that cheery ice cream jingle. Finally, Ben pulled his ice cream truck into parking slot 309, opened his apartment door, and collapsed into his bed. Just before drifting to sleep, however, thumping music from the upstairs penthouse seemed to shake the entire apartment complex. What could be happening up there?

ELEANOR CADY
ENGLAND

Penny Miller turned the stereo volume to full blast. She liked it like that. The bass thudding through her body making her insides feel like an echo chamber. The sensation pushed out the stresses of the day, the anxiety and complex emotions she carried with her all of the time. The hollowness of the experience made her feel empty, and somehow this emptiness was calming.

It was coming up to midnight, the darkness of the summer night taking hold, with just a dim light haze out to the west. Penny poured herself a glass of whisky, grabbed the cigarettes and sat on the balcony of her penthouse apartment. Everything out there seemed calm, and oh, how she envied it. Being so high up she could make out the town. She could see the soccer pitch she had taken her nephews to earlier that afternoon, the local coffee shop with the barista, who prepared her take-out order every day, the street lamps with their flickering lights, all of it calmly sitting there in the dim twilight.

She took a deep inhale on the cigarette and then, puffed out a long, slow, trail of smoke, releasing the stresses of the day.

“Mindfulness, is this what it is?” she asked herself whilst the music pounded behind her. What had the doctors told her? Every time things got too much, when the flutter in her chest felt like it would jump out of her throat and she wanted to reach for that, oh so sweet, release of the pills hidden in a box under her bed, she tried to remember what the doctors

said. Mindfulness, keep busy, socialise, take a bath with some scented candles... What a load of bollocks. She knew she would cave.

But she had made a promise to Sarah. 'I'm doing it for you,' she thought. Because losing Sarah was the hardest thing she had had to deal with. The fights they had had when Sarah would come home and find Penny comatose on the floor, drugged up to her eyeballs on whatever she had snuck out of the pharmacy that day. Sarah left after the third time Penny had been admitted. She was done.

The hurt Penny first felt, led her to fill her life with whatever she could as a distraction. Well, didn't the doctors say to keep busy and have fun? So Penny went nuts, bought the ridiculous pink Chevrolet Corvette which sat in the drive, had blown all of her inheritance on the flashy penthouse with the ridiculous 60s' style interior and would throw wild weekend parties much to the annoyance of the neighbors. What a great time she was having!

But god, she missed Sarah. Trying to replace her with all this stuff was futile. So she had made the decision that she would really quit this for good. Because she loved her. Maybe they could get back together once Penny was clean. Get married or adopt some kids and start a family like Sarah always wanted to? The Jefferson family of seven in the apartment a few floors below always seemed happy to Sarah, maybe they could do that? God knows, Penny only tolerated her nephews and hated kids in general, but she would do it for Sarah if it meant having her back.

Penny allowed the music to swallow her whole as she looked out into the night, trying to avoid the nagging pull of the box under the bed.

“God, I should just throw it out!” she swore. She glanced meekly round, as if someone was watching her. “But maybe just one last one to say goodbye? To take the edge off, huh?”

But just as Penny went through the apartment towards the bedroom and her box of pleasures, there was a thud at her door.

RONJA WULFES
GERMANY

She looked through the peephole and immediately stumbled back a few steps, her breath stopping in her throat. The red vase that Sarah had given her fell to the floor with a clanging sound and shattered into glittering pieces, like fresh drops of blood on the white carpet. This time the knocking was more energetic. With shaky legs she staggered to the door and needed two attempts to grab the door handle. Two policemen stood in front of the door and blocked her only escape from this cursed penthouse.

“Ms. Miller?” asked the older of the two, his gaze hardened by years of experience. She licked her dry lips and nodded.

He held a snow-white document up to her face.
A search warrant.
Shit.

The cops squeezed past her into the apartment, whilst she was frozen in the hallway. But when the first drawer was opened, she started moving again.

Her gaze scurried in panic to her bed. The box. The box with the stolen drugs and fake bookkeeping. The only evidence any judge would need. Slowly she approached her bed, next to which was the red nightstand.

“Where are you going?” The young man looked at her suspiciously but it was obvious that he did not see any threat in her. He still considered himself as indestructible as a teenager.

Penny pointed to the little water bottle. “May I?”

He just nodded.

She lifted the bottle but it slipped out of her wet palms, landed with a dull thump on the floor and rolled under the bed. She quickly muttered an apology and sank to her knees to reach for it. There it was, in the middle of the dust. The metal box, with numerous dents and scratches from Sarah’s attempts to destroy it.

Her breath echoed in her ears as she looked up at the policemen one last time. Then she grabbed the box and jumped up, spun around and sprinted around the corner, out of the bedroom into the empty hallway. The men yelled and quickly took off in pursuit, but she knew this building better than they did. Penny pushed open the door to the stairwell and took two steps at a time, but her feet could not find a foothold on the bare concrete. The policemen’s heavy boots, on the other hand, echoed in the stairwell and came ever closer. When she reached the ground floor, she rammed her shoulder into the heavy steel door and ran into the burning daylight.

Liam stood on his balcony and looked down into the depths. He saw Julia again, her upper body in an unnatural position, her blonde hair mixed with the red blood from her temple. Over and over again. Bitterness spread across his tongue.

A loud bang took him out of his memory and he looked up. A woman ran out of the building in panic, straight towards the pink Chevrolet. But she was too slow. Two policemen were hot on her heels. The woman seemed to notice her hopelessness and dropped something shiny into the thick hedge in front of the parking lot, before she was brutally torn to the ground. A scream tore the evening peace apart, desperate sobs replacing the birdsong. Shortly afterwards, her head disappeared behind the darkened window of a police car.

Liam stared at the spot where he had seen the shiny object fall. "What was that?" he muttered to himself as he slowly groped his way through the damp earth. Suddenly, he hit a solid object and pulled it out. A metal box no bigger than a book. With wet palms he operated the opening mechanism. The lid popped open with a quiet click and provided a view of the contents. Crumpled documents covered the floor and numerous pills in all colors shimmered like candies in the evening sun.

NIC ZEIMET
LUXEMBOURG

Liam stared at the content of the box in confusion. He could not make sense of it and was oblivious to what he was holding in his hands. As he kept staring

at the vivid colors, they suddenly appeared to merge together in a spiraling motion, and images of him and his sister playing in their shared childhood bedroom as their parents watched, formed in his head. He tried to suppress the memories immediately, as he had done for the past couple of years. But this time the unwanted thoughts didn't immediately disappear. It was as if he was trying to put a lid on an erupting volcano. He struggled for a few seconds longer until he finally let his emotions burst out, for the first time in a long time. Feelings of guilt and helplessness overcame him, mixed with loneliness as well as anger. His eyes filled up with tears and, as his knees gave in, he started crying uncontrollably.

After he had calmed down, Liam noticed that someone was standing behind him. He turned around and looked up into the deep blue eyes of a bearded man, whose facial expression showed a level of compassion and empathy that Liam had never seen before, and all his pain vanished in an instant. He recognized him as a resident of the building he could see from their living room. The only interaction the two of them had ever had was when they passed each other a couple of times on the street, Liam on his way to school and the man out walking his dog, and exchanged a short nod of the head. And yet, inexplicably, Liam could not help but feel as if there was a deep understanding between them, that he could safely entrust all his fears to this man. As Liam was still pondering how this was possible, he realized that he was back on his feet.

"If you ever feel the need to talk, you can come to me," the man spoke, while putting a hand on Liam's

shoulder in a gentle and comforting way. Then he turned around and walked away.

Liam watched his new friend until he turned a corner and saw him throw something in a trash bin. Liam looked down in his hands and noticed that he was no longer holding the metal box.

It was not until a few days later, that he decided to take him up on the offer and went over to visit the old man. He hesitated just for a brief moment before he resolutely knocked on the door.

“Come in! The door is open,” he heard a familiar voice say from inside. As he followed the direction, from where he thought he heard the man speak, he took a quick look around. What immediately caught Liam’s eye was the large amount of books that were scattered everywhere in a chaotic yet somewhat still organized way, as well as a considerable amount of framed diplomas hanging on the walls of the living room.

JOHNNY LORANG
LUXEMBOURG

“I will be with you in a second,” said the voice in the neighboring room. Liam made a few steps towards one of the shelves, so that he could scan some of the captions on the book spines. Most volumes were dull-looking, unwieldy anthologies evincing complicated titles like *Exploring new frontiers of research in matrix mechanics as part of quantum field theory* and other scientific sounding inscriptions. Liam’s view wandered to the framed diplomas on the wall. He noticed they had gathered a considerable amount of dust. Something which he did not catch on the

books. The name which was prominently featured on all of the diplomas was *Zampanò*.

“Until not so long ago, I wanted to fill the whole wall with those,” said the man who now entered the room, “but I needed to realize that they are just pieces of paper. Funny when you think about it, isn’t it?”

Liam turned around and glanced at the friendly face of the man he had encountered a few days earlier. Zampanò smiled reassuringly and eyed Liam for a few seconds. “You have the same eyes as your sister.”

At this moment, a wave of questions flooded Liam’s mind, leaving no room to form a clear thought, let alone saying anything sensible. Zampanò must have apprehended this since he placed his hand on Liam’s shoulder and offered him to take a seat in one of the two leather armchairs in the middle of the room.

“Your sister was remarkably talented. She was talented like no other student I have ever had,” Zampanò continued. “She could intuitively understand what made no sense to others, even after they studied the topic for years. I wish I could have spent more time with her. Her death came too soon for all of us.”

Liam’s thoughts were still jumping around, while he was trying to get a hold of the situation. ‘Who did Zampanò mean when he was talking about *all of us*?’ Zampanò’s face took on a slightly concerned look. “I know that this is a lot to process, but you will understand soon enough.” A mild smile returned to his face. “Have you ever heard of quantum entanglement?”

Liam shook his head so Zampanò went on. "I bet you know the phrase, which says that everything is connected. Well, it is true. Not only because we are all humans and share large parts of our DNA. It is true in a much more fundamental form."

Liam's mind was slowly calming down as he was focusing on Zampanò's deep voice and trying to follow his expositions.

"This does not only carry numerous philosophical implications, but also allows for powerful practical applications. As you probably have guessed by now, your sister and I were working on something in that direction. Would you like to see it?"

**ALI SOUKIEH
SYRIA**

Liam, who's never been a 'science person', was hesitant to say yes. Actually, unlike his sister, he has always been interested in arts and humanities and always struggled with mathematics and science. However, he did not wish to disappoint Zampanò, who was looking at him with bright eyes full of excitement - like a child eager to tell his parents about his first day at school. Moreover, he was more interested in hearing what Zampanò had to say about his sister. Liam felt like he had no choice but to acquiesce in Zampanò's expectations, however, as he was about to nod in agreement, they heard a knock at the door.

