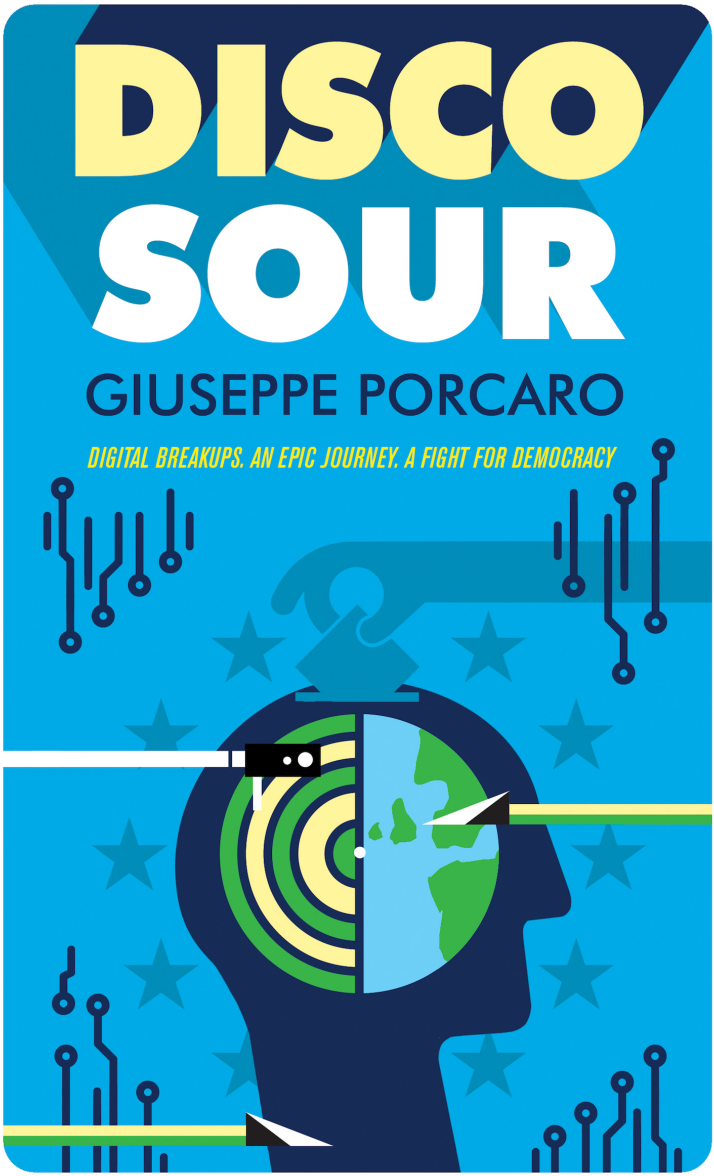

DISCO
SOUR
GIUSEPPE PORCARO
DIGITAL BREAKUPS. AN EPIC JOURNEY. A FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY

DISCO SOUR

Giuseppe Porcaro

Free digital re-release · 2026

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Preface to the 2026 re-release

My first attempt to write *Disco Sour*, back in November 2014, ended with a dislocated arm on a small Indonesian island.

I had arrived on Gili Meno with the romantic idea of writing a novel in a beach bungalow, coconut in hand, and finishing the manuscript in a matter of weeks. The coconut was quickly replaced by Bintang beer, and after three days I slipped in the mud following a tropical storm. A local osteopath attempted to put my arm back into place, with rather dramatic consequences. I ended up in hospital, my right hand swollen and purple, and my tropical literary retreat came to an abrupt end.

It took me another month to return to writing. By then, I had abandoned the fantasy of producing a novel in splendid isolation. What followed was a much longer, messier and ultimately more interesting experiment.

Rather than simply writing about a possible future, I decided to involve other people in imagining it.

Between March and July 2017, I organised a series of events around *Disco Sour*, bringing together artists, political thinkers, friends and strangers. These experiments allowed me to explore the novel's central questions outside the page, through encounters that were often unpredictable, playful and occasionally uncomfortable.

They also changed the story. Conversations found their way into dialogue, encounters influenced characters, and elements of the fictional world emerged from collective imagination.

Disco Sour was published in 2018, at a time when politics, technology and intimacy were becoming increasingly entangled.

Democracy seemed simultaneously indispensable and dysfunctional, while digital platforms were reorganising the ways we participated in public life and established personal relationships.

The novel follows Bastian, a European political activist trying to save democracy while his own love life, increasingly mediated by apps and algorithms, collapses around him.

One of the ideas running through the story is something I called *Tinderpolitics*.

I was fascinated by the uncomfortable resemblance between the transformation of political participation and the growing influence of dating platforms on intimate relationships. Both seemed to be moving towards a world of proliferating choices, immediate engagement and provisional commitments.

Why invest in a relationship, a political organisation or a collective project when another possibility is always just a swipe away?

In the novel, this parallel takes a deliberately absurd form. Political participation becomes increasingly automated, democracy risks being reduced to a succession of instantaneous preferences, and the protagonist struggles to navigate relationships in a world of seemingly endless alternatives.

But returning to *Disco Sour* eight years later, there is another idea that interests me even more than *Tinderpolitics*.

Towards the end of the novel, we encounter Janine Karasu's theory of connections and conjunctions.

Connections are essentially functional: they establish links between individuals and systems. Conjunctions are different. They transform

those who participate in them. Bodies, minds and experiences come together, generating something that did not exist before.

In Janine's theory, love does not simply connect two pre-existing individuals. It changes them. Their relationship produces something neither possessed independently.

What if relationships are not simply things that happen between individuals, but processes through which we become something different? What if encounters do not merely connect existing worlds, but participate in creating new ones?

These questions have continued to accompany me, both personally and creatively, through different places, relationships and experiences. They also inform my continuing interest in possible worlds, and in the futures that emerge when different lives, cultures and imaginaries meet.

Not every connection becomes a conjunction. Not every encounter produces something lasting. And not every transformation is necessarily desirable.

But perhaps the most interesting relationships are those whose consequences we cannot fully anticipate.

Looking back at the collective process through which I wrote *Disco Sour*, I realise that I was not simply exploring this idea through the characters. I was also experimenting with it through the very act of writing.

The performances, discussions and collaborations were not merely connections that helped me gather material. They were encounters that transformed the story itself.

In a sense, the novel was already an experiment in conjunction.

The collective experience continued when *Disco Sour* was published through Unbound, a British publisher experimenting with crowdfunding as an alternative model for bringing books into existence.

The novel was supported by people willing to take a chance on a story that had not yet become a published book. Some were friends, colleagues or acquaintances; others were people I had never met.

Their names remain in the original acknowledgements, which I have preserved in this re-release.

I am still grateful to them, not only for making the publication possible, but for becoming part of an experiment that blurred the boundaries between writing, artistic collaboration, political discussion and community-building.

The book was written by one person, but it was shaped and brought into the world by many.

The world has changed considerably since *Disco Sour* was published. We have lived through a pandemic, wars, accelerating technological transformations and new forms of political fragmentation. Artificial intelligence has become part of everyday life, while platforms have become even more deeply embedded in the ways we communicate, organise and relate to one another. The idea of algorithms choosing for us has moved from near-future speculation into everyday gestures.

Yet what interests me most in returning to the novel is not whether it anticipated any of these developments, but how the questions that animated it have continued to evolve.

I have chosen to leave the original text unchanged. Whatever its imperfections, it belongs to the moment in which it was imagined.

Unbound is no longer operating, and the publishing rights have returned to me. Rather than leave the novel suspended in the remains of its original publishing life, I have decided to make it freely available again, accompanied by this preface.

I like the idea that the book can continue to generate encounters of its own.

Giuseppe Porcaro
Brussels, November 2026

About the Author

Giuseppe Porcaro is a writer and political geographer interested in possible worlds, the future of politics, and the strange ways technology transforms our relationships.

His first novel, *Disco Sour*, was inspired in part by a journey to Chile in 2013, during which he managed to miss three connecting flights across two continents in 72 hours. What began as an improbable travel experience eventually became a speculative journey through democracy, algorithms, desire and digital breakups.

Alongside his writing, Giuseppe works in European foreign policy and strategic foresight. Through his creative project *Europarama*, he explores imagined futures, places and relationships through conversations, encounters and field notes.

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Epigraph

Разумеется, это непохоже на беспорядочные, неорганизованные выборы у древних, когда — смешно сказать, — даже неизвестен был заранее самый результат выборов. Строить государство на совершенно неучитываемых случайностях, вслепую — что может быть бессмысленней? И вот все же, оказывается, нужны были века, чтобы понять это.

It goes without saying that this does not resemble the disordered, disorganised elections of the Ancients, when – it seems funny to say it – the result of an election was not known beforehand. Building a government on totally unaccounted – for happenstance, blindly – what could be more senseless? And yet still, it turns out, it took centuries to understand this.

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Translation ©2006 Natasha Randall

BREAKUPSHOP

I was dumped a few hours before the party. It was a straightforward break-up, one of those that leaves no doubt that it's over forever. He bought a non-customised text message from the BreakupShop™, the Trojan® plan. It was the cheapest and meanest service they had, which at the time cost only around thirty xEUs, not even offering a personalised letter.

After I opened the message, I scrolled around my Morph®, and his number, along with all our tagged photos and his social media accounts, was instantly blocked or deleted. I had no way to reply to the message, which came from an untraceable number, and it informed me with cold, mechanical disinterest that I would be unable to contact him electronically ever again. I felt depressed, and I kept struggling with the straw in my gin and tonic. It had a vintage Greek flag on the top and was the kind of straw that keeps popping out of the glass because the air in it is lighter than the liquid. It was a major pain.

Another major pain was coming straight from my chest. Possibly from the hilus at the lung's root, where the blood vessels and airways pass into it, like thousands of straws. The pain was slowly spreading all over and reaching the pleura. My left lung was glued to my chest wall. I felt like I was dying.

The straw popped out of the glass, ejected by the bubbles of carbonated tonic, and it almost fell as soon as I was not keeping it in my right hand. I didn't want it to fall to the ground so I held onto it with my teeth, discreetly swapping the glass to my free hand. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I held on. The evening had

just started, and yet the enormous tide of thoughts rising inside me was at odds with my duties.

My name is Bastian Balthazar Bux. At that time, I was the executive director of The Federation®, the platform representing the decentralised and not-for-profit structures all over the old continent. After the civil war, the European Union™ was left as the only entity with a grip on the rule of law over continental Europe. Local bodies, such as cities, regions and independent microstates, kept on making decisions on their own, and associations, youth organisations, trade associations, religious councils, workers' leagues and the like were expanding their niche in politics. This was still very unregulated, and that is where The Federation® was playing a role, gathering those fragments together in the fragile and embryonic governance of the multitude.

It was a warm night in Lower Macedonia™, on the 29th of November, exactly two years after the armistice. We were near Thessaloniki's waterfront, in a stone building saved from the big fire of 1917. The old house was now hosting the Rover Hangover bar. The venue had a fabricated feels-like-home atmosphere, with old wood and stone holding the structure together, and an eclectic decor with pinball machines, butchers' tables and collectable pre-civil war posters. The delegates shouted around the three floors, drinking, gossiping and flirting.

'Cheers. To new beginnings,' my friend Lorenzo said. We'd known each other since before the civil war began. When the riots spread to set the rest of Europe on fire, people thought that the unrest against the financial crisis could be contained and would fade out quickly. But soon it became clear that the deployment of privately hired military contractors, combined with the lack of national armed forces, was not going to stop the violence. Lorenzo Poretti,

then president of the Italian Young Volunteers' Association, converted his organisation into a militia and became one of the commanders in chief whose numbers kept multiplying on the rebels' field. Eventually, after intense fighting for two long years all over the continent, the various factions came to an agreement. Lorenzo then joined The Federation®, where he represented the Southern Italian delegation.

'It's the first time I've heard about the BreakupShop™. Frankly, I'm not impressed,' I replied.

'That's the big new thing trending on all the social media sites. I even bought their services a couple of weeks ago to get rid of a girl I met on Snapchat®,' he said.

'Why would you use it? Couldn't you tell her yourself?'

'She proposed I meet her dad after our first date,' he replied. And he wasn't helping by telling me all this. I didn't know how exactly to react to my new status. I had my own issues with break-ups.

'Look, you fucked it up,' he continued.

'He sent me an automated bot message to break up with me,' I said.

'You fucked it up,' he repeated.

I didn't understand why he was saying that, and I thought, for a moment, it was the fault of the Bryan Adams song playing in the background, or the first two G&Ts I'd drunk since arriving. Or perhaps the break-up hangover itself.

'The Fifteenth Amendment was passed in the new statutes,' he said to change the subject. 'It's not what we agreed on.'

'C'mon. Don't bother me with that shit now. The General Assembly was a blast,' I replied. 'We made the structural changes. The

president of the European Commission endorsed them. The Governor of Lower Macedonia™ gave us his general blessing with home-grown wine.'

I got even more bothered by the shitty, nostalgic, Greek-flagged straw, not to mention the taste of cheap gin in my mouth. On top of everything, Bryan Fucking Adams was still playing in the background '(Everything I Do) I Do It for You' ℗1991 Bryan Adams, which was particularly annoying because it reminded me of a disastrous night at a friend's place long ago. That song had been playing on repeat for three hours while some girls attempted to transcribe the words and a friend tried to find the chords on his guitar.

In the present, Lorenzo was saying, 'You should have stepped into the discussion to explain it was not legal according to the European Fundamental Law to include three vice presidents, *cazzo*.'

I saw that coming. Typical Lorenzo. I loved him, but he enjoyed putting pressure on people out of the blue and far too much of it. He also loved to win small battles, thinking they were huge victories. But in doing so, he often set off time bombs that he wasn't even aware of, which I usually had to deal with later.

'We need more room for negotiation,' he continued. 'Things are getting much more sensitive now. The Federation® isn't just a token any more. The Nordics want their spot. The Southern Alliance can't be left out. Easterners are playing both sides,' he said.

Bryan Fucking Adams stopped singing and, given the circumstances, I didn't give a fuck if there were two vice presidents instead of three. We had just adopted statutory changes establishing regulations to fully execute the powers granted to The

Federation® by Article Eleven of the European Fundamental Law. What might have looked like a bureaucratic measure on the surface actually allowed The Federation® to be part of all the decisions of the European Union™, transforming it into a sort of second chamber alongside the European Parliament. Whether or not its candidates would have an extra jockeying spot for an additional vice president to use for horse-trading at the next election was, to be honest, of no real concern to me.

I stabbed the straw to break up some ice cubes. ‘Listen, it’s not a matter of legislation. I have said everything I have to say about the legislation. Go and ask the board about it, if you really want to complain to someone. They are the ones who cared so much about proposing the Fifteenth Amendment, not me,’ I said.

My argument with Lorenzo wasn’t going anywhere, but I was getting better at using the straw, pushing away the surfacing images of curly black hair, the scent of the chlorinated pool and the smell of pine trees, yellow shoelaces and sweat.

Lorenzo cared too much about including three or four vice presidents in the statutes. It didn’t appear to be just pure, wicked pleasure. He must have been cooking up a plan behind the scenes for the next election.

I said, ‘Can’t you just enjoy yourself, for once?’ And I left.

*

I wished that the evening could have just been about gin and tonic. I wished I could have simply enjoyed the fizziness of the bubbles and the aftertaste of a fresh cucumber in the glass. But what I had in the glass was not cucumber. And it was not Hendrick’s®. It was

hardly a piece of lemon and the Lower Macedonian gin was cheap, with a chemical aftertaste. I'd never heard of Lower Macedonian gin before and suspected it was a bathtub concoction developed during the war. Meanwhile, another one was being delivered to me. Again.

This time by Sandra, my deputy. She was one of the best on the team; not only smart and highly competent at what she did, she also had an acute political sensitivity.

'Bastian, this is to celebrate us. Cheers.' And she gave me a glass of the same stuff I was drinking before, so I smiled in fake appreciation. She could have bought me Hendrick's®. Or Bombay Sapphire®, at least. I took a deep breath and clinked glasses.

'How's it going?' I asked. 'You look splendid.'

She had combined retro-glam sparkles, an open-cut back and fluid plissés with modern strict layering and a muted colour scheme. From Filippa K™, I guessed.

'Thanks. It's going okay,' she replied, 'especially after the last five G&Ts. You look splendid, too.'

'Is that the drink, or do you really want to give me a compliment?' I asked.

'Ha. No, I really mean it. I also really loved your wooden tie earlier today,' she said. 'It was cool that you wore that during the General Assembly.'

And she started to dance. Not too obvious, just moving to the sound, keeping the conversational mode light. I had indeed worn a wooden tie during the Assembly, and she managed to improve my mood by praising the gesture. I used to be a great collector of ties, of all kinds and species. I had at least 350 of them. The wooden one

was a gift from my ex-boyfriend for my last birthday. Wearing a wooden tie was not a revolutionary act but, for me, it meant we shouldn't have been taking *ourselves* too seriously. By *ourselves,* I meant the Assembly, with its rituals of voting, changing statutes, the historical moment we lived in, and so on. But that afternoon seemed light years away.

'We should be proud,' I said, unconvincingly, moving my thoughts away from the tie and from my ex.

'We should be what?' she asked. The music was getting louder.