"I'll get the door," said Zampanò. At the door was a young woman with smooth rose-tinged ivory skin and midnight-black hair that tumbled over her shoulders.

“What can I do for you today?” asked Zampanò.

“I left my clothes to dry on the balcony and a gust of wind blew away my yellow sundress. Luckily, it landed on your balcony. May I pick it up, please?” she asked.

“Sure, come in,” answered Zampanò.

As she entered the room, her ice cold blue eyes met Liam’s, but she swiftly turned her gaze away. She rushed to the balcony to collect her sundress, thanked Zampanò, and left.

“Who was that?” Liam asked.

“That was Catherine, one of my students and a previous colleague of your sister.”

Liam knew that he had seen her somewhere before, but he could not remember when or where – and her behavior confirmed his suspicion.

“You know what? Let’s sit outside,” suggested Zampanò.

The balcony was just a small concrete ledge with round smooth edges and a rusty brown rail, but it was Zampanò’s little oasis. The warm sunshine balanced the cold breeze, and Zampanò filled whatever space the table and two chairs did not occupy with potted plants; verbena, marigolds, petunias and begonias.

“This balcony used to overlook the city square,” Zampanò said. “Your sister and I used to meet here to discuss our projects. We would often lose ourselves observing the hustle and bustle of the city... at least until this new hotel blocked the view... Such are the beautiful things in life; they never last,” he continued. “Your sister used to be one of the key persons involved in our projects. She was very passionate about our research and would often stay at the labs longer than everybody else. I wish I had

stopped her from overworking herself. If I did... maybe... just maybe... she would still be with us today. Not a day passes without me wondering how things would have been if I had been a more responsible supervisor," he added with regret.

LENA REIFFS

GERMANY

Liam was confused. What he had learned about his sister today didn't make sense to him. How could it be possible that Julia kept all these meetings and hours working in the labs a secret? How could his parents not have known about it? How could he have not known about it? Or did his parents know and didn't tell him? What if Nora knew about it?

He was tearing his hair without noticing. No... she would have told him about it, *that* he was sure about.

After leaving Zampanò's apartment, he first headed home but before reaching the staircase, he changed his mind and turned around. He needed space, not the confining walls of their apartment, where almost everything reminded him of Julia and where his mother would be waiting for him and would ask dozens of questions. So, he turned around, crossed the parking lot and headed for Queen Street.

Somewhen, he reached a small park and sat down on a bench. There he was now, wondering about the things Zampanò had just told him.

Julia's interest in physics he had known about. She sometimes couldn't stop talking about new theories she had just learned, ignoring completely that neither his parents nor Liam were able to follow her

thoughts. But Liam always believed she had learned about it at school, he never would have imagined that she was visiting a kind of private quantum physics class. Even after talking to Zampanò, he thought it was very strange and did not quite understand the nature of this class, but if it was true, and Julia had been part of this class, why lie about it?

When he had asked Zampanò that question, Liam noticed that the old man was looking at the floor before he answered.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Liam needed to talk to Zampanò again. The other things he told him, that Julia was staying hours in the labs, tiring herself and becoming careless with her well-being, were things Liam - thinking about it - had noticed himself in the last months before the accident. But he always thought his sister was a little bit too much into parties or something.

He was tearing his hair again.

And then this girl, Catherine, why did she look so familiar? He closed his eyes. This black hair, why did he remember this hair?

And then he recollected picture fragments of a girl with midnight-black hair running away from the crossroad where the accident happened.

He needed to talk to somebody. He called the only person he wanted to speak to right now, Nora.

CAROLINE ARENDS
GERMANY

Nora layed lost in thought in her bathtub. Next to her, a glass of red wine. The soft music and the dim light gave the scene a touch of melancholy. It was

true, she had told her family about her job loss - and they did take it more positively than she had feared. But the feeling of having failed remained. Besides, she was pretty sure that her parents were disappointed but just too compassionate to let it show.

Her cell phone vibrated: *Julia's brother calling* - but the soft noise did not reach her. She thought about what she actually wanted to do with her life. And how it could have happened that she had dropped out of her promising studies and lost a job that was not challenging, yes, that she didn't even like. After Julia's death she had vowed not to waste her life. It's too short - much too short! And yet here she was now, sitting in this bathtub, unhappy with her decisions. 'I must change something!'

The cooking! It was the only thing that gave her real joy. But what does that mean in concrete terms? Start another education? In her 20s, she thought it was a bit late. And anyway: wasn't it Julia who had always been more talented in it and who had rather pulled her along? Did she even have what it takes?

Nora became dizzy. The mirror and the windows were all steamed up from the hot fumes that were spreading throughout the bathroom. Very slowly she got up, grabbed her pink bathrobe with the grey bunnies on it and wiped part of the mirror clean so that she could see her blurred face. A bright flashing light next to her brought her back to the here and now. *Julia's brother calling* was flashing on her cell phone again. She took a deep breath, dried her hands and picked up the phone.

“Liam? Hello?” At the far end, she heard faint sobbing. “Liam! Are you okay? Are you alright?”

Overwhelmed by his emotions, tears welled up on his face before he even heard her voice. He wanted to pull himself together, sort himself out and not cry like a baby. He never used to cry. But since his sister died, this happened to him often - too often for his taste.

“Hi, Nora. Thanks for picking up. I’m totally whacked...”

CATHARINA BLANKE
GERMANY

Sunbeams fell into the flat of the young woman living on the fourth floor of the big apartment complex. They filled the rooms with the soft colors only morning light creates, while caressing photos of happy people and sketches of tattoo ideas and astronauts all over the walls, which have all gone unnoticed for quite a while.

The cup of freshly made coffee in her hands filled the room with the smell of a new day, mixing with the faded smell of the vase of already dried flowers on the table. The coffee had turned cold, before she turned her attention away from the view outside of the wide opened window. Her thoughts were lost between the clouds in the sky, as she enjoyed the first morning without deadlines in her back, since what felt like ages to her. All she did was to follow the birds flying around in the wind with her eyes.

Quietly she stood there until the muffled sound of a guitar brought her back into reality. The kid next door must be practicing again before heading off to

school. It had annoyed her so many times, when he was playing on the balcony, while she had felt stuck in her room, stuck with piles of work she felt she would never finish in time, stuck in her life that for too long felt like a never-ending treadmill.

All in all, it was a rather good moment to start into a new story and to see how hers connected to the stories of all the lives taking place around her.

“It sounds so beautiful... he really improved,” she realized and felt bad for a moment, as she recalled how several times before, she had hoped he would just lose interest in the instrument. Now she was glad he kept going. Maybe she should go and tell him that some day...

Once the music from the flat next to hers caught her attention, she could not help but notice dim voices from behind the walls on the other side of her room. A door closed somewhere, and the sound of steps passed the main door of her apartment, only to fade away down the corridor. The house slowly woke up, while the young woman was standing calmly in the early sun with the cold cup of coffee in her hands. Today she could enjoy the signs of life around her that often felt unbearable in the hurry her life had been in the past weeks and even months. For a second she wondered how fast the human perspective could change. How easy it was, to feel isolated from the rest of the world in times of stress or sadness. And how natural it felt to her this morning, to fall back in love with the small things and the big house, after the weight has been lifted off her shoulders. With a smile she turned away from the window to make herself a new cup of coffee and turn on the radio. After all, today she could take all the time she

wanted for this and she already missed the smell of fresh coffee again.

“I should go and get new flowers today.”

MARION GUEDOU

FRANCE

Juliette felt the urge to go out of her small studio. The only window the apartment had was a patio door opening onto the balcony and today's heat was hitting her studio strongly, oppressing her mind. In addition, George, a young budding guitarist living in the apartment next door, was playing for too long now and speeded up her headache. Quickly, she took a few coins from the desk, her keys, and slammed the door closed. Last week's experience of getting stuck in the old and rusty elevator between the 3rd and 4th floor for two hours ruled in favor of the stairs that she ran down with drive. She pushed the heavy front door open and a hot draught took her by surprise as she rushed into the entrance hall.

Juliette first passed in front of the bakery and saw Marie Müller by the shop window sitting at a table with another woman. She had met Marie yesterday while she was going out for groceries. She was talking with Facundo Rossi and heard Marie had just arrived in town. But no coffee or pastries for Juliette today, she needed something cold and refreshing to cool her down. Having made her decision, she walked towards Ben's ice cream truck. She crossed Leonard Cohen street and took the first right. The ice cream truck was there parked aside the gate of the George Floyd public park. Ben greeted Juliette

with his usual “Salut, ma cocotte!” because of that one French movie he had seen once.

Since he had started his business, Juliette had stopped buying supermarket ice cream to only buy ice cream at Ben’s truck to support him in his new career. As usual, Juliette took a few minutes to decide which flavor she wanted, even though red peach sorbet was her final word as almost always.

It was 3:45 pm and Juliette didn’t realize a car had just pulled into the street, driving way too fast. She also didn’t realize that the left front window of that same car was open, showing a man wearing a ski mask on his head and a gun in his left hand. When she realized, it was already too late.

ZSUNI BLAHO
HUNGARY

Juliette heard the loud noise before she felt the sharp pain. She hit the pavement. The shock of the landing all but forgotten as the burning pain paralyzed her. She had never heard a sound like the insistent bark of the gun. Time stood still, it was chaotic, deafening, senseless. Thoughts fled her mind, leaving only the all-consuming pain behind. She didn’t know how long it took until the thunderous gunfire was replaced by the sound of screeching car tires as the gunman drove away.

Desperate screams of panic and pain were slowly fading as Juliette’s mind went black.

Slowly, she regained consciousness. For a while, Juliette didn’t know why she was on her belly, on the pavement, lying in a lukewarm puddle. She tried to

get up but nothing moved. Suddenly, pain hit her and she blacked out again. Sounds of wailing sirens chased her consciousness back to herself. With the return of her consciousness, came the memory of the shooting and the pain.

Someone turned her gently onto her side. Juliette concentrated, battling through the stabbing burning ache. Ben's worried face came into focus.

"Juliette, are you hurt? Oh my God! You've been hit!"

"Ben... it hurts..." Juliette started to sob quietly. Her hard won concentration shattered. Pain was consuming every fibre of her body.

"It's gonna be okay! Help is here! Hold on, ma c-cotte!" Ben saw Juliette's consciousness fade as the blood formed a bigger and bigger puddle underneath her. He tore off his apron and pressed it on her wounded abdomen.

"Help!" he screamed desperately.

A short woman in paramedic uniform ran towards him carrying a bag. "Sir, please move your hand away. I need to see what I'm dealing with." The woman's calm mannered voice made him a little bit more relaxed, so he did as he was asked. The paramedic checked the wound with efficient movements, but she looked worried. Ben's calmness didn't last long. By the time the woman finished the examination and started to place some bandages and medical gadgets on Juliette, he was back to full panic.