'We should be proud of what we pulled off in the past couple of days,' I repeated.

She nodded while continuing to kind-of-dance, and then she came closer again, this time whispering in my left ear. 'But I want to warn you,' she said, her breath smelling of the cheap gin, 'we all know you mean well for us. However, the trade unions are really pissed off with what we had to cope with,' she said, her speech slurring as the alcohol worked its way into her bloodstream.

So, the smile and the cheers were not totally celebratory or genuine. The Federation® had quite a strict trade union structure, and its employees were often prone to conflicts with the management.

'You're referring to the discussion we had about the Fifteenth Amendment to the statutes, I suppose,' I told her. 'Until midnight yesterday.'

'Well, that was a painful discussion, but the new app AssemblyManager® made the operations much easier for the secretariat. We were just bored watching the live feed from the delegates on our Morphs®, while they were fighting over the

number of vice presidents. That was ridiculous,' she continued, 'and seriously, I'm talking about the shitty food we had to swallow for the past four days. People within the secretariat are annoyed about that. They are not as cool as me, you know.' She kept dancing.

'We will fix it, Sandra. I can't say much more than that now. But I promise, we will fix it when I'm back in Brussels,' I said, and I asked her to relate to the others that I truly understood how that cheap deal with the hotel's caterer was far from ideal.

Lorenzo was now hugging a representative from the Student Union's delegation while he showed her some pictures on his phone. I envied the fact that they were enjoying the evening. I was angry with him because he had already ruined mine. And a batch of memories flooded in. The sweat, the pool, the smell of pine trees, the curly hair. I could not stand that they came back unexpectedly, piercing my brain on an endless loop. I felt like dissolving into them, falling, flowing and melting.

Then, in a burst of lucidity, I thought I could connect the dots again. I wanted to understand. I thought that if I could put together a rational explanation for what had happened, all that would disappear from my head, together with all the images, and I could rest a bit. Despite how hard I was trying to nail it down, I couldn't see any plausible explanations. I thought of myself as doomed to wander until the end, from love to love, without understanding and without relief.

*

I went to the bar by myself this time to avoid anyone else coming up to me with a cheap drink. It stank of smoke. I kept forgetting that

they had not banned cigarettes in Lower Macedonia™. My lungs were not happy. A guy in his early twenties was queuing at the counter next to me, holding a menu. He looked super cute, clean cut and fit. I was imagining his abs when he pushed his chest towards the counter. I noticed he was wearing a white T-shirt not long enough to cover the back of his waist, revealing a sexy striped boxer brief.

‘Hi, can I look at the menu, too?’ I asked.

‘Sure,’ he replied. ‘Where are you from?’ He passed me a thick wooden tablet with the names of the drinks drawn against a backdrop of a map of the continent.

‘Technically from Brussels, but I have been all over the place in the past few years,’ I said. ‘And you?’

‘I’m from here, well, not exactly from here. I come from Nea Gonia, in Halkidiki, but I study literature in Thessaloniki at the University of the Mediterranean™,’ he replied. He had a soft accent, especially when pronouncing the letter L, which seemed to me as if he was caressing it in his mouth. I was more and more fascinated.

‘I am Hephaestion. What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Bastian, Bastian Balthazar Bux,’ I replied.

‘And what do you do in life?’ he asked.

‘Well, during the daytime I run an organisation called The Federation®. In my spare time, I get dumped over BreakupShop™. That is why I need to get a drink, a strong one. What do you think I should get?’

‘If you want to drink like a local, you should try #TBT®,’ he said. ‘That’s the bar special.’ He showed me where #TBT® was marked

on the menu map. It cost fifteen Macedonian rupiahs, something like one and a half xEUs.

It was a shot made up of tequila, Baileys® and Tabasco®. I felt a punch in my gut just thinking how fucked up that stuff might taste. But I also felt like congratulating the bartender for the geopolitical imagery, and the owners of the Rover Hangover for having managed to register the trademark for such a widely known label. In order to get #TBT® registered, they would have to have been the first to use the mark for commercial use, which was clearly not the case. They possibly took advantage of the Privatisation Concordat that freed for purchase several hundreds of thousands of trademarks, brands and names when the armistice was signed. Or that was a fake trademark, illegally placed on their menu.

'Do you know where #TBT® originally comes from?' I asked.

'I think it used to refer to Throwback Thursday on Twitter®,' he said.

A friend of his, who was also there at the counter and happened to be eavesdropping on our conversation, jumped in. 'No, #TBT® is another way of saying TBH, to be honest,' he said.

'I heard someone else referring to it as Taco Bell Time,' Hephaestion said.

The thing is that #TBT was one of these chameleonic hashtags that changed over time. During the civil war, the media used #TBT for a while, as they always liked acronyms and hashtags to promote viewership. Since no one could tell what #TBT really referred to, in those gloomy days, collective confusion mounted. An analyst from an obscure think tank in Umeå postulated that #TBT was a bioweapon produced by the Russians. For others, #TBT resonated as a new sexually transmitted disease. It was common to see people

writing that they were #TBT-negative on their Grindr ©2009 Grindr LLC and Tinder ©2013 Tinder, Inc accounts, two sex dating apps first made popular back then.

‘Look at the map on the menu,’ I said, to end this argument once and for all. ‘What do you see?’

‘Well,’ Hephaestion said, ‘I see Lower Macedonia™ and the other regions of the European Union™. There is also the P.A.R.I.S.™, other city-states, the territories of the Swiss Confederation, including Bavaria and Vorarlberg, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden and Northern Ireland.’

‘Bravo!’ I said. ‘That’s exactly what #TBT® is about. The Big Transformation, the new borders after the war.’ I was shocked that, despite this having been a traumatic experience for us all, by the time I was in the Rover Hangover bar, #TBT® was just a nasty-sounding drink.

I had to try it, though. ‘All right, three #TBT®s, please,’ I asked the bartender.

Only a few years earlier, the older brothers and sisters of these two guys must have been fighting barely a few hundred metres from the bar, in the battle that ignited the war. That was, after all, the reason why we were having the General Assembly in Thessaloniki, symbolically commemorating the fact that, in a place where people once fought with guns, we were now rebuilding a new governance for the continent.

‘These are on me!’ I cheered to them, and I quickly downed it all, preventing that creamy monstrosity from being in close contact with my taste buds for too long. Then they both left to meet their friends, and I ordered something else.

TINDERPOLITICS

Gin and tonic again, and finally it was Hendrick's® with cucumber. But I'd forgotten about The Federation®'s board, a constant pain in my ass. I saw Dalia Gulbasciute, the most pathetic board member, from a distance. If she saw me, I would be in for another one of those contradictory critiques, where I would be blamed for something after being praised for all the hard work I'd done over the past few months. After all, the board was not very happy with the same amendment Lorenzo had mentioned, and they accused me of being the one manipulating the whole discussion. I was probably the only one who didn't care about it.

I tried to make myself invisible in the crowd. It is always helpful to pretend to be busy by staring at your phone. More than that, my chance meeting with Hephaestion had made me horny, and I decided that some fun with a cute local boy could be the natural remedy to get over my relationship drama. I unfolded my paper-thin Morph® and switched on Grindr ©2009 through the touch ID fingerprint sensor beneath the display, just in time to get a couple of messages.

When we meet (if we meet) , I will punish you for not prioritizing sex.

Huh. A very angry guy was going off at me for some reason. That was not improving my mood, especially since he was surely thinking about some degree of physical pain. I usually enjoy BDSM but couldn't deal with it in that specific moment, so I switched the app off.

I realised too late that other delegates in the bar might have poked me and asked me for sex online. That wouldn't have been a real

scandal, considering the open sexual habits The Federation®'s delegates were known for, but I opted to change to a standard, safer and more effective approach to invisibility: checking work emails. Regrettably, my overly busy attitude didn't put Dalia off, as I saw her moving towards me. I put my fingers inside the glass to try and pick up the slice of cucumber, and then I threw away the straw.

'Bastian, always knowing when to put your fingers in,' she said.

I'm sorry, but there is always a limit to what one can take. And I don't overestimate the fact that I could have been diplomatic at the time. I was truly putting up an effort to tame my deeper self, the one made predominantly of instinct, intuition and impulse, to balance more between Shinto and Karma. Think before acting. Focus on the facts of the situation. Speak clearly in simple language. Avoid highly emotional situations. Refuse to be interrupted. Be firm in your responses and opinions and stand by them.

Those were my rules, which I thought I'd eventually trademark at some point as 6-steps-diplomacy®. But that is another story and shall be told another time.

No matter how flirtatiously Dalia looked at me, no matter what kind of arguments she might have used to discharge the board from their own responsibilities and put them on my back, I would not fall into her trap.

Dalia stood just a few centimetres from my comfort zone, holding another infamous glass of cheap G&T – a gift, no doubt, in exchange for whichever complaint she wished to levy against me, the secretariat or the rest of the world.

'A drink for you, Bastian,' she said.

‘Sorry, I am dealing with a crisis,’ I replied.

And dove deep into my emails.

*

Emails were, at that time, offering a wealth of possibilities. They were the most potent drug I could assimilate during working hours. Mood switchers. Serotonin providers. Dopamine inhibitors. As well as occasionally causing tryptophan depletion, catecholamine depletion and alterations in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis.

‘Blink your eyes,’ Sandra said.

I had totally lost perception of the outside world.

‘What?’ I replied. And I showed her the pictures I had just received.

The circular badge of The League™ pictured a red and white hot air balloon emerging from a golden ballot box against the backdrop of a rising sun on a blue sky background. The embroidered patch had a traditional raised look and feel, achieved by densely stitching thicker threads into a twill fabric backing. And it reminded me of those colourful badges I used to wear on my scout uniform. That was pretty much the reason why, when deciding on the merchandising for The League of Young Voters™, I wanted to have its logo reproduced over one of those. The League™ was our new campaign for the European elections.

But there was more in these pictures. One of these badges was floating at zero gravity in the ISS®, the International Space Station®. The tiny badge, made of cotton fabric on iron-on backing, only nine centimetres in diameter, brightened with its garish colours in-between our blue planet and the endless black of space

as it floated. It had been photographed by astronauts Luca Parmitano and Karen Nyberg in the glass dome of the space station, the Cupola™, to celebrate the launch of the campaign.

‘This is not fake,’ I said.

When I was a kid, I always wanted to be an astronaut. Or, if not, I was sure to end up in a science fiction movie, doing some Luke Skywalker shit. My mum used to encourage me. I remember her bringing me sci-fi movies on VHS™ and scientific magazines about space travel, when we still lived together. She also enjoyed building Lego® spaceships and moon bases with me, which were regularly crashed in planetary accidents caused by my younger sister. Mum taught medieval history at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. When I was eighteen, I told her I wanted to study political anthropology and she confessed she was relieved. Apparently, she had been horrified for years by the remote possibility I would have ended up becoming a mechanical engineer like my father. Their relationship hadn’t ended well, and she used to blame engineering for it. My father, Caesar Augustus Bux, used to work for Sabena®, the failed Belgian state-owned airline.

The League™’s badge operation was, in the end, the closest thing to flying in space I had ever participated in. When we were planning the campaign, I began to cooperate with ESA®, the European Space Agency. The ESA® was interested in getting young people excited about exploring the galaxy. The Federation® was interested in getting young people to participate in politics after the civil war. A weird and random, but effective, match. Astronauts got involved and, after a flamboyant event in Brussels with a real hot air balloon taking off outside the European Parliament, the badge was sent up to the International Space Station® from Bajkonur in a cargo hold.

With that, The League™ badge earned its place in history as one of those weird objects that people send into space.

I ran around with my Morph®, showing the pictures to everyone like a little kid all excited with his new toy. I saw Lorenzo with the same girl as before. They were kissing on a leather sofa, unconcerned by what was going on around them. This time I didn't care, and for a moment I felt released from my gloomy thoughts. Gin and tonic again, to celebrate.

*

'He must be kidding. This logo is a joke,' I heard a voice behind me say.

It was Nathan, Nathan Ziggy Zukowski. The alleged illegitimate son of Roman Polanski. Everyone knew that. Born in Paris, raised in Krakow. A real shark but very much beloved because of his personal history and his manners. Sandra insisted on inviting him to Thessaloniki. He had initiated a set of new projects that I had not yet understood. I could again feel my pleura screaming. My left lung was pushing it, following my accelerated heartbeat.

'Bastian likes old Soviet Pioneer badges,' he continued.

I kept staring at my Morph®. Motionless.

'This guy is turning The Federation® into a kolkhoz,' he kept going on. 'What will he do next? Establish a Politburo?' He was blowing full steam ahead.

I took a deep breath, turned to him and said, 'Firstly, Soviet iconography has been de-ideologised by younger generations in post-communist regions.'

‘Man, we finally get to meet again.’ He smiled.

‘Secondly, what counts is not what you think about the logo,’ I said, cutting him short.

‘I thought you were hiding or something,’ he continued and tried to hug me.

‘Nathan, you have no idea…’ I stared at the pinball table beside him. The petals of a rose marked points for the winners. A tattooed girl was painted on the top of the rose as the final prize, a reminder of the gender-biased past I had thought completely finished. She had black curly hair, and the images flooded in.

Nevertheless, I continued. ‘The League™ is changing politics and will help us all move towards a solid postwar democracy.’

‘Democracy, as you know it, is doomed,’ he replied.

Holy Mary-Inanna, I thought, he’d transformed himself into another populist who would recite some bullshit about destroying political parties, getting rid of the elites, online voting, and so on. I was sick and tired of those people.

‘My new app, plebiscitum®, will allow anyone to express their opinions anytime, anywhere, and will include geolocalisation systems,’ he replied.

‘Basically Tinder® but for politics,’ I said.

‘Exactly, you’ve got it. Politics will be as easy as swiping. Likes, dislikes, matches,’ he said.

‘Fucking bullshit, Nathan,’ I replied.

‘And poof! Magic. No need for elected representatives,’ he continued. ‘Must I always remind you that you have no sense of

strategic understanding, Bastian?' He was smiling, calm and happy like a sheep peacefully grazing among orchard grass.

'What we need is neither fewer parties nor fewer politicians,' I said. 'We need parties mobilising the people and being mobilised by the people.'

'Sure. Like some wannabe politicians in this bar tonight,' he said. 'And why wouldn't people blame them? They caused a major part of the mess and the war.'

'You won't get me over there, Nathan,' I said.

'One of the key problems today is that politics is such a disgrace. Good people don't go into government,' he replied.

'I refuse to throw politicians in your technological trash bin just because some of them caused a mess,' I said.

'Man, you are just a cheap idealist full of passion. When it comes to controlling human beings, there is no better instrument than lies. Because, you see, humans live by beliefs. And beliefs can be manipulated. The power to manipulate beliefs is the only thing that counts.'

'I might be full of passion, but you are full of shit,' I said.

'Calm down, be Shinto, man. You will tell me if I'm right or wrong when the moment comes,' he said.

And he left me with a sense of fear and anger I could not explain.

I would have preferred to have simply punched the guy in the face with no mercy right then and there. He belonged to that dangerous class of human being that seems to preach good to cover their more nefarious intentions.

Being angry is a weird state of mind. I didn't express it often, but it festered in my chest and left little space for anything else. It made me irrational, and I lost the clarity with which to keep up the fight. In truth, I suffered in confrontational situations even though I had to handle them every day. My 6-steps-diplomacy® would have clearly recommended avoiding highly emotional situations. And I repeated to myself, 'If you are involved in a discussion that's already emotionally charged or argumentative, your attempts to be diplomatic will go unheard.' But I had no clue or any further tips on how to handle it.

I was lost. I was totally worn out.

*

Everyone wanted to shoot me. The Rover Hangover bar was a dusty, smoky saloon from *A Fistful of Dollars* ©1964 Sergio Leone. But I didn't get shot. And I didn't shoot. I stared at that circus and simply realised that I was part of it. So, I jumped on the roller coaster with another Hendrick's® in hand.

A girl with a tangle of curly black hair stared at me with big, dark eyes. At first I thought it was just a quick look around the room, but her gaze unmistakably found my eyes.

I love eye contact. It is one of the simplest, deepest forms of non-verbal communication. The term 'eye contact' was coined in the 1960s to define the act as a meaningful and important sign of confidence, respect and social communication. But I am sure people stared into each other's eyes well before hippie scientists gave it that meaning. Gazing into someone's eyes and having that look reciprocated has such a primal feeling.

‘Where are you from?’ I said, casually approaching her.

‘Troy,’ she replied.

‘Very epic,’ I said. And then I kissed her, seeing as that was the only appropriate move.

We kissed and kissed, and I got lost in her hair. I was drunk. She was drunk. I tried to control the situation but failed miserably. I turned out to be totally wasted. Totally out of control. Wild horses entered the dusty saloon and destroyed everything, turning it into a big, spacious green field. No more cyber break-ups. No more rich kids of famous directors or political apps. No more amendments to the statutes, fundamental laws or shitty food to complain about. What happened to the green field, the dusty saloon and the circus next, I don’t exactly remember.

My eyes were closed. Short flashes. The dance floor. The sweat. The bar counter. The men’s toilets. Her asking for shoelaces. Me giving them to her. A familiar situation. Unzipping my trousers. Tightening a knot. My eyes were closed. I was floating at zero gravity with the League of Young Voters™ badge. I was now with the astronaut Karen in the ISS® Cupola™, and I was giving her photo shoot instructions. I positioned the badge and left it floating free for the camera.