"Phil!" the woman shouted, "Bring the stretcher! We need to take her to the hospital!"

Another two paramedics ran to Juliette's side carrying a stretcher. They placed her on it, lifted her and loaded her into an ambulance. With the woman in

the back and one of the guys driving the vehicle, they were gone in a blink.

Ben looked around at the bullet-ridden ice cream truck. In the chaos of the park, emergency personnel rushed around treating wounds and asking questions. He looked down at his hands. Juliette's blood was slowly drying on them, on his thin trousers, on the ground, on his discarded apron.

He couldn't do this again! All that blood reminded him of his daughter Julia. He lost her, and it destroyed his life. Wrecked his family. It took him three years to come back and try to fix what he messed up. His son Liam didn't even want to look at him. Ben thought, if he moved back to the same apartment building - where they used to live as a family - he would have a chance to make amends, to be close to him. But Liam pretended like Ben didn't exist. His wife Linda didn't let him visit their old home. He didn't argue, he deserved the scorn. But still Ben hoped, one day he would be forgiven for leaving them to cope with the grief. Julia would be the same age now as Juliette, if she was still alive.

All that blood. He hoped she would make it. He would never forget her pale bloodless face as she looked up to him. She didn't look anything like his Julia but in his nightmares he saw this expression on his daughter's face. After years of therapy, he made peace. Ben knew, he couldn't have saved his daughter. But this, here and now, was most likely his fault.

"Sir? Has a paramedic looked at you yet?" asked a gentle voice. Ben shook himself out of his dark

thoughts and looked up. A police officer was standing a couple of meters away from him.

"I'm alright. But my neighbor was shot. I don't even know where they took her," said Ben.

"I need to ask you a few questions. Then I can find out for you what happened to her. Let's sit on that bench."

Ben walked to the bench on shaky legs.

The officer sat next to him. "Sir, my name is Officer Dave Callahan. You are the owner of that ice cream truck?"

"Yes, my name is Benjamin Turner, I live in apartment building 309."

"Can you tell me what happened here?"

JONNA HÄGGLUND

SWEDEN

Ben told Officer Dave Callahan that a car drove by at very high speed: "The left window was open and, and..."

In his mind he was thinking about all the things that had just occurred and when he tried to speak his words failed him. He looked at his hands, Juliette's blood had now dried completely.

"So you saw a car driving at very high speed with the left front window open. Did you see how many people there were in the car?"

"There was a man, a man was sitting in the driver's seat with, with... He had..." Ben broke into tears. Everything had happened so fast and all Ben could think of was Juliette's pale face.

"I understand that this is very hard for you Mr. Turner, but we need your help. Can you tell us something more?"

The police officer talked to Ben with a calm but earnest voice, but Ben couldn't answer. It was just too much. All this reminded him of Julia. His beautiful daughter. Thoughts spun in Ben's head. But all he could do was to sit on the bench, staring at his blood covered hands as tears were streaming down his face.

After a while, Officer Dave Callahan's phone rang. It was a witness who called. The witness had seen the whole occurrence.

"The reason why I paid attention was because I recognized the car. It was an old dark blue BMW. The car slowed down close to Ben's ice cream truck. Then I heard a shot, and at the same time the car was driving away really fast!"

"Did you see the driver of the car?"

"No, neither the driver nor any passenger in the back seat."

"In which direction did the car drive?"

"The car followed the street and then turned left onto Leonard Cohen street and then I didn't see it anymore."

"Okay. You said you recognized the car, why?"

"The reason why I recognized the car was, because a friend of mine usually drives that car," said Zampànò with a slightly dark voice as he was ashamed.

It was 4:25 pm, lots of curious people had stopped at the crime scene, wondering what had just happened. The police worked hard to make the crowd disappear. Ben was still sitting on the bench with his bloody hands in his lap. Who would do this? Who would shoot a young lady, in broad daylight, in the middle of the street? Why Juliette? What had she done to someone that made her a victim? Ben

couldn't understand that his cocotte just left in an ambulance covered in her own blood. Just as Officer Callahan was on his way to check up on Ben, Ben suddenly screamed out: "It must have been Liam!"

"What do you mean?" Officer Callahan asked.

"The person that shot Juliette must have been Liam!"

**MARVIN S.
GERMANY**

"Make sure no one interrupts us," Officer Dave Callahan said to his colleagues. They were still busy making the crowd disappear. A hard job since more and more people were gathering around the crime scene. Within a few minutes the whole neighborhood came together. 'It is always tragedies that bring people together,' Officer Dave Callahan thought. He sat down next to Ben who struggled for words.

"Take a deep breath," he said with a soothing voice. "Who is Liam?"

Ben did as he was told. While he was talking, the number of people around endlessly increased. From everywhere curious bystanders converged as if someone was giving away ice cream for free. No one realized the person who was – first slowly, later more quickly – moving in the opposite direction, away from the crime scene. The face covered by a scarf, only long blond hair falling out of the hood of her sweater revealed it was a woman. Half way between the crowd and a nearby crossroad she fetched her smartphone from her pocket and frantically dialed a number. It only took a few seconds until she heard the voice of a young man at the end of the

line. Not paying attention to what he said she screamed into the phone: "Your father knows it was you! Wait for me at Leonard Cohen street!"

Without saying goodbye, she hung up and turned around the corner, her eyes still fixed on her smartphone while her thumb was moving on the touchscreen. Finally, she crossed the street and sneaked into an inner courtyard. Right at the end of it, hidden behind old trash cans and straggling bushes, the old dark blue BMW was parked.

"What are we supposed to do?" Liam asked when she arrived. Beads of sweat poured over his forehead. But the woman did not reply. Instead of that, she went to the passenger door, opened it and caught the gun. It was still lying on the passenger seat.

"I disperse the gun, you let the car disappear," she explained. "We meet at the airport in two hours. We need to leave the country."

Liam was obviously confused.

"On the way over here, I booked a flight for us. I just picked the first aircraft that was available." She waved her smartphone and showed him the tickets. Liam checked the destination, but only the IATA Airport Code was displayed.

"What does HND stand for?"

"Haneda," she replied.

Liam still questioningly frowned.

"Tokyo International Airport, my son."

His mother disappeared with the gun around the next corner while Liam stood confused in front of the car.

“Tokyo,” he asked himself, “why Tokyo?” And where did his mother come from? How did she know about everything? He had a huge amount of questions, all mixed up in his head. Once again, it was his mother who had to save him from his own actions, he couldn’t believe it.

Liam took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. He had to get away from the crime scene as quickly as possible and get rid of the car. He got in and drove away deliberately, always keeping an eye on the pedestrians and cars on the road in case someone was following him. His heart was beating like crazy and sweat was running down his neck. Despite the circumstances, he knew exactly where to go and what to do, after all it was not the first time that he found himself in such a situation.

Liam got to the highway and drove there for ten minutes until he turned right. Old, run-down houses appeared, the road was eerily empty and quiet. Only two old men were sitting in old, white plastic chairs in front of a kiosk, smoking cigarettes. He turned right again, drove along a deserted road and came to a halt at its end. In front of him was his buddy Miguel’s junkyard.

Liam got out of the car, put on his sunglasses and went to the entrance. A man with light grey hair, heavily tanned and tattooed greeted him. It was Miguel.

"I need you to make the car disappear for me," Liam told Miguel. "Shred the plates and trash it. And I need you to call me a cab, I need to get to the airport as soon as possible."

"Everything fine, man?" Miguel asked.

"Yeah, there were a few problems, but everything's fine, just take care of the car," Liam answered.

Miguel sent two of his employees to deal with Liam's problem while Liam and Miguel waited at the entrance for the taxi. When the taxi arrived, the two men hugged each other.

"I'll send you a refund in a few days, don't look for me. I'll get back to you as soon as it's safe," Liam said and got into the car.

"Where are we going?" the taxi driver asked.

"To the airport."

ANTONIA THAMM
GERMANY

Bertha looked out of her small kitchen window and saw a plane high up in the air leaving a long white trail in the sky. Where these people might be heading, she wondered. She remembered the excitement of sitting in a plane as if it was yesterday. Knowing that you will get off the plane in a completely different place than you entered it from, not knowing what the time ahead will bring. She looked around her kitchen and living room. Various small little decorations reminded her of past holidays, big and small travel adventures. She smiled, enjoying the feeling of contentment that ran through her body when she looked at these testimonies of her active and adventurous life.

Nowadays, she did not feel up to the challenge anymore. Exploring, walking all day, sleeping in unfamiliar beds, being outside in any weather. She was too old for that now. These days, looking through her photo albums while stroking her cats gave her all the pleasure she wanted in her old days. She looked down when she felt one of her cats roam through her legs and around her ankles.

“Mr. Carlson, are you hungry already? It’s not dinner until another 25 minutes.”

She picked him up and gave him a soft cuddle and a stroke behind his left ear that made him purr. She sat down next to Lucy, a beautiful red tabby cat that was quite shy with other people but completely relaxed around Bertha. She could even scratch her belly without fearing to be hissed at by Lucy.

She turned on the TV to see if any good documentaries were on. She loved to learn about new exotic animals and nature phenomena. Only last week, she saw a great show about ants and their world-wide war that was going on directly underneath our feet, so to say. It was absolutely fascinating to see what complex societies ants are able to build and what strategies they have developed over the past thousands and thousands of years. Her sister shared her fascination for nature and animals and during their regular card evenings, they told each other the newest stories they had heard and what latest videos they had watched about the mantis shrimp that in fact was neither a mantis nor a shrimp. She loved those evenings, playing cards, exchanging stories, sharing a decent bottle of wine and making up the rules to the game as they went. They always laughed a lot.

When she opened the first can of cat food, the others gathered around her feet quickly. All six of them, awaiting their dinner feast as if they had not eaten in days. Although they got fed three times a day! Mr. Carlson and Lucy were as always the most eager ones while Fred, Wilfred and Willy laid down next to Bertha's feet confident that they would get their share. Only Pussy, the large grey Maine Coon cat was cheeky enough to jump onto the nearby chair to have a better view over the process. She looked at each one of them for a second and smiled gratefully.

SELINA MELCHIOR
GERMANY

Anita woke up to the steward offering pieces of watermelon to the passengers. Normally, she would cherish the sweet red crisp but high up over the ground she felt far from her normal self. She wiggled her fingers, stiff from gripping the raspy cover of her passport in her sleep. Yawning, she was left with the feeling as if someone had just watched her plane from the ground and had thought of her. Exactly her. As if.

She started to hum *Leaving On A Jet Plane* and felt the long gone but familiar emptiness creep up. She pushed it away. She wanted to collect memories now to return back to them later when she was old and would live with at least six cats. Feeling pulled back and tied to where she set out from, but, at the same time, anxious to experience what else there could be to life. It would be the first and last flight of her life, so she wanted to make it worthwhile.

"Watermelon?"

“Yes, please,” she said and looked out of the window.

Somewhere down there, someone might be occupied with letting go of cold and ever-so-slightly sweet memories. The watermelon was cold and fresh. It occurred to her how crisp and new this journey might be. The overview from up here gave her comfort and an odd sense of power.

A few kilometers below her, the cat Pussy had just jumped on a chair to oversee old Bertha preparing food for her and her five cat mates.

The old lady moved with the elegance of flesh and bones that had weathered many years in a dance between airy, melancholic and hopelessly optimistic. The dark wooden kitchen floor, where Pussy’s friends were eating now, was a scuffed witness of the apartment’s inhabitants, their claws constantly drawing new lines and scratches and creating a unique work of art in the most unlikely place. Only from up here Pussy could see the whole picture. The light was warm where the sun hit the specks of dust. Some were still swirling around her where her body had moved through the air while jumping up, slowly finding back to their usual pace. Pussy loved sitting up here and watching the scenery, never changing but still different every day in the most subtle ways.

Today was different as well. Even though the food was tempting, Pussy lingered for a seemingly endless moment to take in the atmosphere that had just changed slightly. It was like a sudden moment of remembering had shifted the composition of the air around them. If Bertha had been contently resting before and smiling to herself while looking at her

furry friends, now, a worry line had appeared right above her right eye.

SARAH TORNBERG
FINLAND

A certain dark thought slithered its way into Bertha's mind. As she was watching her beloved cats having a feast, she could not help but think of something she had buried deep inside, something she had tried not to think about for the longest of time. The memories felt almost foreign, as if someone else had lived through the experiences, witnessed it all. But no, they were her memories, her difficult decisions she had to make many years ago.

Bertha made her way back to the living room. As she was passing by multitudes of happy memories in the form of photographs, she glanced at one particular small photo frame on the shelf. It seemed as if she had shrunk a little bit, as she reached for the old photograph and sat down on her armchair. She sighed again, and her face showed a range of emotions. Grief, sadness, maybe even shame? The black-and-white photograph was that of younger Bertha, with curled hair and wearing lipstick. She was looking straight into the camera lens, very relaxed and with a bright smile on her face. Next to her there was a happy looking man who had his arm around Bertha and twinkling eyes locked on her.

As Bertha was falling deeper into her thoughts looking at the photograph, one of the cats jumped on her lap breaking the moment. Wilfred demanded attention and Bertha scratched his ear with an abstracted

smile. Even after her husband had unexpectedly died many, many years ago, she had still managed to build a fulfilling life for herself. Bertha had travelled, studied, and bought this magnificent apartment for herself; she had done everything she could ever imagine doing, yet there was one thing overshadowing her successful life.

Wilfred fell asleep on Bertha's lap as she petted him with calm strokes. The elderly lady's breathing became more superficial and her jawline tightened as she thought of a child she had given away after her husband died – the child had been only three years old. Bertha allowed herself to think about this child, as the heaviness on her chest grew and almost felt unbearable. What kind of a woman had that little girl become? Did she have a family of her own? Was she happy? Bertha wondered if she would even recognize her child if she would walk past her on the street.

RYAN PISUENA
USA, CALIFORNIA

Bertha gazed upon her feline companion, whilst feeling his warm pelt through her fingers. His physical presence comforted her whenever she would get caught in her own thoughts. Bertha continued to ponder on how her daughter was doing in life. Where was she in the world right now? What things was she into? Did she find a good partner to spend life with? How many kids did she have?

The visual image of her holding two beautiful grandchildren in her arms took her out of her train of thought and back to reality. The idea of having

grandchildren satisfied something deep inside of her, the mere thought giving her as much joy, even more, than having happy, warm Wilfred on her lap. On the other hand, the thought reminded her of her age, and how much time had gone by since her travels, adventures and triumphs as a young woman full of ambition. She grabbed Wilfred and put him down on the ground. She swiped her lap of his stray pelt hair and slowly got to her feet. She moved at a snail's pace towards her picture with her late husband, while anxiety crept over her. She grabbed the frame that contained the beautiful image of a younger Bertha and the handsome figure of her late husband. Bertha took another moment to study the picture, to gaze upon a different moment in her life, and she began to ask herself:

'What were these two envisioning life to be like right now?'

At surface level, Bertha believed she had accomplished everything. She had attained a lifetime of adventures, a career many envied, and a beautiful apartment adorned with the trophies and achievements of a life well lived. However, she knew deep inside that pain was holding her back and that the lovely people in the picture she was holding would urge her to move past it.

Move on to new adventures, to new horizons, and even the possibility of bumping into her daughter and her theoretical grandchildren later on. Bertha had seen many things but she knew in her advanced age that the world was too big to be explored in one lifetime, and the notion of attempting to do so anyway sparked something new in her.

She gazed back at her cats, and then scanned the room around her. Her feline companions and this piece of real estate she was living in provided her with an adequate level of comfort in this stage of her life, but she realized that maybe she and her cats were ready for a new phase of the journey.

ANDREAS THAMM

GERMANY

When she got out of her old, so beloved camper van, she no longer remembered the end of yesterday evening. In a mist of various multi-toxic substances, a familiar roar in her head slowly fell silent. The first verse of a Lewis Carroll poem *Jabberwocky* in her mind still echoed.

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe*

She should have killed her friend's husband for a long time. The judgment would have been profound hubris and eternal oblivion. Mitigating circumstances as requested by the public prosecutor were rejected by her. Aren't we all concerned? But the reason to live is simple - keep your DNA. From her grandparents to the children not yet born, everything suddenly seemed clear to her. A flash of lightning in her head told her that everyday heroines were needed, but the following thunder evaporated her philosophical thoughts and brought her back to a world in which her helper syndrome was not valued. For her, being optimistic meant being robust to the adversi-

ties of life, accepting coincidences and loving them. That was not her state of mind. She had an illusion of control and greatly underestimated obstacles.

This was one of the reasons why she could hardly help herself, let alone others. She believed that each other's concessions were always more painful than her own. She was wrong. It's just the asymmetry of the losses.

And yet she was lucky enough to have friends and not be ashamed to ask for help. As she climbed the stairs to Bertha's apartment, she decided again to change her life and become a better person.

Finding her mother's address hadn't been easy and there was no question that she would disappoint her. Only three floors left...

DOMINIK WAIDE
GERMANY

Only about 20m beeline away, Bertha sorted her cards and looked with an impish face towards her sister. Her new set of cards was marvelous. She stroked over Willy's back who was sitting on her lap while she was waiting for her sister Claudia to make the next move. One more move before she could play the cards cementing her triumph. One of the other cats meowed from another corner of the living room. Claudia scratched her forehead and exhaled dissatisfied. In this round, luck was not on her side, but she enjoyed playing cards anyway. To her it meant mostly spending time with her sister, although she of course enjoyed winning. Some things just never change, whether one is nine or 99 years old. She put two cards on the table and Bertha immediately responded by adding two cards on top. Bertha

laughed and made a victorious move with her arms. Claudia replied with a congratulating gesture.

Claudia shuffled the cards and Bertha looked around. Her eyes were caught by the photo album which was still placed on the coffee table from when she was browsing through it earlier that day. Her thoughts switched immediately to her daughter and the potential grandchildren she had to think of today.

“Claudia,” she said and had to pause for a moment, “I had some thoughts today. I don’t know where it was coming from, but I was wondering how Emily was doing.”

Claudia looked puzzled at Bertha and did not know how to react.

“I was painting the visual image of her holding two beautiful children in her arms, my grandchildren,” she whispered while a single tear was slowly finding its way down to her upper lip. “Do you think I could find her? Or imagine her ringing at my doorbell any moment. Maybe standing there with her two children and her husband. Would she smile or just slap me and cry?”

Claudia moved on the sofa to get closer to Bertha, put her arms arounds her sister’s shoulders. “Sometimes we make decisions in life just to get rid of the immediate pressure, to feel the instant relief. What we often don’t take into account is the future weight we have to carry because of deciding that way.”

In the following conversation, Bertha explained to Claudia how she thought about starting to search for her daughter and Bertha felt better talking to someone about it and getting some mental support. It was

a moment in which the two sisters felt very close to each other. Close in a way they had not felt in years.

After a while, Claudia suggested continuing with the cards to turn away from this topic and cheer her sister up. Claudia was just distributing the cards when it knocked at the apartment door.

EVI HAKALA
FINLAND

Bertha looked at her sister and smiled. She walked through her beautiful apartment, feeling relief about the discussion she just had with her beloved and strong-minded sister. It felt like everything was finally relieved. She was going to take a new important step in her life.

“Who’s coming?” Claudia raised her voice and asked from the other side of the apartment, “Are you expecting someone?”

Bertha shook her head. She was noticing that in these days, it was too easy to be swallowed by your own thoughts. She walked towards the door and opened it.

“What on earth!” she exclaimed.

“What?” Claudia shouted and hurried towards the door. The sisters were looking at each other. Bertha took a deep breath and knelt on the floor. In front of the door there was a sleeping baby in a car seat.

“Let’s take the child inside,” Claudia gasped. She did not want to try to hide her confusion. Claudia was a straightforward and honest woman, who did not have any interests in pretending something. She des-

pised people, who were spending a lot of their time adjusting to others' behaviours. She had always been ready to act and right now she knew that this kind side of her was needed. She watched as her sister picked up the sleeping baby and closed the door behind her.

"Alright, this was unexpected. Do you recognize the baby?" Claudia asked, even though she knew that Bertha probably would not even admit it. Her sister was maybe old but still ready to get in the middle of any kind of trouble that could be imagined in this world.

"No... no, I don't understand this..." Bertha murmured.

"Well, there must be a reason why someone left a child here, no? How did that someone even manage to get out of this building without anyone noticing?" Claudia snapped.

"I... I don't know... I don't understand..." Bertha answered while watching the baby who was still asleep.

For a moment they both were quiet. Something was going on. Something they could not be able to foresee yet.

"Is there any message?" Claudia whispered.

Bertha shook her head.

"We need to call the police."

Bertha did not say anything. She tried to think. Was it too late? What was the meaning of this?

"Hey..." Claudia started and raised her hand to her sister's shoulder, "we will figure this out. You know it. But we need some help right now, let's call the police."

"The police?" Bertha's voice was trembling.

"Yes," Claudia insisted, "someone left their baby outside your door unattended. Of course, we should inform the police." She tore her eyes away from the baby and walked towards the telephone in the corridor.