I had a closer look. It was not Karen. I could not have been mistaken. Her curly hair was sneaking out of the spacesuit. She looked at me. I was floating in my bedroom. It smelled like pine trees. I was floating under the blankets. There were actual blankets on the spaceship. But upside down.

My eyes were wide open. Space looked like my hotel room. No spaceship. Felt just like a hotel room. A messy room. I closed my eyes. I took another deep breath. Something was missing. My

boxers. No, something else. I opened my eyes. No alarm clock. Things fell down, and gravity was back. She wasn't there. A plane to catch. My head spinning at 78 rpm. I walked in zero gravity in my room. I never imagined it would have been so hard to walk in space. It was hard to find things in space. They were sticking all over the place. I had to pack and leave the station for the ultimate mission.

'Where is my phone?' I shouted.

'Don't lose your head. It must be the fault of zero gravity.' I thought I heard her voice.

'You will find it,' she said.

I replied, 'I'll go crazy if I don't.'

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I held on.

I had issues with break-ups, to say the least.

BATTLEFIELDS

My head was still spinning from the hangover, I had only a couple of hours until I had to rush to the airport and I was pissed off about losing my Morph®. I looked everywhere in the room, but I couldn't find it. The astronaut's voice, and the girl with the curly hair, had also disappeared.

I needed a plan. The only option I could think of was to try to claim a replacement. I logged into my laptop, which luckily was still there, and navigated to LongSunshine.eu. Life would seem less miserable to anyone looking at the company's website. Against the background of Baía do Sancho, the world's best beach according to TripAdvisor™, I could read an animated text that said, *Imagine: your phone is stolen. It falls on the ground and shatters into pieces. Here you are,suddenlyunreachable. Don't panic. Gain peace of mind.With our insurance,your phone is always covered against theftand accidents*. That was a reassuring message. I breathed deeply, blessing Long Sunshine ©2001 Insurances Inc.

The thing was, though, I had no clue what had happened to my Morph®. I couldn't prove that I'd lost it myself; in fact, it had probably actually been stolen. In that case, I should get a statement from the local police to help with my claim for a new one. That sounded like the most feasible plan I could come up with in my current state. I felt like dying, and had a strange feeling that something else was missing, something related to the previous night, but the memories were still too foggy. Then, just as I was about to close the laptop, I saw a pop-up message from The Federation®'s ZenDesk™, which had gone unnoticed before. It was Sandra.

I tried to send you lots of messages. Are you already on your way to the airport?

I opened the chat box and typed. *I lost my Morph®. It got stolen, not sure. It's all a bitdisorganisedhere*. I glanced around the room, which looked like a battlefield, still hoping to recognise the silver case of my Morph® somewhere.

Her message came a few seconds later. *Your new phone, shit.*

Yeah, shit.And I need to travel to the other side of the world in a few hours, I texted.

She wrote back, *Speakingof,I was trying to contact you about your trip. We just received the full programmeforthe conference,andI sentyou some important comments on it. You have an issue to sort out over there.*

I wondered what this issue could be.

After a short pause, another text appeared. *Check my mail as soon as you canbut you're in a hurry,so you better notmiss the plane.* She switched her status to offline.

I was curious, but she was right: I had no time, so I asked the hotel reception to call me a taxi instead.

*

The old, black Volkswagen Passat® smelled like an ashtray. It was rusty enough to not worry about driving it on the dusty streets on the outskirts of Thessaloniki, where the Egnatia Palace Hotel was located. A *matiasma,* an eye-shaped amulet to protect against the evil eye, was hanging from the rear-view mirror, and a worn-out copy of the sacred writings of The Blend® sat in the back pocket of

the front seat. How astounding that a bestseller conceived as an anti-religious pamphlet quickly became the keystone of the ecumenical syncretic creed.

The driver spoke only neo-Hellenic and continuously shouted at me, *'Astynomía eínai malákes!' The police are assholes*, or something like that, repeating it non-stop as if I could understand and partake in a discussion with her. Even if my translation was right, I didn't want to have a conversation. I was focused on sorting out my phone situation while getting to the airport on time.

We drove around the squalid periphery, passing the former free economic zone of Kalochori, home of many construction sites left unfinished when the housing bubble burst and the financial crisis hit the city just before the war. It was mostly desert now, but I could see from the car's window a few slum-like houses in the interstitial spaces between the abandoned buildings, all sporting outdoor, gas-powered generators that belched black steam. Brownish water flooded into small canals, highlighting the absence of a sewage system and pooling dangerously close to the electric wires scattered all over the ground.

There was a disproportionate number of CCTVs placed on the fences that used to mark the territory of building sites. These fences were at least twenty metres tall, and most of them had fallen apart, hitting the road. The same was true for the CCTVs, which made it difficult to pass through in the car.

The further we drove, the more I could make out the deserted casinos, a series of skeletons once designed to look like ancient Greek villas, Bulgarian castles and Ottoman palaces. An homage to Vegas, but with *tzatziki* sauce, and within the free economic zone. Solntsevskaya Bratva®, a powerful Russian Mafia™ group, provided most of the funding, while Matrix™, the largest Greek real estate

company, oversaw the operations on the ground. That Mafia™ franchise had hired a notorious criminal mastermind, Semion Mogilevich, to oversee their money laundering. He decided to reinvest Solntsevskaya Bratva®'s illicit gains in massive piles of collateralised debt obligations from the United States, through an Anglo-Turkish financial mediator in the City of London, and then reinvest that second round of profits in Kalochori development plans. These obligations were based on subprime mortgages sold as safe bets and, consequently, it was like trying to produce Champagne® from rotten eggs.

Through the window, I could see one of the few completed buildings standing on my left. It was a tower about forty stories tall; each floor was designed to rotate 360 degrees, resulting in an ever-changing shape for the tower. The building was now a squat, and the glass was broken here and there. But since it was solar-powered, the rotating system still functioned, making the whole scene look like a slow-motion loop of a shiny spaceship landing on a reddish planet.

This was a monument to Thessaloniki's moment of glory. Money flooded in, and the most expensive restaurants and hotels at the harbour were fully booked seven days a week. Kalochori was just the tip of the iceberg; the entire free economic zone had to employ countless migrant workers to cope with high demand during the first months of the operations, and everyone was directly involved in either construction or hospitality.

When the global financial bubble burst, the housing market was the first to be affected. Kalochori experienced mass evictions and foreclosures, and huge numbers of people were suddenly fired thanks to the free zone's exemptions from social protection legislation. A few of the construction sites were kept running for a

while to give the impression that the economy would be back on track soon, but their presence, combined with the lack of jobs, only accelerated the first insurrection that sparked the civil war.

*

Black curls of barbed wire stretched along the guardrail, hypnotising me, and the fog in my memory disappeared. I thought about the several speeches I had heard with the delegates over the past few days, the ones that mentioned the symbolism of the place we were in, the peace and the reconstruction process. But all those speeches, including those by the mayor and the president of The Federation®, were pale and vague reflections compared to the clarity scrolling past my window.

Important details surfaced from my muddy thoughts, carrying heaps of photograms from the night before. My conversation with Lorenzo, Nathan's deranged project and the girl I made out with, who I could now remember was the doppelgänger of one of my exes, Janine. It felt like Janine had been freed from the sarcophagus I'd slowly and painstakingly lowered into a deep corner of my temporal lobe.

Also, the full and vivid dream of the night before came back.

*

It started with me attending the launch of a Saturn V rocket, the same one that took men to the moon. The rocket had been put back in service and upgraded to send people on a flyby mission to Mars. NASA™ had specifically transformed one of the upper stages, after

the burst of all its liquid propellant, to be used as a workshop that would serve as life support for the crew during their journey.

I was attending the event from a terrace reserved for journalists and VIPs, very close to the launch pad, and I could see people, including my mother, who were even closer to the rocket. They blasted the Saturn off but, after a few seconds, I saw the service module and the third stage explode, burning and falling to the ground. Luckily they fell away on the opposite side from the terrace where I was standing but, even so, a lot of people were killed or injured. I ran out as fast as I could to avoid being burned, all the while thinking about my mother who, being closer to the rocket, was probably dead. Then I found her, injured but essentially okay.

Then the dream cut to my office, bigger than the real one, and everyone was talking about the blast, the rocket, the fact that this was the start of a new era. Something along the lines of aliens having arrived, or perhaps we'd discovered proof of their existence. My office turned into a conference room, with loudspeakers, projections and so on. I was still shocked by the launch pad accident and thinking about my injured mother.

I saw Janine among those listening to the briefing. She was smiling and happy and, while I was surprised to find her, I was also relieved, because at least it was a familiar face amidst this entire craziness. I bowed comically in her direction, saying how grateful I was that she had appeared. She laughed.

'Why the hell are you here?' I asked.

'I passed by on my way,' she said.

'I've been so scared. Where were you going?' I said.

‘To yoga class,’ she replied. ‘I’ve been so stiff lately, and stressed with all this mess, I thought I needed to regain my Shinto, but now everything is fine.’

‘Is it the war? What’s happening?’ I asked.

‘It’s complicated,’ she said and smiled. ‘Listen to them.’ *Everyone will be happy*, I read on the slide projected on the black wall.

Next the dream moved to the International Space Station® where I would take that famous picture of The League of Young Voters™ badge floating in zero gravity, against a background of blue oceans and white clouds. Janine followed me there, and everywhere. Then I had woken up in my messy hotel room.

Possibly all this was due to me kissing her doppelgänger, combined with a concealed side effect of the BreakupShop™. My ex-boyfriend had been erased from the operating system, while Janine had been released back into my sensory and emotional circuits.

The cab driver slowed down, gravel having replaced the tarmac on the road, a sign that we were leaving the demilitarised zone. ‘*Malákes*,’ she shouted again.

We slalomed between huge cubes of concrete set in an uneven pattern. The car was so slow, and the abandoned checkpoint stretched for a kilometre. Then we properly entered the former war zone’s wasteland. From the old, rusty Passat® I imagined the snipers hiding during the fighting. The upper floors looked like the most likely places for Kalashnikovs® to shoot in the direction of our taxi. It must have been a nightmare to drive here during the war. Even though it was all calm and quiet outside, I felt chills up my spine and a knot catch in my lungs when I attempted to take a deep breath. I could not tell if that was because of the war’s ghost, or Janine’s.

Outside we were not alone any more. From a distance, we could see blue flags waving atop three of the Union's armoured combat vehicles. Another checkpoint, this time far from abandoned. I looked at the clock inside the car; I was still doing all right for time, but it was going to get tight soon if I wanted to catch my flight.

*

The driver slowed down again, but she was not nervous. She must have got used to military controls all over the city, persistent even after the armistice. After all, Thessaloniki was still considered a sensitive spot. A rogue real estate company that had refused the ceasefire supported a small pocket of resistance that operated underground. They were not powerful, but they blew up grenades here and there every other week, enough to maintain disorder and tension.

I could see with some relief that the convoy was not deployed in the middle of the road. It was patrolling an unfinished, doughnut-shaped skyscraper.

'Papastratis, Papastratis,' said the taxi driver, indicating the top floor.

'Really?' I asked.

'*Naí*,' she replied, meaning *yes* in Neo-Hellenic.

'Stop, stop, *parakaló*,' I said.

I read a lot about the Papastratis' Doughnut, as everyone called it, although its official name was the Phaistos Disc™. It was supposed to reproduce on a gigantic scale the mysterious disc of fired clay from the Minoan palace of Phaistos on the island of Crete. If it had

been fully finished, two enormous, circular LED screens 138 metres in diameter would have covered it. The discs would have broadcast in high definition the spirals of stamped symbols from the original archaeological artefact, as well as advertisements, of course. On top of the building, a series of HoloProjectors® would have created special three-dimensional shows in the sky, proof of the grandeur of the new district. However, the building was never finished, and a huge hole was left in the centre, which gave it the look of a big, concrete doughnut.

Our car stopped on the roadside, a few metres from the first armoured vehicle. I got out and slowly walked across to reach the main gate for the deserted construction site. The soldiers were busy on their Morphs®, so they barely looked at me. Instead of the gate I found a monumental wall with a map of the continent carved in pink marble and a text etched in stone. I read out loud:

‘This place is a legacy of battles, sacks and sieges. Here, the Goths defeated the Roman Army in the year 380 AD. The Bulgarians were victorious over the Byzantines in 995 AD. The Byzantines defeated the Bulgarians in 1014. The Bulgarians overran the Byzantines in 1040, but lost once more later that year. At 11:35am on 9 November 2009, Alexi Papastratis was taken hostage and defenestrated from the twenty-fifth floor of the Phaistos Disc™, instigating the battle of Thessaloniki, and igniting the European civil war. Respect upon the dead. Peace upon future generations. Never again shall fraternal blood be spilled on this land, or across the continent. Never again.’

I was shaken. I looked towards the top floor. They had installed a special platform with a silver frame outside the window where he had fallen. From there a metallic rope ran down to the ground, where it attached to a hook on a statue of a lion crowned by an

eight-pointed star. The statue stood just in front of the marble wall, a tribute to Holy Mary-Inanna, our supreme goddess of love, beauty, sex, desire, fertility, war, combat and political power.

On the side of the wall, there was a small, decrepit shrine with a photo of Papastratis and a few burned candles. Alexi Papastratis was the owner of Matrix™, the company financed by the mighty Mogilevich. Papastratis had had this idea of transforming Kalochori into a theme park-style district for a long time. He tried with the Saudis, the Egyptians and even Chinese investors, before turning to Mogilevich and his collateralised debt obligations. In Thessaloniki, he was considered first as a saviour, then as a devil. When an anonymous youth group kidnapped and killed him, the zone went up in flames, catching local and national institutions by surprise. The protest became a symbol of revolt against the housing bubble burst, as well as the corruption and mediocrity of national elites in handling the situation.

I drew closer to inspect the last section of the memorial. It was a time capsule placed in a transparent cube filled with a gel suspension. I glanced at its contents. There were several objects, small flags of former nation states, coins and a pile of documents, including a copy of the infamous Constructions & Free Zones Act.

Ratified by most of the Union's members and proposed by Greece, under pressure from the Mafia™ and several other companies, the Act whitelisted the hiring of private troops to defend building sites and special economic zones, while prohibiting the use of air power and drones.

Gone were the days when national armies split into several competing organisations, such as Fernando Alejandro Martínez Security Services Inc., the G.O.I.™ or the Premier Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes®. The Act seemed the best tactic to

prevent the spread of violence, but instead it escalated Kalochori's insurrection into a continental civil war. Fences and closed-circuit cameras were installed to defend construction sites and free economic zones everywhere. Troops were hired by companies, landowners, free zones' managers and subcontractors to be in charge of scaffolding or the security of the site. People saw these as provocations, and they responded by smashing anything vaguely resembling a building area, including works in progress on the streets. Retaliation followed and, in a few weeks, the death toll skyrocketed.

The time capsule read: *Pleasedo not open until the year 3009. We cannot guess what the next millennium holds for the world. But we are confident that you will have a greater understanding of human politics, and that we will have made some contribution to that understanding. We wish you continued success in the pursuit of peace.*

I wondered if they would really know better in a thousand years.

I returned to the lion statue, bent my knee on his foot and prayed. 'Holy Mary-Inanna, be blessed for the reincarnation of all those who died, and for accompanying the living, so that they shall peacefully seek the three cardinal virtues: Karma, Shinto and Hedonism. Amen.'

Then I returned to the car, switching my thoughts to Janine, asking myself where she could have been in that very moment, what she would have said if she had been there with me. 'Clumsy boy,' she would probably have said, giving me a lesson on how to stand straight and tall and not let mobile phones fall apart or get lost. After that, she would have given me one of her signature pieces of advice that would have fixed everything, because she always knew best, and I would have followed, happily.

THESSALONIKI AIRPORT CRASH

We left the memorial. The taxi driver continued to insult the military and to scream '*Malákes,malákes*' as we passed by the patrol. I refocused on the Morph® issue and tried to keep Janine and the war out of my head.

After another long stretch of gravel road, we got back to asphalt and an inhabited zone. We finally pulled up in front of the police station. The structure didn't look to be in any better shape than the abandoned snipers' buildings we had left behind. The old Greek police station had been turned into an illegal ouzo distillery during the war. It still smelled of anise, but now the police were back.

Each region of the Union had established an autonomous civil police, strictly composed of a rotating system of volunteers, to save money. A European Bureau of Investigation®, EBI®, was also established and comprised highly skilled, recruited policemen. I initially thought EBI® could have had jurisdiction over the case of my missing phone. Technically speaking, it could have been a European criminal case, as I had bought it in Brussels. On the other hand, I thought, I was not going to disturb the EBI® just for an insurance certificate. Plus, it was better not to set foot in an EBI® office given the shattered state I was in, struggling with the morning after the night before.

My head was still spinning and, while walking in the dark, narrow corridors of the crumbling police station, I felt as if I had been locked in a squeaky space station. My brain was depressurised. I approached a volunteer officer at the reception desk. He was reading a translated copy of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* ©1968

Goscinny & Uderzo. I tried to explain why I was there and what had happened to my phone.

He didn't speak a word of any foreign language, and he had to search all over the building for someone knowing at least some rusty English before I could be dealt with. Finally, a tall, twenty-something woman with a scar on her left ear came down the stairs with a huge book in her hands. She must have been a former street fighter in the war, I suspected.

'*Parakaló*, wait, I read manual to know what do,' she said.

I replied, '*Efharisto*,' showing off one of the few words I knew in Neo-Hellenic. She seemed dedicated but a newbie, dealing with the criminal code as if she was searching in slow motion, page by page. My head was exploding. I knew that the new regional police were still developing their capacity and testing volunteer schemes, but I would have never imagined they didn't even have a digital code to hand, not to mention a translation device.

*

Waiting felt eternal and, of course, I didn't even have my phone to kill time with. The officer kept reading *Asterix*, but there weren't any other comics on his desk I could ask to borrow. On a corkboard, there was a notice for a missing cat, a list written in Neo-Hellenic – somewhat related to grocery shopping based on the brands of cleaning products I recognised – and a stained and scratched map of the town. Luckily, I noticed a yellowish piece of paper fixed to the decrepit wall with the Wi-Fi icon, *NETWORK: Ouzeria,* and *PWD: anis2010* marked down.

Despite my headache, I thought that this was possibly my only opportunity to read Sandra's message before going to the airport. I went back to the car. The taxi driver was smoking a cigarette and looking far away, towards the stretched line of the horizon over the seaside. I retrieved my laptop, went back inside and logged onto ZenDesk™.

From: Sandra Müller
Date: Tuesday , 26 November, 08:35
To: Bastian Balthazar Bux
Subject: A speech that might prove important

Bastian,

I didn't want to upset you during the party yesterday . Especially after you had that argument about T he League™ with Nathan Zukowski.

I ' ve been in touch with the organi s ers of the T hird International Conference on Voting Devi c es. They sent a revised agenda. You were copied in , but I guess you haven't seen it, as it was sent late because of the time difference , and , well, you were… busy.

See the attachment , there have been some changes to the program me . Y our presentation about the League of the Young Voters™ is now scheduled as the second morning session of the first day. But that is the least of our problems.

As you can see, instead of the working groups in the afternoon , which we initially agreed up on to get the m inisters to discuss and brainstorm the potential implementation of our campaign, now there are two slots for Nathan to present and discuss plebiscitum®
.

It is worrying that The League ™ has been downgraded to an other regional campaign , like any n on- g overnmental o rgani s ation. Notwithstanding the step backward that this would represent for The Federation ® , to be associated with other grant-seekers, I see us los ing political support for our initiative. The success of T he League ™ is strictly linked to empowering The Federation ® , n o matter what i s written in the Fundamental L aw. I f the public won't perceive us as effective and impactful ahead of the European elections , we' ll be seen again as a token istic platform. B ut you know all this .

More worrying is the feeling that there are deal s being arranged around plebiscitum ® . I text ed Pancho, our contact at the ministry , to ask for clarification, but his reply was vague , basically just saying that these changes were coming down the hierarchy, probably on the executive order of the Minister herself. He also tried to reassure me that your presentation timing was one of the best, as it will be just after the introduction and just before the coffee break. I don't buy this, tbh.

My advice is that you must stress that the central purpose of T he League ™ is to save politics as we know it , while plebiscitum ® will destroy it all – in – all. And be sure to clarify , once more , that the primary target of our campaign is to explain to young people what is at stake for them during elections , by mapping out the positions of each party in a non-partisan way .

Y o u should make an extra effort in your speech to ensure that these points get stuck in the m inisters ' minds . Try to use being the first to speak to your advantage. Get a couple of influential people on board during the coffee break , convince them to revert the program me on the spot , and at least include T he League ™ as a parallel session to Nathan's in the afternoon.

I am sure you ’ ll have some other ideas on how to handle the situation. Let’s continue to work out the strategy together , and move it in the right direction.

Ah, don’t forget our S kype ® conference with Dalia, to coordinate and align the follow-up of the General Assembly with the board. I’ll send you a reminder on your calendar, otherwise you’ll forget.

Good luck, and have a safe trip.

S .

*

That was some serious shit.

Sandra, as usual, was extremely good at untangling situations rationally and sketching a plan for them. She had both a natural predisposition for this, as well as a great deal of practice. Before the war, she must have handled such a variety of cases in her human resources department that she became a real expert on behavioural strategy. And when work environments mingled with politics, as in our case, that was an invaluable skill to have at hand.

Sitting in the police station’s waiting room, I was disappointed. I was supposed to fly to the other side of the world, mainly to get an enjoyable pause from all the European madness, and to come back with the validation of The League™’s official endorsement and funding. It was my understanding that this was just a matter of rubber-stamping, as we had an informal agreement already stitched together with the European Commission. The choice to send me instead of Sandra or another officer was mainly due to protocol. Now, not only was The League™’s funding at stake, but plebiscitum® might have scored our preferred lane instead.

It was not exactly clear to me what Nathan wanted to get out of the conference but, from our heated exchange the day before, it didn't promise to be anything trustworthy. This whole story started to have a bitter taste, like the taste of the cheap gin still fizzing in my stomach.

*

The police volunteer came back to the waiting room. 'Now I know,' she said. Her quest for the holy grail of a criminal code for phone thieves had been achieved.

'Police here collect points. Criminals pay, and we save money for jail. You know, jail costs a lot. The region here is poor. One point, one hundred xEUs.' She continued, 'Code says: Morph® thieves get twenty-five points, they pay, we both save one month of jail. You understand, *parakalo*?'

I was dazed, but I thought I got the gist of what she was saying. They might have a sort of charging system to save judiciary expenses. It seemed sensible for phone thieves, but I hoped it wasn't applied to cut-throats.

'I need a certificate for the insurance. Just write me one that says they stole my Morph® at the Rover Hangover Bar,' I said, and I repeated that sentence again very slowly to ensure she was getting my point.

'But Morph® twenty-five thief-points. Good deal for police,' she said.

'I don't give a shit about the points,' I said.

‘Yes, you right, if not possible to find thief, no points, no money,’ she replied.

‘Yes, I know, but I don’t need to find the thief. I just need the paper, the voucher,’ I insisted. I tried as convincingly as possible not to speak with my mouth open, which would reveal the smell of the gin and tonics from the previous night. But it was a hopeless mission. Carbon dioxide from tonic water and enzyme-processed gin were teaming up again and racing together to conquer my oesophagus and finally flood the world with a yellowish, greenish mixture.

‘*Ela*, *vous-cher*?’ she asked.

In a split second, all my defences surrendered. My oesophagus flooded like the shores of the Yellow River in China in 1938. The last barriers within the laryngeal portion of my pharynx were knocked down like the walls of Jericho. My face turned an unflattering shade somewhere between violet and orange.

I couldn’t understand a thing, but I told myself that if I could keep my mouth closed, everything would be all right. I would get my certificate.

If only I’d had the strength to push that stuff back into the haven of my stomach, *everyone would have been happy*. But I couldn’t, and the young police volunteer threw the book on the floor. It felt like the end of the world, the apocalypse, was about to happen. The semiliquid substance found its way up to my nasal cavity. My mouth was closed, but my eyes opened. I saw that mixture spewing out of my nose like a water fountain. I couldn’t move or say a thing.

After the astonishment, the embarrassment, the policewoman looked at me. Helpless. I was ashamed. On the floor, the manual was drowning slowly but steadily in the stinky liquid. My head was

exploding. I continued to vomit up everything inside my stomach, as well as any bit left of my shaking dignity.

She screamed, '*Oxénos échei party edó*,' literally meaning that the foreigner, me, was having a party. Another officer, an older man in an oversized uniform shirt, came out with a bucket of water and a mop and started to clean up the floor.

'*Myrízei san sapio gala*,' he said, meaning I smelled like rancid goat milk.

'For Morph® you get twenty-five thief-points. Good deal,' the woman said again, while the other officer cleaned up my spew.

'*Vromomaláka*,' the older cop screamed and continued mopping the floor, laughing.

'Okay. Twenty-five thief-points,' I repeated, embarrassed. I figured I should not insist on anything any more, just agree to charge those points to the thief, if they ever found out who he or she was, and go.

'Wait, wait. You are charged. Puking in police station, destroying criminal code, thirty-seven damage-points,' the volunteer officer said. 'But we make you discount. Thirty-seven damage-points minus twenty-five thief-points. You owe police twelve points. Twelve points,' she explained, 'one hundred and twenty xEUs. One hundred and twenty xEUs, one hundred and fifty thousand Lower Macedonian rupiahs,' she concluded. '*Parakaló!*'

That was a rip-off, but I was not at all in a negotiating position. I thought to myself 'Fuck that shit,' and gave them all the rupiahs I had left in my wallet without even counting.

I left that room as fast as I could. I returned to my taxi driver who, seeing the despair on my face, resumed shouting, '*Astynomía eínai*

malákes.' I started to understand what she had been trying to warn me about all along.

'Yes,' I replied. 'Totally *malákes*, fucking hell.'

*

I was afraid of how complicated it would be to travel to the other side of the world without my phone. If the police station was the prologue, it didn't forecast anything promising whatsoever. My flight was in less than an hour and a half. I had not made any progress on the insurance issue.

The last thing I could do, before telling myself I had exhausted all possibilities, was to call the insurance company directly. Explain the whole situation to them. See if I could get a police statement in a week's time when I returned to Brussels. But calling the insurance company was not that easy as I didn't have a phone. And time was ticking away.

The only person I could rely on was the taxi driver. Sometimes, the most complicated issues are sorted out in the easiest manner: here, that meant saying, '*Parakaló*, I need a phone' and making the phone sign with my hand. She kindly gave me her mobile without asking any questions. Given the circumstances, I accepted without attempting to explain too much. I called the insurance company.

'For English press 1, *pour le français appuyer sur 2*…'

I pressed 1 before the metallic voice gave the Dutch option.

'For information concerning insurance plans, press 1. For our new offers concerning holiday plans, press 2. For information regarding an open file, press 3. To claim damage or a theft, press 4…'

I pressed 4.

‘Please hold the line. All our lines are occupied, we are doing our best to serve you as soon as possible.’

In the meantime, we were already on the motorway to the airport.

‘Please hold the line.’

The taxi driver was switching stations on the radio. She stopped manoeuvring the FM bandwidth when she heard ‘Dignity’ □2008 Thessaloniki Airport Crash. This song had been the official student anthem during the war. QR codes for free downloads were painted at every city corner.

Every revolution has its own music, and that was the one for the European Civil War. Thessaloniki Airport Crash™ was a musical collective with a style that sounded like Vivian Girls playing Italo-disco, remixed à la Aphex Twin. The group staged unauthorised guerrilla performances in unusual public locations, which were then edited into music videos and posted on the internet. The collective’s lyrical themes included opposition to former Greek President Nikolaos Michaloliakos, whom the group considered a dictator, and to his links with the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church. Their hits were the naked cry of a generation.

‘Please hold the line. All our lines are occupied. Please hold the line.’

The song made the last bit of the route to the airport feel very dramatic. I started to feel bad for the taxi driver who was paying for the phone call.

‘Please hold the line.’

The metallic voice seemed, for a second, to simply be making fun of me and my situation. I wondered if metallic voices could have feelings.

‘Please hold the line.’

The Mediterranean Sea was on my right. It looked so blue and peaceful.

‘Please hold the. *Bip*.’ A man with a Jamaican accent finally answered. ‘Good morning, sir, what can I do for you?’

I once read that Jamaica had been one of the first nations to step into the call centre outsourcing industry. The same article argued that global organisations have always preferred outsourcing call centre services to Jamaica, in comparison to China, the Philippines, Malaysia and other Asian countries, because they offered a wider variety of advantages than other countries could, including a higher level of spoken English.

‘Hello, I am one of your clients, and I wanted to know if I can file a claim for my phone as it was stolen yesterday. I am travelling for business, and I haven’t been able to get a police statement yet,’ I said.

‘Can you tell me what happened, sir?’ he replied.

This was the moment where I had to make up a credible story, as I didn’t know what had actually happened.

I attempted a vague, believable version of the facts. ‘I was in a bar called Rover Hangover Bar yesterday evening, and someone stole my Morph® from my coat.’

‘Can you please be more precise, sir? Where was the coat? How did they steal it, sir?’ He was speaking very quickly, in a very strong accent.

‘I can’t really say exactly how it happened because I left the coat hanging in the bar, and when I reclaimed the coat, the phone was no longer there. But I am not sure,’ I said.

‘I am sorry, sir. It is not possible to refund you because we only cover violent theft with your insurance plan, sir. And you didn’t experience any violence,’ he replied apologetically.

I tried to make up something. ‘Well, as I said, I’m not sure what happened. It could have been that someone pushed me while I was leaving and took it. Actually, now that I think back, there was a guy that pushed me hard while leaving the place. He was very violent.’

‘I am sorry, sir, but your previous testimony has been recorded while you answered my question, sir.’

‘But I was only thinking out loud, not giving testimony!’ I shouted at him.

‘I am sorry, sir, I cannot erase the testimony from the system any more. Sir, you cannot withdraw your version of facts. I am very sorry, sir,’ he replied in the same fast-paced, apologetic tone.

‘But it is impossible that there is no way to get it reversed!’ I almost cried.

‘Thank you very much for calling, sir.’ And he hung up.

‘Fuck you, sir,’ I thought.

FLUSH-HOLE CREATURES

The Bavarian market was full of visitors. Wooden decorations and Swiss flags for sale. Small Santa Clauses riding reindeer with little elves, strictly made in Australia. The scent of sauerkraut was all over the place, but during the Revelation Festival, no traditional würsts were allowed, in order to observe the traditional forty days' vegan detox before Christmas. I started sneezing, which was the first warning sign of a peculiar allergic reaction I'd developed to the song 'El Cóndor Pasa'.

A generic Indios band was playing an awful flute version of that Simon and Garfunkel tune. Whenever I heard it, my white blood cells started producing a certain type of antibody that sent histamine into the cells of my nose, throat, lungs, stomach, intestines and skin. Usually the reaction was mild, but sometimes it went so far as to seriously itch around my ears and down my neck.

While digging through the rabbit hole of Disney® archives, I had discovered the song was not Simon and Garfunkel's but an orchestral musical piece by a certain Daniel Alomía Robles from Peru, who was inspired by traditional Andean folk tunes to write it in 1913. Simon and Garfunkel covered it on their *Bridge Over Troubled Water* 1970 album, for the joy of global listeners, but didn't mention Robles at all in the credits. The story became more intriguing when the composer's son filed a copyright lawsuit against Simon and Garfunkel. I didn't imagine such kinds of lawsuits were even possible before the Privatisation Concordat, when trademarks became a compulsory part of our common language.

To get back to the song, though, it was only when Peru declared it part of its national cultural heritage fifty or sixty years ago that cover Indios bands became an invasive pandemic in public spaces around the world, from the Gallery Mall on Baltimore's Waterfront to the MAC®, the Munich Airport Centre®, where I was waiting to catch my connecting flight to the P.A.R.I.S.™.

Now, I wondered, why not some *Schlager*?

I entered the nearest original equipment manufacturers' showroom to look at the Nokia® stand. By then I had already made up my mind that there were only two possibilities to explain my loss. Either I had dropped my phone somewhere in between the bar and the hotel while drunk, or Janine's doppelgänger had taken it. As I had no way to find that out, and the insurance option had failed, I'd better get a new one.

'Good afternoon, mister,' said a middle-aged clerk standing behind a sensorial screen. The showroom was white and spacious, with dozens of manufacturers' stands. Above my head, a series of holograms displayed products that were not in stock but could have been purchased by travellers on connecting flights, and delivered immediately outside the cabin at the landing destination. I was optimistic.

'We have very special Revelation Festival offers. Check out our waterproof Christmas tree,' she said.

The clerk's fluorescent green onesie hurt my eyes, along with the golden dragon and the little bird of the Sinhang® logo embroidered on her hat. On her yellow name tag, TERRY REINTKE was marked in violet capital fonts. Sinhang® used to be the biggest Chinese original equipment manufacturers' retailer group. They had

gradually taken over airport shopping malls by 2032, though they went bankrupt two years later.

‘Very special tree, recharges aquarium fish drones with a timer,’ she continued, showing me a plastic tree with coloured LED lights under a pod of water, where three red fish drones swam.

‘I need a Nokia® Morph®, Ms Reintke,’ I replied.

‘I can give you a very good price for the tree,’ she answered.

‘I like the tree a lot, but I need a Morph®. Do you have one?’ I asked, trying to be nice.

I missed my transparent Morph® so much, with its flexible, anti-scratch, bendable surface; its changing colour, which adapted to my clothes and moods; and its micro-solar cells, charging even on a rainy day with the slightest solar power. But above all, I missed MySpacing, Instagramming, Grindring, Tindering and Snapping.

‘The trade quota applies for Morph®. Very, very expensive, so very few here,’ she explained, pointing at the Nokia® stand. It was indeed one of the smallest in the showroom, displaying a couple of old Symbian™ and one Morph®, which I hoped to make mine.

‘You can also buy a Galaxy™, or we even have the iPhone®,’ she offered.