"No." Claudia came to an immediate halt, surprised by the firmness her sister's voice had suddenly regained. "We will not call the police. They can't help us. We don't have any clue who the mother is and neither do they. All the police would do is inform the Youth Welfare Office – and they would take the baby away." Bertha held the tiny and innocent body almost imperceptibly closer to her own.

Claudia turned around. "Do *you* actually want to keep it?" she asked in disbelief. "Without even knowing whose child it is? Just like that?" Her eyes were wide in astonishment. "Bertha, you know I love you and I will support you with everything you do, but please give it a second thought." She watched her sister walk towards the apartment door.

As she closed it, Bertha said, "The person who left the child here must have chosen this door on purpose. There would have been many more buildings in the neighborhood and there would have been many apartments beneath this one where he or she could have placed the baby if they would have been in a hurry. But whoever left it here chose this specific apartment. He or she wanted the baby to stay with me. Don't you see? I was meant to find it and take care of it. And I am not prepared to disappoint whoever wants me to look after the baby." Claudia no-

ticed a tenseness on her sister's face as Bertha said, "I failed a child once. I will not fail another one." And with those words she ended the discussion.

By the same time, Bertha's daughter had reached the entrance of the building and was walking across the parking lot. She was still intoxicated from last night and had almost forgotten about her resolution to change and become a better person. Even the incident of placing her own child in front of her mother's door hadn't sobered her up enough to resist what was next to happen. Since she felt a slight sensation of hunger arise, she wandered towards the nearby garbage can. Philosophers and physicists might argue about whether the invisible power behind her urge to search exactly that garbage can should be called quantum entanglement, as Zampanò might prefer, the interrelatedness of all things, karma, as a spiritual person might interpret it, Murphy's law, as a pessimist might, or simply fate. Whatever nature the power is, whatever name we give it, it led the woman who was controlled solely by instinct again to the garbage can with the metal box. And although she had only been looking for food, the woman unhesitatingly picked up the drugs and made one of them her first meal of the day.

MICHAEL RAMMERT
GERMANY

On the 37th floor of a giant skyscraper Brian was in his office having a great view over New York. He had not had time for his breakfast yet, but that could wait. The meeting with the representatives of a big chemical company was soon to begin. If he could

close that deal today, it would be another big step up the career ladder. The last few years he had worked incredibly hard. Family and friends had always been in second place for him. Already at a young age he was conscious that longtime relationships are simply not his thing. But convincing people to invest and maximizing the return, that was his destiny. He had already achieved so much, and he could not be more confident.

The ringing of the office phone brought him back from his thoughts. On the display he could see that his secretary was calling. He leaned back in his chair and picked up the phone. "Yes?"

"Hey Brian, are you all right, is everything ready to go?"

With a big smile on his face he answered, "I'm a hundred percent sure we can make this thing fly. I'll be in the lobby at ten to welcome the gentlemen. So, see you in the meeting room." He hung up.

Only a few seconds later his private phone suddenly began to ring. It was an unknown number. Actually, this was really bad timing, but something told him to answer the call. He took a deep breath and picked up the phone. "Hello, this is Brian speaking?"

"Hi Brian, this is Emily."

Caught by surprise, Brian was not directly able to say anything. Emily? He was not remembering the name. The unpleasant thought crossed his mind that this was a woman he once had an affair with. This has happened from time to time on his business trips, but usually he never heard of these women again. How did she get his phone number and why was she calling him? Although he was not happy about it, the

only way to find out was to continue this call. So he finally said, "Emily, I thought everything had been clear between us. What do you want?"

With an unclear and trembling voice, she answered, "I have to tell you something I should have told you much earlier. I haven't been honest with you, but it was so..."

"Wait, are you high right now?" Brian interrupted her angrily. "Are you fucking serious? I got an important meeting in a few minutes and you are wasting my valuable time. I'm not sure why you are calling, but please never call again."

Before he could end the call, Emily said firmly and now much more clearly:

"Brian, you are father to a child."

DENNIS FABRIZIUS
GERMANY

Brian stopped to breathe. His eyes were wide open.

"What did you say??" he asked.

"You are father to a child!" Emily repeated.

Brian put his hand over his mouth, held it there for a few seconds and then tried to say something.

"No... I mean... what? I am... Emily... I am..."

Brian tried to build up sentences, but he couldn't really find the words. It was like he forgot the English language. A few seconds before, he had been absolutely in his business world with the focus on his important meeting which will start in a few hours. He had repeated his speech again and again, practiced it in front of a mirror, had been looking for the right outfit, planning the answers for all possible questions and so on and so on. Nothing was more important today. The accentuation is: *was*.

Suddenly, he is there, right there, where he is sitting right now. With a phone in his right hand and with the knowledge, he was a father. It was like he was sitting in a big empty place. Nothing was around him. Not even thoughts anymore. There was just him, sitting alone in an empty place with his phone and his shock. He was now completely in the moment. His business world ... totally forgotten.

"I'm so sorry that I didn't tell you before Brian!" her voice began to tremble. "I was in a totally crazy situation... and... and I didn't know what to do. I wasn't prepared for that and I needed time. Time for myself! Many things in my life have changed now, you know? And... I wasn't really sure if you should be a part of that. I mean, all of that. I was thinking a lot and unfortunately I didn't have many people to talk to during these times. And I was also really, really scared to tell you what's going on."

Emily took a deep breath.

"But now, I'm ready to talk with you. Brian, I got pregnant! And you are the father. It's a girl and her name is May."

Brian swallowed.

"Send me your number. I'll call you back," he said after a moment of silence and hung up the phone. Brian's look went far into the distance. He needed a moment. A moment for himself. He took a deep breath, closed his hands over his head and looked up to the ceiling. Suddenly, the phone rang again. It's again the secretary. The worst moment, he could call. At this moment, Brian wanted to talk with absolutely nobody. He picked the phone up just to instantly and angrily hang up. Another moment of silence.

Suddenly, after some minutes, Brian stood up, left his office, went into his car and drove home. When he arrived, he ran into his basement. There was a black box. All these years he had not touched it. He stopped, it had caused him so many problems in the past. He knew that exactly and yet he wanted it right now. Even after so many years of cleanness. He wanted it now! That was the only thing he knew at that moment and it was inside the box. He opened it.

MARTHA VALLE ROMEU
SPAIN

Brian thought that if anyone was observing him right before opening the box, they would have assumed something completely different. That is why sometimes he did not have such a great opinion of the human kind and why most of his relationships never lasted long or were too close. His desperation to open that box could have tricked brains as optical illusions do. It was a recurrent thought of him that humans seem to be brain wired to assume immorality or harm when the context seems, indeed, to refer to such circumstances. Like if humans ignore the good parts about people and the extraordinary ability we have to change and do better. Just like he had already proven he was able to do.

What it was inside the box, is up to the reader. Maybe a photo of him and his family from many years ago that made him remember that, at some point, when he was a kid and nothing was more important than games and food, he had also had a happy family. Maybe just a talisman that was enough for him to keep pushing. Or an ultrasound of another baby that

went directly to the sky. Maybe Brian had been clean for so many years of guilt, sorrow, anger, or even clean of happiness and positive feelings. So whatever he was looking for so desperately in that box gave him the courage to understand that he wanted to be there for that baby. He saw it as an opportunity to give that baby what he had never had, and whereas it may sound so typical and cliché, probably the most beautiful things that happen in life are exactly that.

But one of the things he had learned was not to rush. It was just one of the many perks all those years in the business world gave him. He would definitely call Emily back. But one of his mindsets was that when having to give good news, he would do it in a way that was more convenient to him. And given the circumstances, calling back just at the moment was not favorable to him. He had thought for a long while that if the news were good, the person waiting to hear them would be happy anyway. Brian knew it was not a pleasant feeling to keep waiting for a phone call or test results, but still he thought that when the phone finally rings or the results are out with good disclosure, the waiting is compensated. What was more, his agitation and not-so-great feelings didn't dissipate completely yet, so he knew this was not a good moment to call her back. And he still had that important meeting with the representatives of the chemical company. The baby news was indeed shocking and turned all his world upside down, but he did not want this to stand in the way of his whole life and career. So despite all the thoughts in his head and his difficulties to stay cold-minded, he left the basement and walked to the parking lot to drive back to the office.

Brian stumbled towards his car in a blind determination fueled by the desire to solve the mess his life turned into. He had not decided yet if it will be a good thing or bad thing, just a mess for now. But he vowed to make the best of it, not only for his sake, maybe especially not for his sake this time.

“Ooph, I am terribly sorry...” Brian muttered almost inaudible after bumping into a young man on his way to his car. Brian looked at the man and noticed him wearing shades, which he found odd considering the sun had not shown itself all day. He pushed those thoughts aside, he needed every shred of focus he had left for himself. Eventually, he got in the car and drove off.

John was taken aback when that businessman ran into him. He seemed like the man said something to him but by the time John realized that, the man had scrambled into his car. Looking at the man’s face through the windshield, John could not decide whether the man was happy or in distress. He was in a hurry but that is the only thing that was for certain. To be frank, John could not be asked at the moment to care about other people. He knew too well that needing his shades on a cloudy day and the splitting pain inside his head were a telltale sign that even all this time he had not outrun them yet. He was painfully aware it was his brain conspiring against him, making him believe that he needs them, that they will make it go away. And they usually did, until they are not enough anymore and there will be more pain, more need, more... After so many days,

he still repeated this mantra in his head, so he never forgets where this will lead him again - as it has many times before.

So he started walking as he always did, when these thoughts came to haunt him. Desperately trying to outrun them, although knowing very well that this would never work, he continued walking. Walking ever further, until he was too tired, too tired to walk, too tired to think, too tired to feel.

Later that day he found himself in his favorite park. The sun started to set and it was finally dark enough to take off his shades. He looked around. Through the trees and bushes around him, he saw glimmers of the city. Street lights, cars, apartments, planes in the sky, the world ever so busy, rushing and hectic. His thought trailed back to the man he ran into earlier. He seemed to be on the run as well. He started to wonder whether the man was running from or towards something, but he was too exhausted to care, to think, to feel. Finally, his mind went quiet, even if only for a little while.

ZSUNI BLAHO
HUNGARY

John loved the nighttime, and he hated it as well. His eyes were so sensitive to light when he was suffering one of his migraines. Going on and about in the daytime was challenging enough. The soft and gentle evening always made him more normal. But this didn't last long.

As he was sitting on his favorite bench his thoughts started to gain speed. Jumping from one subject to another, so fast, it became one big jumble. Then

came the shivers and the shaking, the uncanny feeling that he was being watched. A shimmering form appeared in front of him.

"Finally," the apparition said, "I've been waiting all day!"

John closed his eyes and with a resigned voice he asked, "What do you want?"