A Galaxy™ was out of the question, while the iPhone® sounded dubious. The truth is that I didn’t have a choice. After buying my first Morph®, I found it difficult to move on to products made by someone else without losing everything I had already paid for. They had designed the device to have desirable offers and features, not to mention switching costs that created consumer lock-in, but this hadn’t been due to a master plan. It wasn’t like when Nokia® rolled

out a calculated product roadmap over a decade or two. Rather, they set a strategic target to be the digital hub for consumers. The rest came from a long series of experiments that had created the ecosystem I was trapped in.

‘How much for that Morph®?’ I asked.

‘Twelve hundred Swiss Francs,’ she replied. That was around 1500 xEUs at the current exchange rate, which was a ridiculously high price. But still, I would have paid it.

‘Are you Swiss?’ she asked.

‘No, I have a European passport,’ I replied.

‘Ah, then it will be very, very complicated to make a Swiss Morph® work for you. You need a Swiss passport for a subscription. I can’t sell foreigners a subscription. Swiss Morphs® only work with a subscription,’ she said. Terry Reintke seemed obsessed with the words ‘very’ and ‘subscription’.

‘You can also buy a waterproof Christmas tree, no subscription. Very cheap,’ she persisted. In the meantime, a micro-pump started to feed the fish from the top of the tree. The dried plankton made a snow-like effect against the vast panorama of the Swiss Alps painted on the background. I thanked her and left the showroom, subtly scratching my neck. I was done with Christmas trees, fish pods, Chinese retailers, traditional Bavarian style, Peruvian flutes and airport malls.

*

I bought a beer and a pretzel, plugged my headphones into my PonoPlayer™ and went back to the terminal. The departure hall

minimalism stood in stark contrast to the postmodern pastiche of the earlier Munich Airport Centre® mall. It was a stunning example of geometric purity, its freshness reminding me of a Bauhaus villa from 1924. Every architectural detail was conceived to look banal at first glance, but a closer look revealed specific functions you wouldn't have thought to look for. A black square in the wall was a free coffee machine; a seemingly normal travelator calibrated its speed according to the weight and the amount of people on it; the gates looked like a series of white, metallic cubes, but their walls were entirely covered in OLED™ displays.

I pressed play, and the full-length digital master of *Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space* □1997 Spiritualized® was diffused in surround sound. It was all incredibly fine, light and real. Everything seemed to be in the right place, and even if something was wrong, all I had to do was just let go.

Real travel like this, as opposed to commuting, reminded me of when I first started taking long-distance trips alone on trains. I was fifteen or sixteen years old. Mobile phones were not a big thing yet. To call home during trips I would buy prepaid phone cards or use coins. I even had a collection of used prepaid phone cards from all over the world because they were such a trendy thing to collect.

Trains had separate compartments back then, with a maximum of six people in each. And that was fun, because I made a point of examining the carriages to choose the kind of people I wanted to travel with. I especially liked foreign tourists; I could listen to them talk about faraway cities for hours. They would ask me questions, and I would give them tips on what to see during their trip.

The whole idea of travelling was tangible and physical. There even used to be night trains, a smart, simple concept: you jumped on a train in the evening only to wake up in a city on the other side of

the continent the next morning. There were borders but no security scans at the stations. I felt it was the vanguard of the continent's future: peaceful and united. On top of this, it was just so practical, even more than planes, because you didn't have to waste time during the day. If the trip was too long, there was a bed and even a restaurant car. For me, that was real travelling, and I loved it.

There was a specific smell, especially in the summer: oxidised iron mixed with dust and old wood. That was the smell of the rails, which pervaded the corridors and the toilets, in the rare case they were clean. The toilets' flush was activated by a pedal, mechanically sliding open a lid and revealing a hole in the floor of the train. I remember staring at the stones below, hypnotised, after taking a leak. It was kind of scary, too, like, a hole in the train, what could have jumped from it? Think about the remote chance you would be sitting there, while the train passed through a tunnel. I heard all sorts of crazy stories about strange creatures living in the cracks of the rails in the dark, ready to enter through the hole.

Once, my parents sent me with my little sister to spend a month with our grandmother in the South of France. School was out, my mum was busy with exams at university and my father was travelling, as usual. It was hot as hell, there was no air conditioning in those old carriages, and the oxidised iron smell pierced the nose. To keep my sister calm, I told her about the scary creatures of the flush-hole before we made the trip. She was seven or eight years old, and she was excited to be on a train without our parents for the first time.

My mum was stressed out. On the platform she spoke to me, as she never had before, about my duty to bring my sister safe and sound to our destination. It was probably the first time I'd been assigned such a big responsibility, and I felt a huge pressure, the same kind

that was slowly but constantly mounting to deliver that speech in Chile. But on the train with my sister, all I had to do was to keep watching her sitting beside me in the same train compartment.

There was a couple from New Zealand sitting in front of us, and in the middle of a conversation I don't really remember, we passed through a tunnel. I turned my head to check on my sister, but she wasn't there. In the same moment, I heard her screaming from down the corridor.

I ran towards her voice. She was locked in the restroom and couldn't get out. When we were in the tunnel, she had panicked over the creatures that might have been jumping from the flush-hole and tried to get out, but something was wrong with the lock. She kept on screaming, and I could not calm her down. After all, it was my fault she feared imaginary creatures from the flush-hole. Finally, a train attendant came to unlock the door, and she was released. She was pale, but she started to punch my legs and chest with all her strength.

When we arrived in Aix-en-Provence, she told my grandmother everything, and I was blamed for the rest of the summer for having told her the story of the flush-hole creatures. I was never allowed to take care of her alone again. It was useless to explain that I had told the story to keep her calm and quiet. It was the first, but not the last, time I was blamed for trying to get it right. Since then, failing to get something right has become one of my biggest fears.

That was also the last time I spoke to tourists on a train and, since then, travelling has lost its mystical and sacred aura for me. It has transformed into banal commuting. A large-scale, stressful, uncomfortable and wearing commute.

SPITZENKANDIDATEN

I should have started to write the speech for the conference while waiting for the flight. I had plenty of time, but I continued to stress over the last email from Sandra. I took the badge of The League of Young Voters™ from my pocket. While looking at it, my initial euphoria about the ISS® photos seemed misplaced and light years away.

I also feared serious gaps in the information-gathering capacity of The Federation®. I couldn't stop thinking about how Nathan had slipped through, and why Sandra had even invited him to our General Assembly. On the other hand, we'd been focusing on internal restructuring and statutory changes. It was reasonable to think that Nathan's endeavours, which initially looked like just another digital start-up, weren't as closely monitored. If there was a silver lining to the situation, at least all of this was keeping Janine out of my mind for the time being. I could still not believe how she got back obsessively from the deep past, while my most recent ex-boyfriend seemed erased from my memories as well as my digital devices.

I switched on my laptop, but instead of writing, I checked MySpace®. Nathan was smiling while boarding a direct flight from Istanbul to Santiago. The caption read, *On my way to Chile to change the world*. He had 327 likes, 53 comments and 21 shares, after posting only three hours before. He must have been above the Atlantic by then, enjoying gin and tonic in business class.

Have you seen Nathan'sphoto? I wrote to Sandra, who happened to be connected to The Federation®'s ZenDesk™.

Have you read my message? Did you catchyour plane? she wrote back.

I mean, why am I not on the same flight? I asked again.

Ask Pancho, we didn’ttake care of your ticket. It was their travel agencyfrom Chile sortingitout, she replied.

Slight paranoia mounted inside my chest the more I thought about the whole situation.

Whatever, you just need to prepare a convincing speech. Stay serene, she wrote. But it was hard to put anything together on the League of Young Voters™ or about paradigm shifts in democratic systems. The more I processed the importance of the speech, the less I could think about its structure. I feared I would end up running through scratch notes at the last minute or even during the panel. I was getting into bad Karma and losing my Shinto. Panic was setting in. I could feel an unpleasant state of inner turmoil slowly kicking inside my brain. I was nervous. I started to pace my thoughts back and forth, circling around mentally: they call it performance anxiety.

By the way, have you checked NewsPage™? Sandra continued.

Not yet, it’s candidates’presentation day, right? I opened NewsPage™ to see elections all over. The following spring, Europe would have its first election since the war.

Yes, and this should be the moment to push to fund The League™. Either it makes a splash or The Federation® becomesirrelevant, she wrote.

I swiped around the news. Everyone was going crazy about Rob Comley. During his campaign’s launch, he theatrically burned a

European passport on stage. He declared that this was his electoral programme, as simple as it could get.

Well, either Europe makes a splash,or it dies forever, I typed.

Comley was a young, rising star, and people had become used to his performances. When the United Kingdom exited the European Union™, there was a split between UKIP® and its youth wing, Young Independence, YI™, because the latter claimed that the party's goal should have been to destroy the Union itself, not just to pull the UK out. Comley was, back then, the president of YI™. He took a ferry to France, jumped on a bus and declared to the press, *Like the Ostrogothstook over Rome, we will take over Brussels*. He built up the new concept of the Mobile Party™, a sort of mass movement changing its base daily. He organised rave parties and provided free drugs for his acolytes. His view of the continent was to reject the European Fundamental Law, and to live the spirit of the frontier as though continental Europe was the new Wild West.

Sandra texted back. *I mean, what I want… what Ineed, isforthe world toget back tosome sort ofnormality. If The Federation®is the only tool Ihave to contribute tothis, I won't give it up.*

I scrolled down NewsPage™ again. The rest of the *spitzenkandidaten* were a collection of clichés. Marie-Christine Arnautu, the leader of the Front National™, was opening a bottle of Champagne® on a sunny terrace in San Remo together with the exiled former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

They were more stylish than their British opponents, Arnautu especially. She headed a handful of nostalgic nationalists escaped from the Parisian Anarchist Regional Independent State, had formed a new coalition and was now fighting for the Big European Restoration, #BER opposed to #TBT. She aimed to convene a

congress after the elections, with pre-war presidents and prime ministers from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland. The Restoration Congress would have decided on a ‘new’ territorial divide for the whole continent.

Sandra kept texting. *I won’t sit and watchNathan or any of those spooky candidatesruin it. I already sat and watched once,I won’t do it again.*

It was hard to disagree with her; I knew where she was coming from. But she only increased my anxiety and my fear of being blamed if something went wrong.

You’re not sitting and watching, I texted back.

As I mentioned, before the war, Sandra Müller worked as a human resources advisor. This was for Volkswagen® at the Export Processing Zone of Wolfsburg, also known as EPZ-W. Her factory used to be the biggest exporter of European cars to the United States until President Sarah Palin closed its borders and implemented strict autarchy, in reaction to the financial crisis. The export zone quickly stagnated, and the factory had to close.

Sandra got assigned the unlucky task of firing individual workers. Her managers praised her for the humane way she dealt with the situation, but the workers didn’t share their point of view. Their rage escalated in fierce protests outside the factory. That was a few days after Kalochori’s riots inflamed Greece, so the landowners of the EPZ-W got to be among the first to implement the Construction & Free Zones Acts outside of Greece.

I typed again. *If you weren’t collecting all the info I would just be drinking my beer and eating a pretzelwithoutcaring about the speech.* Which admittedly had been my initial plan.

As Sandra once told me, she was in her office when the military contractors arrived without notifying the people at the factory. From her window, she saw assault troops firing upon her workers. Over the next two days, she was stuck together with colleagues, the battle raging outside, until the helicopters sent by Allianz® Insurance evacuated the management.

She typed back, *I know, but I could do more.*

They flew her straight to the special economic zone of Mut, in the Egyptian desert, which had been transformed into a refugee camp managed by Emirates®. The camp was hell: overcrowded, food and water rationed. The press only covered it during the occasional incident with anti-refugee movements, which multiplied all over Egypt and the Middle East.

Have you seen Truszczyński? I wrote, switching back to the *spitzenkandidaten*. On my screen, I was watching the greyish Jan Truszczyński, a former director-general at the European Commission who initiated the Movement of Stakeholders, the MOS®. He was standing in his black suit and purple tie. He held a smoking pipe with his hands together, forming a weird rhombus with his thumbs and forefingers that looked like a vagina.

I swiped his program's platform and found a 3D slide with animated text that said, *I am not really a techie. I still prefer the feel of a newspaper in my hands. And I am convinced that the complexity of European politics cannot always be explained in a 280-character tweet. But you don't have to be a techie to believe in technology!* A couple of slides followed with his proposal to solve the political crisis with direct democracy.

Sandra texted back, *I'm reading about himnow,it'sworrying. Clearly,he's including plebiscitum® in the programme, without mentioning it.*

It made sense. Getting rid of general elections in the name of tinderpolitics seemed a rather appealing solution for bureaucrats like him. This would weaken The Federation®, too, as associations and other intermediary bodies would be considered a waste of time and resources.

Anyway, I need to leave you, they are taking us to Elidis, to eat the best TrigonaPanoramatos™ in town, she wrote.

What? I replied.

TrigonaPanoramatos™, crunchy pastry funnels soaked in syrup and filled with cream. Apopularthing in Thessaloniki, she typed.

Sounds likea hangover cure,will you hacka black-marketdelivery for me? :–p I wrote back half seriously, as those trigonometric pastries sounded delicious. Also, I knew that Sandra coded for fun, and that she had hacked Emirates®' distribution system back when she was at the Mut refugee camp. She increased her deliveries of food and convenience products, and started a small but lucrative black-market business inside the zone. She had always claimed it was for survival, but I'm sure she took some pleasure in doing it, if only to piss off that stingy squad managing the camp.

Lol, I'll see what I can do about it. Give me news on the way, and if you need anything just connect here, I'll check in on my phone. Talk to youlaterfor theboard catch-up. And she disconnected.

STRANDED

‘Pancho, we’ve got a problem,’ I said.

Francisco, aka Pancho, was our contact at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile.

‘*Hola Bastiàn*, what is going on?’ He waved over a pixellated Skype® link. I could barely see his goatee and golden-framed glasses.

‘The flight from Munich to the Parisian Anarchist Regional Independent State has been delayed over three hours, and I will miss the connecting flight to Santiago,’ I said.

I should have boarded half an hour ago. At the beginning I didn’t even notice, absorbed as I was by my fruitless attempt to write the speech. On my way to the loo, every single OLED™ screen was blinking to warn us about the delays.

There was chaos, angry passengers queuing at the transfer desks. People were pressing airline staff to allow them to make transfers elsewhere.

The airport was full of pilgrims from every continent, all going to the Revelation Festival in Mecca, Lourdes or Varanasi. Munich was a hub for C-Church®, which held the monopoly on religious tours. Because of the delays, they set up special information points for pilgrims, distributing Lourdes bottled water, mats for improvised collective yoga sessions and the seal of Holy Mary-Inanna as compensation for the discomfort.

This was one of the now-familiar red alerts given by the air traffic control of Switzerland®. Authorities randomly closed the skies to

run checks and ensure that no aircraft would illegally fly from the European Union™ airspace.

I tried to convince both the Air France® and Lufthansa® desks to reroute me to Santiago via Mexico City or Bogotá, without success. I even tried with the C-Church®, as they had special arrangements for charter planes, but they asked to see my pilgrimage visa before even speaking to me. Without my phone at hand, I couldn't even show them my Blend® app as proof of my religious subscription. I was begging for information, checking several screens in different corners of the terminal, each one giving me a different piece of information. I felt so miserable.

'We will also check with our travel company and let you know,' Pancho replied and closed the conversation.

Twenty minutes later I reopened my mailbox.

From: Francisco Trafia
Date: Tuesday 26 November, 21:35
To: Bastian Balthazar Bux
Cc: Rosalyn Fusa , Sandra Müller
Subject: R e : R e : COCHA – Ticket – BASTIAN/BUX.

Dear Bastian,

We are so sorry that you will miss the connecting flight in the P.A.R.I.S . ™ .

Unfortunately, there won't be any alternative for you to arrive on time for your speaking slot on Thursday morning . The earliest you might arrive would be on Friday morning, but t he conference ends at 1 2 .00. Your plane would arrive at 09.55 , and you would be here , at best , around 11.30 if there's no traffic. So , it doesn't make sense for you to be there for half an hour. We 've arranged a ticket

for you to go back to Brussels from Munich at 0 8.45 tomorrow morning. You ’ll find it attached.

All the best,

Pancho

*

‘Why the fuck is he asking me to go back to Brussels?’ I screamed out loud and jumped out of my seat. I thought they hadn’t even bothered to check any other connecting flights from other cities. I refused to let Nathan celebrate his victory without me even being there to attempt some damage control. I also couldn’t stand the self-inflicted blame I would feel if I didn’t make it. I was truly pissed off.

The plane for the P.A.R.I.S.™ was finally boarding. I looked at my boarding pass, then at the screen again, and smiled. Maybe I wouldn’t read any email yet, I thought.

*

From: Bastian Balthazar Bux
Date: Tuesday 26 November, 23:55
To: Francisco Trafia
Cc: Rosalyn Fusa , Sandra Müller
Subject: R e : R e : R e : COCHA – Ticket – BASTIAN/BUX.

Dear Pancho,

I’ve just arrived in the P.A.R.I.S.™ .

I managed to rebook on a flight via São Paulo, and I will land in Santiago tomorrow night at 23.40 (flight TAM JJ 8028).

This should still allow me to attend the program me on Thursday morning and possibly deliver my speech then.