The ghost was probably in her early 20s. If John concentrated enough on seeing the ghostly form, he could tell she had most likely been quite pretty when she was alive. It was always easier to see them at night.

"I wish I'd know!" said the put out ghost. "I don't know why I'm here and I don't know where I'm supposed to go! You are the only person who can see me! And half the time you ignore me or take those stupid tablets that make you sick!"

With a long exhaled breath John started his usual spiel for otherworldly visitors. "Listen. I can't help you. I don't know you. Find someone else to pester." John knew he was being a bit rude but he didn't want to end up in a mental health ward again. Once was more than enough.

He realized that his migraine was fully gone now, but without the medication the sight came back. John hated seeing things that other people were oblivious to. He would rather take the splitting headache and no visions of the supernatural than being thought crazy.

ARNAUD WIECLAWSKI
BELGIUM

After closing his eyes for a while, shaking his head and trying to clear his mind, he reopened them to observe the shimmering phantom was still there, becoming even more real as ever, almost tangible.

As she was looking straight into his eyes, she replied, "Well, I am definitely not leaving you as easily as that, this time. There must be a reason why you can see me and no one else does. If I want to reach the place where I belong and find an inner peace, you'll have to help me through this process, one way or another. Please, try to put yourself in my shoes..."

John looked at this sight, lost in his thoughts. He was wondering if this apparition was getting more real only because he was slowly but surely falling into deep mental disorders or because he really had supernatural power, allowing him to communicate with lost souls. But this time, everything seemed so real...

The ghostly form became more and more distinguishable. He could now notice precise details of her physical appearance. She was a real beauty, wearing long and curly dark hair, contrasting with her sweet and almost childish face. Her eyes showed a fierce determination and a very strong personality, proving she was not that young after all. She also seemed to have been tanned during her lifetime, indicating probably a Mediterranean origin, even though her complexion was now pale. Her purple lips were barely moving when she was speaking, giving an irresisti-

ble urge to be kissed. They were literally mesmerizing.

John couldn't stay insensitive to this pictorial apparition, and something deep inside him wouldn't stand the idea to abandon such a poor and enchanting soul in an eternal purgatory where no redemption or peace could be found. Real or not, she was worth giving a chance. After all, this was perhaps the only way for him to get rid of those visions.

After checking out that no one around could see him talking, he said, "OK, very well, let's assume I got a role to play in your quest. What am I supposed to do? Maybe the first question to ask would be, for how long have you been in this state, if you know nothing else?"

The ghost seemed appeased to have been taken seriously by John after such a long time. Slowly, she let a charming but mysterious smile appear on her angel face, knowing she had just found the next carrier of the curse she had endured for over 130 years...

DAVID RITZMANN
GERMANY

„I am always surprised at how memory is strong in someone, an almost painfully clear image that repeats itself over and over in your mind. And you can't imagine other people from other times just being indifferent. Not forgetting, just never knowing. You feel powerless. Memory always loses its power to indifference." She was slightly hovering, always subtly moving, either as a whole or something within her. Her voice was echoing slightly, sometimes breaking.

John was drawn to this, fascinated. "I understand and I don't." He wanted to let her talk to make more sense of her. Clear facts always helped him to figure out what exactly to do.

"You built your stone houses, parked your iron wagons called cars just because you liked the site, the land, the view. You are indifferent to the real location of your dwelling. Sure, you have maps, but they do not tell the story. They just give direction."

"Well, I only pay rent here, I never built a house in my entire life, so..."

But she just kept on going. "Those green hills, the creek at the back of the house. They were a different color 130 years back. They were not green and blue. Everything was tinted in scarlet, smelling metallic, sticky, heavy. One place was the end of us. Wounded Knee."

John still did not understand. He had read the name once before but without the story behind it. Thus, it had merely been a source of amusement for him since his own joints were showing signs of wear.

"Wounded Knee," the apparition started again. "After fighting this disease that nature brought over us, chasing us away, poisoning our lands and killing our animals we came to an end there. Beaten. Slaughtered. Eradicated." The apparition did not raise its voice but it seemed as if its color got darker and more saturated at the same time. The movement within it accelerated.

John started to become aware that he was not in control of this thing at all. "We. Who were you fighting? Help me understand."

"You should know who we were. You should know. Nanissaánah, ghost dances. We just wanted to go back to the old ways like the elders showed us in

visions. It was the right way. But the old way lost. I can see it clearly glancing around. I felt it back then. They did not understand. They did not want to. They just slaughtered us like they did with the animals before. Efficient.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Seen-By-The-Nation, spouse of Sitting Bull. Our Nation died. The Lakota way died.”

John was starting to understand. He tried to remember history class. “But there are still Lakota around. There is a reserve a few hours from here.”

“The Lakota died,” the ghost replied, “and I ran. I closed my eyes and I ran. I should have died there with my people. I should have shed my blood as a tribute to all the sacrifices. I did not. I ran.”

GPT-2, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE NETHERLANDS

The apparition started to disappear. “You are the one who saw us,” the apparition said calmly, “I am not the one who was murdered on Wounded Knee. I would know if I were. And you are not the one who killed Sitting Bull. He was a man like you.”

He could hear the sound of the apparition disappearing.

The sun started to rise. John had never felt so tired in his life. He thought about what the apparition said the day before. How she was convinced the Lakota people died out at Wounded Knee. He had to do something, he couldn't let it go. John had heard about an Apache war in his history classes. If only he had paid more attention during class, he would know where to start searching for answers. It must

have been the Great Plains Wars. The Apache people had been a powerful Native American tribe for hundreds of years before the arrival of European traders and explorers. Then in a flash, it came to him:

"There are still Lakota around" - the words he spoke the previous evening.

John decided to call Nicole, maybe she wanted to join him on a trip to the reserve. He knew he probably wasn't the one for this task but he had to try to find the Lakota people for himself. He went on the phone and called. After explaining what had happened and convincing Nicole to join him, he took a shower, changed his clothes and got dressed. As soon as he was done, he rushed to Nicole's place and took her to the reserve. He had no idea what he would find there but - after several hours of driving - he figured he would know soon enough.

"They were probably killed by white settlers and soldiers," Nicole spoke calmly while they were driving into the reserve, "be careful okay?! These people have little left and they might blame us. We can just turn around now..."

But John was determined to learn more about the massacre of the Lakota people. Nicole and John got out of the car, she walked to the side of the road and onto a small path. John followed her and they soon came to an open area. A huge log-tree cut across the open area that looked as if it had been there a long time. It was almost as if it had been waiting there for years.

Suddenly a voice spoke, "What are you doing here, there are no visitors allowed in the reserves."

John and Nicole turned around towards the voice, a big suntanned man stood before them.

"You are trespassing, please leave."

"Hello, my name is John Müller and I want to learn what happened to the Lakota people... Was it the Apache that killed the tribe?" John stuttered.

"For the last time, it was not the Apache, it was settlers who've killed my ancestors, why won't you people understand that? There is so much material to read and to learn from," the man looked frustrated.

"We better just go, John," Nicole said nervously, "they don't want us here."

But John needed more answers. "Yesterday I saw the ghost of Seen-By-The-Nation, spouse of Sitting Bull, she spoke to me..."

In disbelief, the man stared at them.

ZSUNI BLAHO

HUNGARY

"I don't know what is crazier! You, coming all this way just to ask what happened to the Lakota or that a ghost sent you? Have you heard about a thing called the internet? Google it." The man looked at them a bit longer, shook his head and walked away.

"You know he is right," Nicole said, "we came here for nothing."

John looked at her and said, "No, I don't think so. I know this looks stupid and impulsive, but it feels right. I was meant to be here."

"Whatever," Nicole rolled her eyes, "What should we do next?"

"Let's go back to the car and drive around the reserve a bit longer." They walked back and drove on arriving to a small town. It had this air of desperation and dejectedness. The roads and buildings were in a horrible state.

"Are you hungry?" John asked. "We just passed a coffee place and it looks good." He parked and was about to get out when Nicole grabbed his arm.

"You can't be serious! This place is scary! It doesn't look safe! I don't wanna get out!"

"Oh come on! It's not that bad! It'll be fine!" With that he got out, walked to Nicole's side and helped her exit the car. The place was a rundown little building and it looked like it could collapse any moment. The inside wasn't any better either, but at least it smelled good to John. He greeted the waitress with a big smile and asked about eating in. The young woman showed them to a table, gave them menus and then left them to choose.

"Do you know what you would like?" John asked Nicole.

"Yeah, I want to leave."

"Oh come on, it's not that bad!"

Nicole was about to say something when the waitress came back.

"Could you recommend some dishes?" John asked.

The girl told him the house specials and smiled back at him shyly. After a moment, they started to chat leaving Nicole to her thoughts. She was not happy. This whole town freaked her out and now John behaved more and more like a crazy person. She was willing to accommodate his delusions and support him in some things. She was getting a lot of things out of this relationship, but this was going too far. Now he was staring at and flirting with a waitress in a shitty coffee place in a shitty town. She was not happy at all.

"So you are home for the summer?" John asked.

"Yeah, I'm helping out in the community before I go back to university."

“And what are you studying?”

“I will be a doctor.”

“That’s great! Isn’t it, Nicole?” John turned to Nicole.

“Yeah, great. So how long ‘til we get our order? Have you even placed it...” she peaked at her name tag, “... Aurora?”

“Oh sorry, I got caught up in our conversation.”

“Really competent. I don’t imagine you messing up as a doctor at all.” Nicole said in a cold voice with an eye-roll.

“I’ll go and take care of your order,” the wannabe doctor said and walked away.

“Was that really necessary?” John asked.

“Yes, it actually was. I came here with you on this crazy quest and now you are flirting with a waitress? Seriously John?! What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong! I just... I think I had to come here to see this place. These people need help! You’ve seen the state of the buildings!”

“So let’s go back and find a charity where you can give them as much money as you want. It’s not like you don’t have enough. You can buy an island if you feel like it.”

“It’s not the same! I need to be here. I just don’t know why...” John said, looking away from Nicole. He had this weird look in his eyes that made her angry. She followed his line of sight, at the end was the waitress.

“That’s it! We are leaving! Now!” Nicole stood up and walked out angrily. John had no choice but to follow, even though he did not want to leave. Aurora looked straight into his eyes and time stopped. He never felt like this before. She is beautiful, all right,

but there was something else that made his heart race out of rhythm.

"You are leaving? But your food is not ready."

"It's okay, my girlfriend's not feeling well. I need to drive her home."

"Oh, sorry to hear that. I hope she gets better soon."

"How much do I owe you?"

John paid and left a hefty tip. He took a last look at Aurora and walked out.

'It hurts,' Aurora thought, staring after the young man, 'why does it hurt?'

John took Nicole home and now he was sitting in his car deep in his thoughts. They had barely spoken on the way back.

"What should I do?" John asked himself out loud.

"I think you do understand now why you went there," came the answer. He jumped in his seat with a small scream and turned forward. It was the native woman. "You know it in your heart."

"I was right! Your people are still there!" John exclaimed.

"Yes, but for how long? Hope is not enough to go on. You have the chance to make a difference."

"I do?"

"Trust your heart, your spirit is strong. But your soul is not complete yet. You'll find happiness amongst my people."

"I..." John saw her getting more and more transparent. "Wait! Don't go! I have questions!"

"Follow your heart..." her voice was fading. In a blink the ghost woman was gone. Leaving him alone but determined. He made his decision. For better or

worse he will follow her advice and the past she showed him.

His phone started to ring, on the screen flashed *Marie*. John decided to pick up the call.

“Long time no hear little sis! I have some news to share with you!”

“Me too, big bro! I have a girlfriend! Her name is Mia. I want you to meet her. Do you think you could come for a visit?”

“Of course! I’m happy you are finally ready to invite me!”

MAX THURSTON
USA, NEW MEXICO

Brian opened the car door a bit shakily. He had never made such an abrupt change in his life; he had been steadily climbing the corporate ladder since he graduated from college and thought he understood what he wanted and who he wanted to be. That was until Emily called.

It took him a few days to decide to leave this job and to follow the only address he had for her in his phone to deliver the good news. Stepping out of the car, Brian peered out at a colorful array of apartment buildings and wondered about what colorful stories each apartment could tell. Suddenly, a sensation pulled Brian from his thoughts. It was the same sensation he felt when Emily called him and when he quit his job, like the universe itself was tugging on his shirt. And so, he listened. This time the feeling directed him to a dumpster behind one of the older looking apartments.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed, looking behind the dumpster. It was her. She lay with her arms and legs splayed, her body limp, and her eyes closed, but she was breathing.

“Help! Somebody please help!” Brian started yelling as he dragged Emily out into the courtyard in front of the apartment building.

Pussy, the large grey Maine Coon, was the only cat brave enough to investigate the new tiny human that had appeared earlier that day. The rest of the cat crew sat back and watched attentively. A small hand reached out from the crib and gently stroked Pussy’s warm grey fur. The baby let out an audible squeal, and Pussy jumped back, alarmed. But the child started giggling happily and reached out for the kitty. So, Pussy returned to the side of the crib with a sense that this mini human was friendly after all. Bertha eyed the scene from above with a warm smile.

“Maybe this arrangement could work in the end,” said Claudia as she placed her hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“Help!” A distressed yell from outside the apartment broke the peaceful scene. Looking out the window, they saw a man holding a young woman passed out in his arms. The old women hurried down the stairs, Bertha holding baby May.

Claudia rushed over to the man. “What happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know. She was just passed out,” Brian replied.

“It looks like an overdose,” Claudia recognized the symptoms from her days working as an EMT. “Call an ambulance!” she exclaimed.

Emily opened her eyes and could make out three hazy silhouettes standing over her. Her vision began to clear for a moment, and she began to feel an unmistakable familiarity with one of the women looking down at her.

“Mom,” she exhaled breathlessly, “I...” Her consciousness started fading again. “I’m sorry.” She managed a fragile sigh before falling back into blackness.

In the back of the ambulance, Bertha and Brian sat silently. Brian peered over at the baby in Bertha’s arms and that same quantum sensation arose again, tugging him towards an essential realization.

“That’s my baby!” Brian exclaimed.

Bertha was taken aback and stared at Brian with astonishment. “But... this child was left on my doorstep. She was abandoned,” Bertha said.

“That’s mine and Emily’s baby. I just know it is,” Brian declared confidently. “Listen, I haven’t always been a family-focused man and I’ve had some mixed-up priorities in the past. I know I haven’t done my part in taking care of this baby but I want to change. I want...” Brian continued to speak, but his insistent voice became fainter and fainter to Bertha as she looked down at the baby in her arms. Her granddaughter. A flood of emotions poured over her, from pride to regret to hope to guilt, but most of all, joy.

“So, can I hold my baby?” Brian’s voice pierced into Bertha’s consciousness once more.

“What’s your name, young man?” Bertha asked calmly.

“I’m Brian,” he replied.

“Brian, the woman being taken in this ambulance, Emily,” a tinge of sadness tainted Bertha’s voice, “she’s my daughter.” Brian could sense the seriousness of the old woman’s tone, and so continued to listen. “I let her down.” A tear rolled down Bertha’s cheek as she looked down at baby May. “I won’t do that again.” The baby peered up at Bertha, and Brian could sense the loving connection the two had already formed and he knew his child was in good hands.

“I understand,” he said.

The ambulance came to a sudden halt and Emily was rushed into the emergency room. Brian began walking towards the hospital, but Bertha pulled him aside.

“It’s so unfair of me to ask this of you, Brian,” that same feeling of sadness, this time much more than a tinge, had returned to Bertha’s voice. “I’m not ready to face my daughter yet,” Bertha conceded, “but she needs someone Brian. Can you keep her safe, for me?”

Emily’s eyes opened to a bright light shining from above her. As her eyes adjusted, she began to make out the figure of a man standing by her hospital bed. “Brian?” The surprise was evident even in her weak whisper. “I... I thought I saw my mom before I passed out. Where is she?”

The man reached out and held her hand. “You must have just been dreaming,” said Brian, “but I’m here.”

Inside the rehabilitation clinic, Emily took a deep breath while looking at the phone. She dialed the

number that Brian had given her and, after a nervous hesitation, hit call.

"Hello," Bertha's face appeared on the screen.

"Mom," Emily replied a bit shakily. "I'm calling from rehab."

The call went silent for a moment as the two women stared at each other through the screen, each wanting to say so much but neither finding the words to say it. Finally, Bertha broke the silence.

"I'm proud of you," she said a bit timidly, "for going to rehab."

The silence returned, but they both had the feeling that the other understood how they felt, so there was no need for words. They smiled at one another before Emily spoke again.

"Can I see May?" she asked.

Bertha held up the baby and she smiled as she saw the face on the screen. Emily smiled back at her daughter and simply said, "I love you."

"Well duh," Baby May replied, "everybody loves me!"

JASMIN ZOLL

GERMANY

'Just like the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox was proven wrong, my own convictions will be proven wrong again and again,' Zampanò thought with a smile on his face. He liked it when life and science surprised him.

He and his mentee had walked for twenty-five minutes in silence when they finally reached the point where they had to leave the path. They were deep in the forest. Beside the walk, a forty-minute train ride separated them from the city. With the

lake quite close, this place always reminded Zampanò of the setting in Robert Lee Frost's poem. Only, Zampanò knew, contrary to the poet, exactly whom the woods belonged to since he himself was the owner. He had bought it years ago and often used it for long walks with his dog, who also accompanied the two humans today. Also contrary to Frost's *snowy evening*, today the sun shone brightly through the branches and it was the hottest, surely not the darkest evening of the year. According to the weather forecast, there would only be one more day with temperatures almost as high as the present ones this season. Zampanò was very thankful for the shade and coolness the trees provided while they walked over twigs and moss on their way to their tree of commemoration.

They came here once a week, often during the weekend. The train rides were used for discussions on their recent experiments and theories. But as soon as they would reach the forest, they would both fall silent, just as if they had a kind of secret agreement.

Zampanò saw how Catherine suffered while she was removing the leaves the wind had contributed to their tree of commemoration with the picture, the letter and the candles. He also saw how dutifully she arranged the flowers she had brought and he hoped she was aware of the necessity of all this and did not only do it to please him. She was a very intelligent woman. But the more intelligent a person was, the higher their capability of self-deceit. He would have liked to take her pain away. Zampanò knew that confrontation was the hardest part of the healing process. Not walking away but facing the ugly, hurtful and seemingly unbearable truth and, which was

worse, embracing and accepting it. At the same time, it was the most crucial point if you didn't want to take the path of repression. And for him, repression was not an option. It would make the pain infinite, the outbursts of anger and self-hatred unpredictable and it would haunt you anyway. He had been in the very same place. And only through the deepest and darkest phases of his life he had become the self-assured and calm man he was today. Only through honesty and the strength to confront the dark sides inside him he had been able to feel at ease with himself. And he deeply wished for Catherine to develop both to the needed extent. He could be there for her and give her a push, as he was doing with their weekly visits, but in the end she would have to do all the work by herself.

He called for his dog who immediately ceased digging in rabbit holes, ran towards its owner and stayed at his side for the whole way back to the train station.

Later that day, as his dog was fed and rested next to him, Zampanò sat in his armchair and let his thoughts wander. He was exhausted. Not only because of the hot day, but also because of all the twists and turns his life had taken. And yet he was thankful for every single one of them. How dull would his life have been without them. Even though he loved his research and the hypothetical juggling of theories, assumptions and connections, he also loved the indomitability of hard facts and how they forced you to adapt and learn. Just when you thought you had reached a point of security and steadiness, life would tear it all down and confront

you with just another obstacle you had not reckoned with. Accepting change and developing flexibility were the real guarantees of calmness. However, Zampanò was thankful for his bookshelf full of memories, which represented all the different phases of his own life to him. None of them were lost, he had a great memory. And with repression not being an option, they were all very present.

Browsing through memories, Zampanò realized his own absent-mindedness only when he heard the knock on his door. The dog was conditioned not to bark at every person in the hallway because in the big building with so many people it would have driven the both of them crazy. But with the knock on the door, even the dog raised his head.

“Who could that be?” Zampanò asked with a curious look on his face. He walked towards the door, opened it and was immediately filled with joy and life when he recognized his neighbor Bertha with her sister Claudia and baby May.

“We were wondering,” Bertha began, “if you could look after May again.” The little sunshine beamed at Zampanò full of expectation.

“We have an appointment at the registry office and don’t know how long it will take. For May...” Bertha gave her a warm, loving look, “it would probably be very boring.” The old man returned May’s expectant look, which immediately made her smile.

“Of course. I will look after her. Come on in, little sunshine.” The dog greeted the familiar guest and Zampanò smiled amusedly as he was reminded of a former thought of his.

“Just when you think you have reached a point of steadiness and rest...”

The A/C was already working at full power but was still barely able to keep the temperature below 20 degrees. The sun was standing high up in the sky and bringing the last hot summer day to the area while Ben was sitting in his car in front of the hospital, waiting for Juliette to exit the building.

Six weeks have passed since the shocking attack on her and on his ice cream truck and Ben had been overwhelmed when he finally received the call from the hospital where they had told him that Juliette would survive and be able to leave the hospital soon. Unfortunately, he wasn't allowed to visit her, so he promised to pick her up when she would finally leave the hospital.