I ' m sorry , but I was already flying to the P.A.R.I.S.™ from Munich when you sent me the previous message. I only saw it after I landed , and had already made the arrangements for rerouting .

However, you will be happy that I 'll make it to the conference.

As you know, I don't have a phone. I 'm guess ing there will be someone picking me up from your side at the airport. Correct?

Thanks a lot, and looking forward to meeting you soon .

All the best,

B. B. B .

*

I was typing from the Ibis® Hotel at Daniel Cohn-Benedict Airport, formerly known as Roissy-Charles de Gaulle. It was one of the first automated hotels, where robots welcomed you at the check-in, cleaned and performed room service. They even already had a set-up for face recognition to open the doors, instead of the old-fashioned keys still widespread at that time. The hotel was in the main building of Terminal One, which was built in the shape of an octopus made out of pure grey concrete. What I loved most was the tangle of escalators arranged through the centre of the building and suspended over the central court. Each escalator was covered with a transparent tube – of course, I loved it because it was

featured on the album cover of *I Robot* ℗1977 The Alan Parsons Project.

However, the Ibis®'s carpets stank of deep-fried, rotten bananas. The corridors were long and narrow. It was very cold. And the paint was flaking off. These features didn't reflect the expectations I had for a high-tech Ibis®, nor for the P.A.R.I.S.™.

That small, independent microstate had been officially trademarked and had signed a treaty of association with the European Union™ just one year beforehand. Parisians established a communitarian system of wealth distribution. It was especially renowned for instituting price controls over Champagne®, which was accessible to everyone. It was a bit of anarchy and a bit of socialism, plus all the advantages of upper-middle-class standards. But this hotel lagged far below those standards.

I didn't complain. I was lying down on a real bed and, despite all my problems, I'd managed to sort out my travel and keep going. But I could not sleep. Thoughts of Janine came back as soon as I managed to have a bit of downtime, and again I had that bad sense of guilt brought on by procrastination.

That night, I should have used that precious extra time to prepare – my plan to write on the flight to the P.A.R.I.S.™ had failed miserably. I was too worried about finding a solution to arrive in Santiago on time. It was past midnight, and my flight was going to be early in the morning. On the other hand, I obviously needed some rest. Doing neither of the two was a less-than-perfect solution to the dilemma.

I took the complimentary copy of the sacred writings of The Blend® from the bedside table, and I moved towards the shrine which was installed in one of the corners of the room. The lion crowned by the

eight-pointed star seemed to stare at me in an inquisitive manner. I wondered if Mary-Inanna wanted to punish me, or something. I randomly opened the book and, on that page, there was the translation of one of the most ancient hymns to our Goddess, written by the poetess and priestess Enheduanna forty-four centuries before us. I started to pray.

Mountain, because of your elevation, because of your height,
Because of your goodness, because of your beauty,
Because you wore a holy garment,
Because you did not bring your nose close to the ground,
Because you did not press your lips in the dust …

I then mentally continued the prayer, closing my eyes, breathing slowly and deeply. I added my wish for the holiness to bless my journey, and to leave the bad Karma behind. I then mourned again my Morph® before reopening my eyes, and leaving the shrine.

In those days, smartphones and social media routed every step, time-stamping and broadcasting each of our movements. They also ensured that our brains' habitual wiring stayed stuck in self-consciousness, pinging our online image back to us, churning insight and wonder through instant gratification. And going back to bed, my social networking addiction resurfaced again after a few hours of latency, compelling me to use all other technological backups in my possession.

I checked Nathan's status again. I knew I should not have done it. It was like when you break up with someone and you stalk the person on his or her MySpace®; that guilty pleasure turns into frustration as soon as you see the other person living a happy life. Or worse, you discover that they are always tagged with the same person, and after a couple of checks and cross-checks you start to suspect that person is not just a new friend. You suffer, silently, but you

continue to check their status every day, because you like to harm yourself. And you plunge into greater depression. Then at some point you stop. You think it’s okay, but you’re only fooling yourself for days or weeks tops. Then you start checking their status again, not only your ex’s, but also that of their tagged companion. You fool yourself again, and you say that you don’t care any more. You declare solemnly that you’re checking only to test and verify the fact that you are healed, like in evidence-based medicine, but then you get depressed again. Once more. Over and over.

Goddess-actually-bless the Trojan® plan by BreakupShop™.

Nathan had posted a new selfie a few minutes before. He was fresh and smiling as usual. He wore a short-sleeved, linen shirt in green, pink and yellow stripes, but that was not even the most horrifying part. He wore red trousers, and the selfie showed him going down the stairs of a plane. The Andes covered the background. Tagline: *Chile, here I am.*

I was furious.

REMEMBRANCE

I was finally attempting to write the speech. It had become my new obsession. I've always enjoyed obsessions, in the good and the bad sense. Jumping from one to another. I don't know if growing older helped me to change that.

I was tightening strings around a paragraph that I thought had potential. I was slowly advancing, but I was exhausted. My head felt heavy. I was lost amidst statistics of voter turnout, demographics and the latest sociological analysis on how the postwar generation was growing apathetic after seeing their older brothers and sisters in the fighting and riots. My fingers simply stopped working long before I realised I was not typing any more. I was sleeping, and dreaming again.

Because seeking hope means being willing to not only settle for,buttoactively disrupt the present. I thought I'd typed these words when Janine woke me up with a slight movement of her breast against my skin. She was glued to my back.

In the dream, the room was sparse, with no decorations on the wall. A tiny wardrobe sat beside the window, which looked towards an inner courtyard. The small courtyard was simply a cube with a series of other windows, taking a breath of natural light from the grey Parisian sky.

Paris was still the capital of France. The day must have been about to start. A pigeon sat outside the window, cooing, probably resting after taking a morning shit. Beside the wardrobe and the window, there was just enough space for the door, then the two single beds that were put together to form a king-size mattress.

Janine was on my side as it was hardly possible to avoid splitting the two beds without one of us falling through the middle. I could feel her. I was still sleepy, but kind of relieved without really remembering much. She took a yellow shoelace and started to go down to my balls to tie them down as tight as possible. From the base of the dick down to the base of the testicles, circling around four or five times until she made the knot. A granny knot, I think. My balls soon became red. I felt it and I realised that I was hard, very hard. She started to make cycles of four or five rounds with her tongue, following the path of the shoelace and going further down.

After a while, I felt again that sense of relief, this time mixed with something I was missing. She went further, and she pushed it deep inside her mouth, taking care that I was teased enough to keep the tension but not so fast that it would end immediately. I was getting higher and higher. She was dominating me, and I simply had to let it go. I loved it. Then she stopped, suddenly. And while I was still waiting for more, she started to speak to me.

'You know who I saw yesterday near Shakespeare and Co., the bookstore?'

I watched my lonely, tied dick with a glimpse of disappointment.

'I have no idea,' I replied.

'I saw Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy shooting the sequel to their love story movie, what's the name?' she continued.

'*Before Sunrise*?' I asked with a note of frustration.

'Yes, that one,' she replied. 'They are probably making a sequel. Because they are both in it again.'

Her long mane of curly black hair was all over the place, and she was staring at me with her big black eyes. In the first movie, Jesse, played by Ethan Hawke, and Céline, played by Julie Delpy, have an incredible one-night stand in Vienna. What would they have been up to in a sequel? It sounded incredibly lame to be making one.

‘I was so disappointed with Ethan Hawke,’ she said. ‘He looked so ugly and old.’

I thought Ethan Hawke was so cute in *Dead Poets Society* ©1989 Touchstone, even if he was just a teenager, and he was definitely very hot in *Before Sunrise* ©1995 Castle Rock.

‘No way. That must have been such a turn-off to see him like that,’ I said. My dick got totally turned off, too.

‘Yeah, that was what I thought,’ she replied, sounding sad about it. ‘Ethan Hawke is now completely unattractive. We must accept that.’

‘What about Julie Delpy?’ I asked.

‘Oh, she still looked gorgeous,’ she replied, and then she asked me, ‘If we were meeting for the first time today on a train, would you find me attractive?’

‘Of course,’ I replied.

‘No, but really, right now as I am? Would you start talking to me? Would you ask me to get off the train with you?’ she asked.

‘Well, I mean, you’re asking a theoretical question,’ I said.

‘Okay. Why can’t you just say *yes*?’ she replied.

‘No, I did. I said, *of course*! That was…’

I opened my eyes.

The seatbelt was too tight, and I had had a damn dream again. I couldn't believe it, but we must have been flying for a while already. On the little screen in front of me, I could see Jesse and Céline walking in the tiny streets of Messenia, a small village on the Peloponnese, arguing with each other. I was watching *Before Midnight* ©2013 Venture Forth, the third movie in the trilogy. Jesse was still playing the romantic guy disguised as a cynic, and Céline was again seemingly a romantic, albeit with some doubts.

*

The flight attendant announced the meal service had been delayed because of turbulence, but they started to serve Champagne® in the meantime. Air France® provided free Champagne® in economy class as propaganda for the Parisian Anarchist Regional Independent State. I decided to make full use of those complimentary refreshments, as they had to make up for the entire fuck-up of the day before. And the flight attendant was hot, which was another good reason to ask for more Champagne® on a regular basis.

I wasn't completely fantasising about writing before falling asleep because my computer was still folded on my lap. Still unsettled by Janine's words, I couldn't work any longer. It was one of those dreams built upon altered memories. And that fragment specifically referred to a morning, years before, when she woke me up and started to talk about Ethan Hawke.

In the real memory, she was not naked. We were in a one-roomed central location just beside Notre-Dame, Hôtel-Dieu: the oldest hospital in Paris.

I arrived at Hôtel-Dieu in an ambulance on a sunny day in late August. My condition was critical: my left lung had collapsed and I couldn't breathe. Doctors said it was a pneumothorax, 'spontaneous' because it occurred without any apparent cause and in the absence of significant lung disease. I spent two weeks there high on the vapours of heavy drugs. Everything was underwater. A thick, green glass of sparkling mineral water.

A pneumothorax is an abnormal collection of air or gas in the pleural space that separates the lung from the chest wall. It's classed as a medical emergency and can cause steadily worsening oxygen shortage and low blood pressure. Unless reversed through effective treatment, the symptoms can progress and cause death.

I got there just in time. They immediately pierced my armpit to insert a chest tube into the lung. It was linked to a one-way valve system that allowed air to escape, but not to re-enter, the chest. This included a water tank that functioned like a seal. In addition to the tube, I had a drip leaking into my arm and another special machine wired to it that released a fair dose of morphine every time I pressed a button.

Then I had surgery, and they glued my left lung to my chest wall, to prevent the pneumothorax from happening again.

That is where I had my conversation with Janine, high on morphine, a few days after breaking up. It was the last time we met, and all we had to say was agreeing about the fact that it was sad to see Ethan Hawke growing old. But making some sense of what exactly happened back then, considering the pain and the drugs, is not so easy. However, I was sure we also talked about other things before leaving each other, probably more important matters, because tiny fragments surfaced every time I dreamt about her, intermingled with imaginary details.

I continued to drink, and after a while I fell asleep again, dreaming about intergalactic break-ups, orbital weddings, Champagne® over the Atlantic and fragments of a cosmic lover’s discourse.

SPACE ODYSSEY

The flight attendant announced our descent towards São Paulo–Guarulhos International Airport, and ‘Wave’ ℗1967 Antonio Carlos Jobim played in the background. The song made me reckon I could do some very fine living in Brazil, sipping gin and tonics beside a swimming pool or, even better, lying down on a beach dotted with palm trees, or something like that. But in few seconds I got back into pressure mode, mulling over the next steps to prepare my mission.

Back in the day, commercial planes didn’t feature vertical take-off and landing. It took ages to reach the airport. There was a long waiting time between announcing the descent and arriving at the destination, and we had to fasten our seatbelts and couldn’t move for at least forty minutes. That is why I deliberately made for the loo, before it was too late.

There was a considerable number of fellow travellers having similar thoughts, and the queue in economy was unsustainable. So, I discreetly sneaked into business class. That was a whole different world: there were leftovers from luxurious dinners and spacious seats. I didn’t focus much on their food, but I was mostly jealous of the free Wi-Fi, a very new thing on planes at that time, and I noticed a copy of *The Neverending Story* ©1979 Michael Ende on an empty seat.

In the first seven rows, there was a group of Japanese businessmen, all dressed in the same dark blue suit and wearing a woollen red tie with the name Nomura embroidered in its centre. They were all connected to their tablets. Nomura Securities Co, Ltd was the oldest brokerage firm in Japan.

While Europe had been downgraded to the semi-periphery of the world system, Brazil was rising as the global financial centre. That had happened quickly. When the financial crisis hit Japan, they reacted differently from Sarah Palin in the United States or other short-sighted politicians in Europe. The shock came a bit later. It culminated with the earthquake, the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and they had to act quickly as the country was collapsing and the population aging. The solution was to open and embrace a new frontier.

Brazil was an emerging market, one of the few places untouched by the crisis, but not strong enough to compete with China and the Middle East. They were looking for new spaces for economic cooperation, after successfully merging Southern American financial markets in their Capital Market Union®.

From this combination of mutual interests, the Tokyo stock exchange teamed up with the Brazilian BOVESPA, creating the NIKKESPA index. Geographical proximity was not an issue. All transactions were performed virtually, and covering various time zones and countries was an asset for global networks.

On top of these strategic considerations, historical ties linked the two countries. Libertade was the Japanese district in São Paulo, Brazil, also known as Japantown. The Japanese presence in the neighbourhood began in 1912. One hundred years later, the São Paulo metropolitan area was the city with the largest Japanese population outside of Japan and had the largest population of people of Japanese descent. In the aftermath of the big stock crash and the earthquake, Libertade literally doubled overnight because of the huge number of refugees fleeing either the financial centre of Tokyo or the northeast coast hit by the tsunami. Ironically, individual members of Japantown were known as Nikkei, which

originally meant Japanese emigrants and their descendants residing in a foreign country.

I once again stared at the red-tied brokers on my way back from the toilet. They were all using the same model and brand of tablet, and they were all using the same app. I noticed that they were swiping stock titles mechanically. It looked like an easy-to-use interface for executing trades quickly. Swipe right to accept the transaction. Swipe left to dismiss it. Some of them also used voice searches to find specific stocks or company data before swiping left or right. Others were moving money into and out of investment funds and buying financial products inside the app. The app also seemed to have some kind of Twitter® for traders. There was a data stream on the right side of the screen providing minute-by-minute insights from fellow investors. I had just noticed some sort of sentiment indicator showing emoticons to indicate whether the other app members were bullish or bearish about any specific asset, when one of the Japanese traders looked at me hovering over his screen.

I was never into finance, so this was all quite abstract for me, the equivalent of large-scale gambling. I was bewildered seeing them swipe incessantly, without caring about anything else, not even showing a glimpse of emotion at the flight attendant's announcement of our delay.

*

Panic. Technically speaking, the TAM™ flight for Santiago should have been on the ground, probably still boarding passengers. A split second could have changed the schedule of my mission.

The boarding bridge looked like the deck of the Discovery One in *2001: A Space Odyssey* ©1968 Stanley Kubrick, with aseptic white

linoleum and black rubber gaskets everywhere. It was just a few metres to get into the transfer corridor, but it seemed like an eternity.

I looked a mess. My backpack was in one hand, and a huge plastic bag with a load of magazines I had bought in the P.A.R.I.S.™ was in the other. The gate for Santiago was, obviously, on the other side of the airport. I was running like hell. My coat and pullover, which I had worn because of the European winter, looked totally out of place. I was sweating like a man in a steam bath at a cheap suburban spa and I was constantly, goofily bumping into people as I tried to pass. I knocked the ice cream from a little boy's hand and heard him cry while I stepped on the toe of an old woman wearing a pink dress and holding a fancy Gucci bag. That distracted me and almost made me fall into the cleaning guy's trolley full of dirty water from a toilet.

I finally arrived at my gate. The flight TAM JJ 8028 São Paulo–Guarulhos International Airport was scheduled to leave at 22.09 for Santiago Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport. Estimated arrival time: 23.40.

That part of the terminal was old-fashioned. Brown Formica® covered the walls. There were fake leather seats and an orange carpet. It looked kind of cool, thinking about it now. But it all seemed very wrong in that moment. What I really needed was a wormhole to simply pass through the door of the gate and emerge straight into the conference room where I was supposed to give my speech.

At least there was still someone at the gate, which was a good sign.

Her nametag informed me that she was called Somoche, which in Mapuche language meant *distinguished woman*. She was probably

originally from south-central Chile, where most Mapuche people come from. The red and green TAM™ uniform didn't manage to hide her big, floating belly, and the small hat she was wearing revealed the regrowth of her natural dark hair colour over a platinum blonde dye. Additionally, the tanning lotion and white make-up she was wearing were quite a juxtaposition.

I tried to smile and be as nice as possible under the difficult circumstances. She was counting the boarding passes of the checked-in people. The last shuttle bus had already left for the plane, and I was clearly the only one left over.

'I need to get on that flight to Santiago. I know you are closing the gate, but please can I still go through?' I asked.

'The gate is closing,' she replied, without showing even a glimpse of empathy for my dramatic situation.

'I am coming from the P.A.R.I.S.™, I was in transfer, and the plane got delayed. The Air France® flight,' I said, switching to begging mode. I was usually good at begging.

'Air France®? This is TAM™. We don't wait for other companies' delays,' she said.

At that very moment, a middle-aged man with a handbag approached the counter with a TAM™ boarding pass and a Colombian passport.

'*Muchas gracias,señor, buen viaje*,' she said after a quick look at his documents. She smiled at him, and let him go through to board. I was horrified.

'But they gave me this ticket at Cohn-Bendit Airport and they said it was all okay for the transfer,' I said. I showed her the handwritten document they gave me the night before in the P.A.R.I.S.™. It was

not really a sort of transfer ticket, but it should have given me the right to get a boarding pass. I managed to get her to look up my name on her computer.

‘Yes, you have a ticket, but you don’t have a boarding pass. You are not checked-in at all,’ she said.

‘Well, can you check me in now?’ I asked. ‘I must arrive in Santiago tonight. I am travelling from the other side of the world; the company already made me miss a flight. I beg, beg, beg, beg you to let me in. Please!’ I had decidedly set aside any remaining semblance of my dignity.

‘The check-in is closed,’ she said, and continued to count boarding passes while looking cold and unemotional. I would have liked to simply let her scream after me as I ran through the gate and onto the plane.

‘But the boarding is not closed. Can we find a way to make it work?’ Calling me desperate was an understatement. I was ready to sell my body to get onto that plane.

‘The check-in is closed,’ she repeated, as if it was her mantra.

I started to question whether she was a real human being or an android programmed only for certain tasks and limited interaction with customers. Yes, that is what it must have been, a humanised android branded by TAM™. Somoche, aka the ‘distinguished woman’, was likely to be the code name for the model. A cheap one, though, seeing the look and the result. I didn’t want to make any kind of politically incorrect comments about this woman, or android, or whatever it was. The reality is that she was totally useless for my needs. I was pissed off, sweaty, smelly and overwhelmed.

That was where I was when a bold, muscular security guy approached and asked me what my problem was. He kindly escorted me outside the gate area.

Somoche continued counting boarding passes.

STRANGE GOODBYES

The security guy left me alone at the plaza of the brand-new main hall of Terminal One, a gigantic steel and glass cube designed to let natural light in. It had several shops and, in the middle, a tropical-themed garden with thousands of butterflies, surrounded by flowering plants and a six-metre grotto waterfall. It had been inaugurated just a few months before, and it was still incomplete, with various sets of scaffolding denoting work in progress. It looked sharply different from the 1970s Formica®-styled gate areas.

'What now?' I asked out loud, as if I was hoping a friendly soul would help me out. An immense sense of loneliness percolated through my body, and I remembered this was not my first time in Guarulhos Airport.

A few years earlier, I went to Montevideo for an international gathering with the Latin-American partners of The Federation®. On the way back, I decided to stop over in São Paulo to meet with a friend and lover named Gloria.

The airport looked very different back then. Instead of loneliness and despair, I was greeted with a kiss and a T-shirt with little spaceships printed all over a blue background as a welcoming present to Brazil. The T-shirt looked very much like something I would wear only as pyjamas, but it was cool.

Gloria was beautiful in her own special way. She was outgoing while keeping it spontaneous and simple. She had positive energy, which she radiated all over, rather than sucking it from the people around her. That was a rare combination I didn't find very often in girls or boys. She had soft, dark skin and curly black hair. She was not tall, neither skinny nor fat. Her cheeks and nose reminded me

of a cute teddy bear. Plus, she had amazing breasts. I liked to cuddle my head on them. That was exactly what I was doing as we drove all the way from the airport to the hotel that she had booked for us in Vila Madalena, a gentrified neighbourhood that she said I would love. And she was obviously right.

We'd met in a lift two years earlier. I was in Washington, DC, for a conference. One evening, I was going back to my hotel room on the twentieth floor. The lift suddenly stopped in between the sixteenth and the seventeenth. It took them over an hour to repair it.

Gloria was the only other passenger in the lift. We killed time by introducing ourselves. We talked about our names, our professional backgrounds and what we'd been doing before getting trapped in a lift. I'd had a very boring work dinner, so there was not so much to tell on my side. She'd had a more interesting evening. She'd had the première of a play with her theatre company. It was a Brazilian reinterpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ©1596 William Shakespeare. She featured in the role of Hermia, the daughter of Egeus, in love with Lysander.

Time passed. No one was coming to rescue us. We found out that neither of us had had sex in a lift before. So, we decided to have some fun, and we both loved it. Eventually they rescued us from the lift, and we left each other with the promise we would repeat the fun somewhere else in the world.

That was the reason I managed the stopover in São Paulo, to fulfil that promise. We arrived at the hotel, and it was lively. We made love over the course of the entire afternoon. She kept screaming, '*Gostoso, safado!*'

After, we spooned for a delightful lapse of time, and then, in one of those moments when someone feels they can *connect* with a person

on all kinds of different levels, I started to speak about my whole life. Eventually, I told her I also liked boys. It came up because I was reviewing the list of the top five people I had been attracted to, and she found her inclusion flattering. There were also boys on the list. Gloria jumped and crossed her legs, sitting up the better to stare into my eyes. I sometimes receive mixed reactions when a boy or a girl learns I like both, and for a second I got worried she might have been turned off. Instead, she hugged me, a hug I will never forget, and we continued to talk about everything.

I learned that she had had experiences with girls, too, and that despite the stereotypical assumption of sexual freedom, Brazilian boys were much less open than I would have expected. I explained to her that my sexual openness was fully part of my spirituality, that it was important to balance Karma and Shinto with Hedonism for the harmonious blending of the supreme virtues given to us by our supreme Goddess. It was exactly what she believed, too.

*

Later we went out to celebrate our reunion and our spiritual and sensual discovery. That kind of *connection* we made was a rare find, and we became friends, more than lovers, after that Sunday afternoon.

She brought me to a tiny bar that had margaritas for three *reals*, something like fifty cents in xEUs. The bar had pink walls, and there was an old lady with a nose that looked like a big potato serving us at the counter. There was also a man glued to one of the stools, who had probably been there since early that morning.

It was a simple and popular place, not like the new bars in the neighbourhood. It smelled like the fake lime syrup they put on

crushed ice. A ventilator hung from the ceiling, producing a constant humming and keeping away the flies. The only piece of twenty-first century technology was a big flat-screen television hanging above the bar. The bartender used it to watch her favourite telenovelas.

Gloria explained to me how telenovelas were a part of daily life in Brazil, being the central subject of many conversations. Even those who were not interested in them ended up knowing what was going on. She also explained that some people confused soap operas from the United States with Latin-American telenovelas. She went on, lecturing that there were some important differences between the two.

Telenovelas had a finite number of episodes and, therefore, the viewers expected a conclusion, while soap operas didn't have a set or expected end. Telenovelas were broadcast in the afternoon and during prime time. Soap operas were broadcast only in the afternoon. Telenovela audiences comprised women and men of all socioeconomic levels, ages and occupations, while soap opera audiences still mainly consisted of retired women.

Gloria also explained to me that at that moment in the bar we were watching one of the most famous examples, *A Próxima Vítima*, originally broadcast between March and November 1995. The story was set in São Paulo, and the main plot revolved around multiple cases of treason followed by many murders, apparently without any link to one another.

I started to enjoy the telenovela subculture as we drank our third margaritas. I remembered my grandmother watching the shows when I was a kid, fixing lunch after I came home from school. They were badly dubbed from Portuguese and always broadcast on local channels. They had so many ads that a thirty-minute episode lasted

at least an hour and fifteen minutes. During these inflated breaks, fat salesmen with moustaches always tried to sell water mattresses, weird gym equipment or magic pans to cook the healthiest food. They were all part of the experience.

I felt like I was somehow at home.

The episode stopped to give way for extraordinary breaking news. The scene of a jealous man screaming at a jealous woman was replaced by gunfire, and a mass of people acted in warlike scenes.

I stood petrified with my fourth margarita still half full. I was watching live, on the other side of the world, the Battle of Thessaloniki.

I could not make sense of what I was seeing, and I asked the old bartender to switch to BBC® news to better understand the news in English. She must have been as frightened as me. She kept on screaming, '*MeaDeusa, meaDeusa*', while pulling her hair with her hands.

Gloria stared in disbelief.

'In my nearly thirty-five years of law enforcement experience,' a policeman said on the screen, 'this is the most violent and gruesome scene that I have dealt with.'

The cameras cut back to the reporter. 'Violence continued for a third day in the free economic zone of Kalochori, after a youth group killed Alexi Papastratis, owner of Matrix™, a well-known real estate company. Papastratis had been kidnapped and pushed off the twenty-fifth floor of one of his buildings, after the body of fifteen-year-old Alexandros Paradoupolos was found drowned in the harbour of Thessaloniki last Friday. The owner of Matrix™ had been suspected of raping the boy before drowning him. Today the funeral

was held for the dead teenager. Clashes erupted near the temple where the funeral took place, spreading violence out of the free economic zone, where it had been contained so far.

‘The boy’s family has hired an independent pathologist to ensure there is no cover-up. On Sunday, the prime minister wrote the following words to the boy’s parents, “In these difficult moments, please accept my condolences for the tragic loss of your son. Like all Greeks, I am deeply saddened.” However, analysts go on to say nothing the politicians or authorities can say or do is likely to reduce the anger in a society already exasperated by the consequences of the financial crisis. Hundreds of building sites in Thessaloniki have been torched, and dozens injured.’

I was listening, speechless.

‘*Yemoja*, *Yemoja*,’ the bartender implored.

Gloria swiftly explained. She was a well-respected *Mãe-de-santo*, a priestess of Candomblé®, a local franchise of our ecumenical religion, and Yemoja was the name given to Holy Mary-Inanna within their pantheon. They both started praying to Yemoja, Orunmila and Egungun. Their prayer sounded like a song, and they did it in harmony. Gloria knew every single word, as she was in fact also a Candomblé® priestess herself.

‘Rage is what I feel for what has happened, rage,’ said one protesting student on the TV, the camera zooming out to show the barbed wire and CCTVs being installed around the main road within the free economic zone of Kalochori.

‘The Greek prime minister has blamed extreme elements for taking advantage of the situation to engage in vandalism and has pledged to compensate damaged businesses,’ the BBC® correspondent

continued. ‘The government called an emergency meeting to discuss the situation with the other European heads of state.’

Then, he interviewed a guest at a hotel set on fire, who replied, ‘Everything that could be demolished was demolished. We truly believe that the situation is beyond the control of the national government. This is no longer a series of riots. This is war.’

There wasn’t a rational explanation for any of this. Gloria kept singing her prayer. She hugged me; she caressed me with her hands. The bartender kept speaking about a prophecy and the end of the world. I had no idea what she was referring to. I was fighting to avoid surrendering to a sense of impotence.

The TV was only speaking about Greece, which perhaps meant no major problems were occurring elsewhere. But I had the gut feeling that it was only the beginning.

At the time, I was already working for The Federation®, but as an international officer, and the organisation was still a civil society lobbying platform. Naturally, I had contacts with the Greek students and their European network.

I instinctively put a hand in the left pocket of my trousers. An automatic gesture encrypted as part of my natural reaction to face any sort of discomfort. My index finger was ready to scroll through the address book on my old Nokia® 3310 3G.

First I called my Greek contacts, but I could not reach them. Then, I called Lorenzo. In Italy the situation was apparently quiet but, if similar provocations to the ones in Greece happened, ‘They will set Vesuvius on fire,’ he said, metaphorically alluding to the sentiment of the people around those parts. Then I called my mother. She was fine, but she didn’t sound as calm as usual. Finally, I called the

office, but they didn’t have more to say than what I could watch on TV.

I felt sad to be in the wrong place and in the wrong moment. I wanted to go back to Brussels and help in case the political situation got worse. I didn’t really know how I could help, but being in the same time zone, being ready for whatever The Federation® might have had planned and being close to my family would have been a good start.

I abruptly announced my decision to Gloria. We went back to the hotel to pack my luggage. She came with me to the airport, but we didn’t speak on the way, just hugged in the taxi and again before leaving for the gate.

That was the strangest goodbye on one of the strangest days of my life.

FEAR AND LOATHING

And there I was, in São Paulo's airport again, with the same feeling of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but this time I didn't have Gloria by my side.

I admired for a few minutes the beautiful tropical trees in the Terminal One plaza and took a deep breath. Across from where I stood there was a convenience store called AeroMix™, one of the multiple franchises of Sinhang®. I decided to go inside the shop, buy a bottle of Guaraná® and wash away that sense of loneliness, and that strong metallic taste stuck in my mouth.

The drink gave me enough energy to look for the Air France® office, which fortunately was also in Terminal One. But the sense of relief didn't last long, and the metallic taste was back. The air conditioning inside the office was broken. I felt drops of sweat forming inside my brain, pooling around my cells and, with a sort of acidic combination, slowly melting them. I saw crawling geometric patterns overlaying the walls, and the walls themselves appeared to be rippling or breathing. From that moment on, things got progressively confused and, to this day, I can't entirely distinguish what was going on in my mind from what was really happening.

I thought I was queuing for hours, but then I looked at the clock on the wall and it was only a couple of minutes. There was a woman waiting in line, dressed like an opera singer, who petted her Yorkshire terrier. I got convinced that a strange chemistry, probably the mixture of sweat and Guaraná®, had given me the power to read her thoughts. She was wearing a heavy black eyeliner, half melted on her cheeks, and I could sense she was worried as she forgot to buy a ticket for her dog. She could not stop

caressing him saying, ‘It will be fine,’ as she trembled. I was also convinced that she had got fired by her manager after he had found her kissing his wife backstage at the Theatro Municipal of São Paulo. I thought she was now going back to her hometown, and speculated that she was sad, not ashamed, as she would not see *her* again.

It was finally my turn with the travel agent.

‘Good evening,’ I said calmly, breathing deeply. But instead of looking at him, I kept staring at the Air France® advertisement poster attached to the wall behind him. I could not stop thinking that the hostesses pictured in the poster were not innocently smiling. They were laughing at me, the guy who managed to miss two flights in a row and still believed Air France® could help him.

‘I came from the P.A.R.I.S.™ and missed my flight to Santiago,’ I said. I told myself to stay focused, to keep to the logical explanation of events, but I continued to stare at the poster. Lost in the geometrical pattern of the airline logo, I noticed that the company was the only legal entity still using ‘France’ in its name; that felt so 2005.

‘The next flight to Santiago is tomorrow morning at 7am, arriving around 9.30am local time. But it is fully booked already,’ he replied, looking at me and smiling as though he was part of the poster behind him. He continued to type on his white plastic keyboard, and I felt this could have been the moment when I was going to seize his keyboard, throw it towards the rippling wall and ensure it would land safely on the faces of those hostesses in the poster. I would then take that screen in front of him and crash it on the floor, before walking out of the office screaming and swearing the whole pantheon of The Blend™ and beyond.

‘I need to be there tonight at the latest,’ I said instead. ‘Can I go via Mendoza or Lima, or do anything else that can get me there earlier?’ I asked, begging as if I had been starving for days.

He continued typing, and my delusions pulled in again. I got distracted for an indefinite lapse of time picturing the misadventures of the man queuing after me. He had a small blue bag with three yellow stars and a patch for The Magical Mystery Tour Béziers™. The texture of the bag caught my entire attention; the patch reminded me of the embroided badge of The League™; while the yellow stars appeared to be inexplicably moving like an animated GIF on a screen. I was persuaded that he was a magician preoccupied by the fact that his assistant had got lost in the middle of the Amazon after taking the wrong flight. And I was convinced that he must have been there to change his ticket, planning to set up a show in Iranduba near Manaus to find his assistant. Or maybe, as a second thought, he could just have been a Beatles fan.

‘I can only put you on the waiting list for the 7am flight, and tomorrow morning you’ll have to see what happens,’ he replied.

‘What about my luggage?’ I asked.

‘That’s checked-in,’ he said. ‘And we will cover your hotel for the night. Just go down to the shopping hall on Terminal Two, turn left, then go straight and go right until the second sky bridge where the works in progress are. Then take the lift to street level. On your left, there will be a shuttle bus to take you to the hotel.’ He handed me a leaflet with a map of the airport as well as a printout of my reservation for the waiting list.

The French magician, or Beatles fan, showed signs of anxiety. He was talking with the assistant beside us, who seemed no more helpful than mine.

I left.

*

The drops of sweat continued to multiply like chlamydospores, asexual spores that reproduce and survive for extended periods of time in hostile conditions. And my conditions felt critically adverse.

I wandered around the departure gate, the arrival hall and various wings of Terminal One without finding my way to Terminal Two. The neon lights of the shops confused me even more; they were glowing and leaving fluorescent trails as I turned my head. Fátima®, Rendas™, Hering®, Trilha Mix™, BrasilSouvenir®, Sobral™, Strelitzia Flores™, all featuring the golden dragon and the little bird of the Sinhang®. I had a panic attack from the impression that I was circling around. At least three times I'd seen a Hering® shop and at least four times a Sobral™. They all looked the same, but I could not tell if they were really the very same or just looked identical.

The map that they had given me at the Air France® office was totally useless. Then I saw a couple of Chinese girls using a selfie stick in front of BrasilSouvenir®.

'*Ni hao*,' I said.