But now in this moment he felt a strange mixture of joyful anticipation and tension inside of his gut. He wasn't sure how this first meeting would evolve and was scared of telling Juliette the whole story, the whole truth. For a brief moment he was even thinking of driving away again, but seconds later the hospital door opened, and he could see Juliette walking out of the building. She was still limping a little bit, but the appealing smile on her face showed him that she definitely was on the way to recovery.

Ben jumped out of his car, walked towards her and gave her a big hug.

"Thank god Juliette, I'm so glad to see you happy and healthy again! I was so worried and prayed for you every day. I'm so sorry for everything that happened!"

Juliette was fighting with her tears. "Oh Ben, I'm happy to see you, too," she whispered while barely

being able to cope with her emotions. "It's so nice of you picking me up and you really don't have to be sorry, it's not your fault! I'm just happy that we both can smile vividly again," she said and gave Ben another big smile.

They entered the car when Juliette started to speak in a more worrying intonation. "Ben? Can I ask you a question? There is one thing I just cannot stop thinking about. All the time, I was too afraid to speak with the medical assistant about it but now seeing you I just can't wait any longer: Was the police able to find out anything about the shooting? I mean... do they know who it was?"

Moments of silence passed by.

Ben's heart was beating loudly in his chest and every second felt like hours to him until he finally encouraged himself to answer.

"Well, yes..." he stumbled, unsure how to start this conversation. "Yes, they found out more about the attack, but unfortunately the outcome implies that I'm maybe not as innocent as you currently think..."

"What do you mean?" Juliette asked, perplexed. "Not as innocent as I think?!"

Ben took a deep breath. "The police found out that the shooter was Liam. Liam Turner, my own son."

Juliette's face froze.

"Your... your son!?" were the only words she could bring out of her mouth.

"Yeah, you got that right: My son actually tried to shoot me. I know, this sounds like a bad movie but unfortunately it isn't... Maybe I should just explain the whole story to you:

I haven't seen my son since my daughter and therefore his sister Julia passed away three years ago in a car accident. I had picked her up from a physics event and she was sitting on the passenger seat when a truck hit us from the side. She had no chance of survival and died immediately on the spot where the accident happened. The police later found out that the driver of the truck disobeyed the give way sign, but regrettably I had drunk one beer at a friend's place before I picked up Julia. Well, and that's where it all started to become difficult: Even though the police could barely find any alcohol in my blood and also the judges did not pronounce me guilty in any way, Liam was nonetheless wondering if I could have saved Julia's life by not having this one beer."

Ben exhaled deeply. One could sense the tension inside of his body.

"What? Oh no, but that is insane! How can he accuse you of something that obviously isn't true?! It was still the truck driver making the mistake, not you!" Juliette said vigorously as if she had to protect Ben in front of a jury.

"Yes, that is true, but unfortunately it is more complicated than you think. A few weeks after the shooting took place, I came in contact again with Nora, a former close friend of Julia, Liam and our family. She told me that Liam had changed a lot since I left the family. He had become more and more introverted, was sitting in front of his computer all day long and was sometimes acting strangely. Nora said he had become kind of desocialized and eventually very likely developed a psychological disorder due to the missing possibility to come to terms with the death of his sister and the following break-up of our family. Everybody left him, including me..."

As a consequence, he probably went to dark places in his mind where he was just not himself anymore. This probably turned into an obsession and brought up his crazy thoughts again of me having the fault for Julia's death and that was where he maybe developed the wish for revenge. The wish that I should feel the pain his sister and, thereby, also he had felt. I'm so sorry, ma cocotte, I wish I could have been a better person and a better father, then I maybe would have been able to prevent all of this."

Ben was staring out of the windshield into the distance. His whole body was tense, scared of Juliette's reaction. But a few seconds later, it started to relax again as Juliette responded.

"Oh my god, Ben, please do not say that! Please do not think that you are guilty, you absolutely aren't. It is still not your fault! Back then, you tried to make the best decisions for you and your family and it was impossible to anticipate these consequences. I didn't have a clue that you had such a hard time, you always seemed so strong and full of integrity. And I still think you are! You are a strong man and you can return to your happy life!"

"Well, you can't read another person's mind, can you? Back then I definitely was neither the strongest nor the happiest man, but you are right; in the last weeks I was finally able to make peace with myself, so I try to look forward now."

Ben turned around and gave Juliette a little smile.

"That's good to hear," she said, "you really should never lose your hope and smile! May I ask what happened to Liam? Is he in jail now? Have you visited him since then?"

“No, I haven’t seen him since all of this happened, as he escaped to Japan, even before the police could send out an international search warrant. I just hope that he is better now and can also live in peace with himself.”

“Yeah, that is true, I hope so too. If you ever need a strong shoulder on your side, let me know, I will be there for you.”

“Thank you so much! But I think now it’s time to improve the mood a little bit! Look, do you see all these people over there?”

The two had just arrived at the apartment parking lot when Ben pointed towards the corner of the left building. Juliette couldn’t believe it: All her neighbors were standing around Ben’s ice cream truck, all waiting for her to celebrate the start of her second life.

“SURPRISE, SURPRISE!” they all shouted simultaneously. Confetti was flying into the air and above the ice cream truck a *Welcome back, Juliette!* - banner was revealing itself.

Juliette broke into tears. She had never realized that she had such an incredible neighborhood. From the outside, the whole apartment and the surrounding area looked so anonymous, but in this moment, it showed its true soul.

‘From now on everything can only get better,’ she thought to herself and smiled.

She gave everyone a big hug, ordered herself three scoops of her favorite ice cream peach sorbet and just enjoyed the moment.

ANTONIA THAMM & ROBIN WULFES
GERMANY

It had been a beautiful, though hot, summer day and the sky was still a bright blue. Due to the heat of the day the streets had warmed up and the smell rising from the warm ground was hanging in the air giving it this particular late summer vibe. In the parking lot the atmosphere was exuberant and joyful. Ice cream was handed out to everyone, people were standing around chatting, having a beer. George, the young budding guitarist, was filling the air with some smooth sounds while kids were running around playing and laughing. Juliette was filled with gratitude and a feeling of connectedness towards the people around her. She looked up into the sky turning her face towards the slowly setting sun to soak up the energy and feel the warmth on her face. She saw a bird flying past the building looking down for a split second and letting out a distant squawk.

‘Life is odd,’ she thought to herself. First, you feel like you are stuck and stepping on the spot and the next moment you realize that the world around you is constantly changing and nothing stays the way it was. It had scared her many times in her life before, this thought that you constantly had to adjust to new realities. But she felt her perspective change in the last weeks. If nothing stays the way it is, negative experiences remain temporary and who knows what new doors open when others close. *You can only connect the dots looking backwards* was a phrase she had heard once and it felt more true than ever right here and now.

We make hundreds of decisions big and small every single day and yet most things in life are out of our control. We will never know how things would have been if we had made a different decision as we have no idea how much that would have changed. Decisions do not exist isolated, they are part of a huge web of actions all around us. We cannot control what happens to us, only how we choose to react to it. Even if through the flap of a butterfly's wing, we end up taking a completely different path in life, won't our morals, our conscience, our deepest self stay the same and therefore ultimately lead us to a similar point in our personal growth even if the circumstances around us might be very different?

There is no point in wondering *what would have been if...* What results from our decisions at the end of the day, is mostly out of our hands and we can only trust in our good intentions and that one day looking back we will think: 'I would not change a thing because every step of the way has made me who I am today.' Somehow this was calming.

Juliette was distracted from her thoughts when the music was turned up. George had packed away his guitar and instead music was blasting from a big speaker now. People started dancing. Zampanò was standing next to the playground with May in his arms, swirling her around and tossing her gently up in the air to make May scream of joy when being caught again. Bertha was standing next to Ben who was just closing his ice cream truck. She was watching the two with a smile on her face.

"Life is full of miracles," Ben commented following Bertha's gaze, then looking over to Juliette who was

now vividly talking with Jacky. Suddenly, Jacky peered over Juliette's shoulder and started laughing when Tobi, one of the Jefferson kids, clumsily tripped off her skateboard trying to copy a trick she had shown off just before. In an attempt to cover up his embarrassment, he leaped over to his two younger twin siblings and started to wrestle them to the ground. But he had underestimated their growth from the last months and soon all three were rolling around in the grass laughing and shouting at the same time until their older twin sisters rolled their eyes, walked over and separated them; almost getting sucked into the wrestling contest themselves.

When the sun set the atmosphere was becoming more calm, the kids were mostly brought to bed and everyone was sitting down while Nora served dessert. Pie with a flaky butter crust and filled with rich and ripe blueberries served with homemade vanilla-cinnamon ice cream on the side. A recipe she had learned during her new job at the restaurant around the corner.

Everyone fell silent with delight while slowly indulging in the sensation of the melting ice cream mixing with the sweet blueberries in their mouths. Mia closed her eyes and softly slid her hand into Marie's.

It was one of these moments where everyone was fully present. Just for a second, the world seemed to stand still for everyone to soak up every aspect of the situation. Food brings people together and this moment right here, was perfect.

Tomorrow, the world would start turning again, and with it would come all the worry, joy, exhaustion, struggle, wondering and hoping, but for this evening

the world was quiet and the universe was friendly. The group of neighbors, friends and families kept sitting together outside telling their stories and holding on to that night while one by one slowly went to bed tired, exhausted and yet full of energy.

Yes, tomorrow the world would start turning again, but for tonight nothing seemed worth worrying about, for tonight everything seemed possible.

After all, maybe it was.



Hi, I'm Robin!

Computer scientist, enthusiastic globetrotter and
now also a book author!

“What, you're a computer scientist? You don't look
like one!” How often I have heard this sentence.

What is he like, this ‘typical computer scientist’?

I am apparently not like him.

Hi there :)

I am Antonia, also simply called Toni. I am currently
studying my Master of Sport Science in Finland. I
travel a lot, I need good music in my daily routines
and I love to do all kinds of sports: From tennis to
bouldering to ballet, you can get me excited about
pretty much everything.

A big, anonymous apartment block and more than 30 authors filling this anonymous place with life.

Dive in to get to know the stories told by authors from all around the world who created a uniquely connected adventure in a totally new way.

Describing the ups and downs of the people living in these apartments, all with their own unique story, their ambitions, dreams, worries and moments of true happiness. Did they know each other? And however opposed and distant some might seem, don't they still have some things in common? Or was there even one thing everybody had in common?

Let's find out! Throwing ourselves into the kitchens of old cat ladies, the morning routines of large families, the absurd realities of the ice cream men from around the corner and the relationships and stories of all these people living so close to each other. After all, aren't we all basically one of them?

„Amazing book, amazing artwork!“ – Homer Simpson

„Tension, drama, love & harmony, what else would you expect from an excellent book? This is the bible of the 21st century!“ – The Pope