They didn't understand, and they looked perplexed. The two girls were dressed in the same style of denim jacket, but one had a purple skirt, while the other had on green trousers.

'I beg your pardon?' the one with the purple skirt replied in a posh English accent.

‘I’m looking for the lift to go towards Terminal Two, could you help me?’ I asked.

‘Mm, we’ve just landed, and we’re heading to baggage claim, though we have no idea where it is,’ she replied.

They appeared to have a Morph®. I could, at least, ask to borrow the phone to check the directions, and take the opportunity also to login with my fingerprint ID to access my data, update MySpace® on the go and Kik® my mum.

‘Can I use your Morph® for a minute?’ I asked.

‘We are extremely sorry, but neither of us has a Morph®. We have a Galaxy® instead,’ the green trousers girl said. I wondered how I could ever get confused between a Morph® and a Galaxy®.

‘But if it may be of any help, you can of course use Charlene’s phone,’ said the one with the purple skirt. So, I had a look at their maps app, but I realised that to get any meaningful direction I should have put an exact destination, and I had no clue about which specific pickup point for the shuttle I should have pinned on the screen. That was totally useless. I was totally useless.

‘We are extremely sorry,’ they said in sync.

I looked at the map that the guy at the office had given me again. I tried to recall his explanation. He had pronounced the words ‘work in progress’ and ‘lift’, so I must have missed something over there. I didn’t see any work in progress or a lift. There was no hope.

I left the girls, and looked around for an info point. Then I got distracted again and realised I’d totally overlooked the fact that I should have communicated to Pancho. Their driver was supposed to pick me up in Santiago in a couple of hours. I looked instead for a computer shop. DigiCentre® was situated on the boarding floor of

Terminal One in the corridor linking the A and B wings. Their Wi-Fi was in range of my laptop, but Pancho had been faster than me.

From: Francisco Trafia
Date: Wednesday 27 November 23:06
To: Bastian Balthazar Bux
Cc: Rosalyn Fusa , Sandra Müller
Subject: R e : R e : R e : COCHA – Ticket – BASTIAN/BUX.

Querido Bastian,

We are sorry about all the problems.

We heard you didn't make it onto the plane tonight. Consider ing that the forum finishes at noon tomorrow and i t is a one-hour drive from the airport to C alle C atedral 1158 E dificio C ongreso , I don't really think you will make it.

At this time, it's too complicated to arrange at all. Tell the airline, which has totally failed, to get you back to Brussels.

Pancho.

Enviado desde mi Morph ®

*

I felt some sense of irony about Pancho sending the message from his Morph®, but I was too depressed to laugh or cry about it.

I was sitting on the floor with my legs crossed, my backpack and my other stuff around me. The floor was made of pale grey linoleum with dust piling up in the corners near the wall where I was sitting. It was kind of sticky as well; I could feel it under my trousers.

Beyond the horizon of my screen a floating sea of Havaianas® and sweaty feet. In Brazil, literally everyone wore Havaianas®.

*

I was sticky, sweaty, half hallucinating and I thought Pancho was right. I should have given up that impossible journey from the beginning. I should have gone back to Brussels when they bought me the ticket from Munich, without playing this insane transcontinental hopping game.

While pondering all this, I saw a pop-up on my screen. *Bastian, are you online?* It was Sandra, typing on ZenDesk™. *Remember, we havea Skype®catch-up with Dalia*.

'Fuck, fucking hell, blessed be you, Holy Mary-Inanna, and all the goddesses of the seventh heaven!' I screamed. Luckily no one heard.

I guess for the first time this tripI'm in the right place at the right time. Give me a second. I wrote back, switched on Skype® and put my headphones on. The call rang.

'Hello, Bastian.' It was Sandra, Dalia not having connected yet.

'Hi Sandra, how are you?' I asked. I could see her sitting cross-legged on her sofa; it was three hours later over there.

'Good, I finally got some proper sleep yesterday after Thessaloniki, but I can't wait to go back to bed. But you? I've been following the back and forth with Pancho over email. There must be something I could help with somehow,' she said.

‘At least you have slept. I’m trying to figure out what to do now, but I’m overwhelmed and I’m having a weird sort of hangover,’ I replied. Then the call rang again, and Dalia joined the conversation.

‘Hi Bastian, enjoying your trip to South America?’ She picked up the wrong line.

‘Hey Dalia,’ Sandra replied, ‘Bastian is having a little situation with his trip – delays.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,’ Dalia said.

‘No problem, Dalia. Let’s focus on our catch-up,’ I replied.

‘I have on my agenda only one point. Communication follow-up around the statutory changes after the Assembly. You wanted to add something else, Dalia?’ Sandra asked.

‘I have something to tell Bastian, since the Rover Hangover Bar, as he was too busy over there to speak to me,’ she replied.

I felt a sense of uneasiness.

‘Okay, let’s tackle the first issue first.’ Sandra was a good chair and, considering the circumstances, she was doing me a favour.

‘From the secretariat side,’ Sandra said, ‘we have already communicated the new statutes to both the European Commission and the European Parliament. We are scheduling a meeting with them next week, when Bastian will be back in the office, and we’ll push to be notified each time there is a legislative process, to start acting upon our new powers, as written in the Fundamental Law.’ She was no-nonsense.

‘Great, thanks Sandra, that’s exactly what the board would expect now,’ Dalia replied. ‘Full implementation and recognition of our new status. But we are also worried that there might be delays

because of the elections. There has been lots of speculation after the presentation of the *spitzenkandidaten*. Nothing is really certain.'

I was happy the conversation was between the two of them so far. There wasn't much more for me to add.

'We are at a crossroads: either The Federation® will become a significant actor in the political arena, or we will disappear. We'll keep pushing on our side, together with Bastian,' Sandra said.

Dalia replied, 'Great. Then we can pass to the second point, Bastian.'

'Tell me, Dalia,' I said.

'So, what is this story about Lorenzo not being happy about the three vice presidents? I eavesdropped on your conversation at the party the other day,' she said.

'Well, if you eavesdropped, you know already what it is,' I replied.

'But I was more interested to learn why you haven't told the board about it. We were not pleased with the way Lorenzo had been fuelling other delegates during the GA about this amendment. We all think you played a double role,' she said.

'But I just told him to inform the board if he had something to complain about,' I replied.

'That's exactly what you shouldn't have said, Bastian.'

'But…'

The connection was gone.

CYGNET COMMITTEE

Dalia was nauseating, I thought. Once more, I felt I was being held accountable for anything that went wrong and, no matter what I did, I would get the blame: my sister on the train, my employees for the shitty food, Pancho for the airline, the board with Lorenzo, Lorenzo with the board, whatever.

I looked again at the white screen of my laptop, motionless, waiting for something to happen, Dalia calling back, or Sandra, or Pancho, whatever. But they didn't call. The screen remained silent, and after a while it turned black because of the screensaver. I continued staring at my face reflected in it. Even in that pale mirror image, the puffy eyes stood out, together with a terrible hairstyle and a sweaty, unshaven beard. Then, I had the impression my face slowly morphed into other images, pixellated transpositions of my thoughts. First, they looked like the same kind of glowing geometric patterns I had seen before in the Air France® office, then they formed shapes.

I had the impression of seeing the trenches in Rue Neuve in Brussels, the ruins of City 2® shopping mall, and I almost felt the presence of the snipers sheltered on the upper floors of the Sheraton®. That was, during the war, part of my daily commute to The Federation® offices until we had to close them down, the morning when the siege of Brussels escalated. That day, I escaped hidden in the back of a Lyreco™ office supplies van, and retired to the South of France to my mum's house.

I looked at the screen again; there weren't any trenches or guns, just a reflection of neon lights. I realised I had totally lost Karma and Shinto, and even Hedonism, my strongest virtue by far, was

vacillating. I couldn't believe I had reached such a low point, and I couldn't help looking back in search of strength and motivation.

From the sticky floor of Guarulhos International Airport, the brave days of the Cygnet Committee seemed long gone.

My involvement in the Cygnet had been peculiar. When we closed the office, we tried to coordinate remotely among colleagues, and to keep an open channel of communication with the European institutions and with our member organisations, some of which had turned into militias like Lorenzo's. But it wasn't always easy. We had communications cuts, internet connections blocked by one provider or the other, according to their affiliations to private contractors' troops, phone lines overcharged, and so on. It was during that period, on a Wednesday afternoon, in one of our regular update calls, that Lorenzo told me for the first time about the committee. He was my main informer from the southern front and that is how we became friends, too. He was based in Naples and controlled not only his militia but also a rebel's network across various cities and territories.

'Are Cosco®'s and Maersk®'s patrols still shooting each other over the control of the container terminal down in San Giovanni a Teduccio?' I asked. The situation on the ground was confused; there weren't clearly defined camps fighting each other, only generalised violence. Often, the technical superiority of privately hired fighters was surpassed by citizens' groups attacking small building sites by surprise, and allowing them to collect weapons. In the free zones, like the harbours, troops from various subcontractors, mostly hired by Russian, Chinese and Egyptian companies, operated until then independently, making any military coordination among each other difficult.

‘No, the situation seems to be crystallising. Contractors arranged a loose alliance that seems to be working on other fronts, too,’ he replied. His strong Neapolitan accent sounded slightly different from usual. He was slower, less melodic, and I thought he must have been somehow in pain.

‘And are you safe and sound?’ I asked.

‘I’ve injured my left arm,’ he replied, ‘but that wasn’t during a fight. Some scaffolding fell on me while I was on sentry duty, but luckily it wasn’t heavy.’

In the earliest days of the revolt against private contractors’ troops, these militias were hurriedly raised from volunteering organisations, trade unions and political movements, and had to improvise military skills for which their members had never been trained. Those kinds of groups strived for vendettas and formed a patchwork coalition consisting of students, anarchists and citizens’ associations.

‘Considering that most of us never fought a war, all this is kind of learning by doing, but the hard way,’ he replied.

At times, I tended to forget that we all belonged to a generation that, before all this happened, considered war as something we would only learn in history books, watch in action movies or vaguely relate to reality while reading news from some faraway sides of the globe.

‘But the good part is that we’ll strike an agreement with local authorities in a few days,’ he continued. ‘For a month or so, there have been clearer dividing lines, making the situation more manageable. Here in Napoli, the mayor got to hire troops for self-defence, using the Acts to his advantage, as they are also responsible for some of the construction zones. They formed a local

army, and with our help they're trying to take back control of the city. Florence, Milan, Barcelona, Marseilles, Munich and Budapest are following the example,' he said. 'There is even more to that,' he continued. 'We are setting up a secret committee.'

'You mean a freemasonry-like lodge?' I asked.

'Now the factions have started to coordinate internally, everyone is leveraging their specific interests and lowering the intensity of hostilities. That's the right time to prepare peace,' he explained. And for the first time I felt like there was hope.

'And do they agree to speak with each other?' I asked.

'We're working on it,' he replied. 'But we need a good chair. Would you be up for it?' he said.

'You mean, me chairing it?' All the hair on my body was electrified.

'I mean, I trust you. Plus your profile fits criteria acceptable to everyone. You didn't get involved in any of the belligerent forces. The Federation® is seen on all sides as a neutral player, albeit powerless. You have contacts with everyone. Who else should we ask?' he said. Almost everyone ended up joining the committee. The private military contractors, the mayors, the trade unions, the European institutions, the rebel students, the volunteers, and so on. The national governments were out of this game. And the anarchists didn't join; there was almost no end to the issues they were against, to the point that they were continually slipping into an entirely negative and reactive self-definition, and participating in the Cygnet would have meant, for them, surrendering to the idea of compromise.

I continued to look at the black screen. The pixellated images were still intermittently appearing and disappearing. I tried to get back

to reality, and I nudged myself about all the times I had been on the edge of a breakdown while chairing the Cygnet, and still I managed to get away with these difficult moments keeping up my motivation. I recalled the fact that, after the civil war ended, it was natural for me to be nominated executive director of The Federation® because that mission was not over yet. I told myself that the mission entrusted to me on that foggy Wednesday afternoon still mattered. I ruled I had to go on, and stop Nathan. But nothing. That Skype® call with Dalia, and the message from Pancho, had been the straws that had broken the camel's back.

DANCE FLOOR

Hopeless and overwhelmed, I decided to return to the Air France® office and ask them to change my ticket to go back to Brussels. I had attempted to remember the exact corridor that I had walked through only half an hour before, hoping the office was still open. But trapped in that sort of maze, my brain hazy, I continued to see the walls rippling and breathing. Fences and scaffolding diverted my path. It felt like the entire floor of the airport was a travelator moving in the opposite direction to me.

I also continued to observe things that made no sense.

On one of the corners I had the impression of seeing, outside a coffee shop, a man roasting coffee beans in a big rubber truck wheel. Melted rubber combined with the smell of coffee. Or perhaps the man was melting some psychedelic drug, I thought, spreading it in the air to make everyone dizzy. That would have explained my visions, I speculated. Or maybe it was my sleep-deprived brain fog. I was sure the man looked at me with a malign grin, showing an ugly black tooth.

Then I saw Somoche, the woman from TAM™'s flight gate; she was coming towards me holding a pile of boarding passes in both hands. Two security guards were escorting her, and pointing their fingers towards me, they advanced more and more quickly in my direction. I ran away, trying not to look for too long at the weird things happening around me, but the visions seemed to follow me instead. I had the impression that the security guards were running after me disguised as tourists wearing flowered shirts and Bermuda shorts. But then I realised I had already seen the same two guys

before, and they were simply passengers wearing their red and blue Havaianas®, from earlier when I was sitting on the floor.

Finally, only a few metres from the ticket office, I had a phantasmagorical vision in the main hall's glass cube. It was the end of November, with Revelation Festival decorations all over the place. Together with the tropical garden and the butterflies, in a dreamlike scene I could see a *bloco carnavalesco*, as they call it in Portuguese, playing samba while hundreds of passengers were either staring at the dancers or dancing themselves.

I remember someone took my hand and dragged me inside the group of half-naked women, men and genderfluid people, and made me spin several times, asking me to close my eyes. Was this real? I didn't know. My breathing was rapid. My heart was pounding. My pupils were dilated. Everything turned blue and red and yellow. The dancer blew golden sparkles on my face, and she said, '*O garoto dourado*,' the golden boy, in Portuguese. I could not refrain from dancing. It was viral. A dance epidemic. I had heard there were dance epidemics in the Middle Ages, and people could not stop moving until they died. I was convinced that a dance epidemic in an international airport would spread everywhere else. I could imagine people already dancing in the airports of Frankfurt and Dubai. The disease would soon go down from the main hubs to the capitals and smaller airports.

The world was doomed, or not.

I recognised a slight switch in the music.

'I wanna tell you today,' they were singing and whistling in tune.

I heard the *bloco* playing a samba version of 'Tell You (Today)' ℗1983 Loose Joints. That was altogether an amazing sight, no matter how real or dreamy all this could have been. The song was

irresistibly happy. It could have made even a severely depressed glyptodont from the Late Pleistocene dance.

‘Tell you, tell you,’ I heard the dancer that blew glitter on my face whispering again in my ear. She had a deep voice and a deep look as well as a long beard.

‘I tell you,’ she said, ‘reality is closer to what you feel than to what you think.’

‘I wanna tell you today,’ she kept whistling in time with the song.

‘You are the one who knows what’s happening,’ she continued, very discreetly. I thought no one suspected she was speaking to me.

‘I wanna tell you today. You need to look upstairs,’ she said.

I wasn’t sure if she was real.

‘I wanna tell you today,’ she sang in the same tone of voice as Arthur Russell, the guy who wrote the song. Maybe his ghost was speaking to me. I kept on dancing, unstoppable, and I looked upstairs above the glitter and the confetti. I saw an advertisement panel.

‘Tell you, tell you,’ the voice kept on inside my brain.

I focused again on the advertisement floating above, and this time I’m sure it wasn’t a hallucination. The neat graphic was appealing. Savvy use of Helvetica font with minimalistic icons and a brief but straightforward tagline.

StockGame®: every financial market in your pocket, from now on.

That app promised to merge all previously existing tools for electronic financial and stock investment: Stocktwits™, Stocktouch®, StockWars™, Virtual Investing®, LearnVest™, and so

on. Close to the tagline, there was the unmistakable logo of Nathan's company. The multiple pieces of the puzzle started to come together. The red tie-wearing guys in business class swiping the same app. The conversation with Nathan in Thessaloniki. He would have done whatever it took to achieve his goal.

'The men in yellow will protect you,' I thought the dancer whispered in my left ear. Then, I have the cloudy memory that she had licked and bitten my lobe, and she had said it felt like a tasty piece of meat. I got horny.

Three men dressed in yellow were waiting for me, standing on the balcony, making signs for me to reach them. But I was trapped in the dance. Two of them came down.

'The men in yellow will protect you,' I remember she whispered again.

The whole airport felt like a huge, spectacular discotheque. I saw everyone dancing crazily and full of love. Whatever that was, even if it was happening just in my imagination, it was amazing.

FADE-OUT

Janine woke me up with a slight movement of her breast against my skin. She was glued to my back, the bra of her swimsuit soaked with sweat, making me wet, too. In the swimming pool, there were four small inflatable mattresses used by the kids. Two were blue, and two were white. One of those was floating half-deflated because of the heat. I was also sweaty. The kids left a huge pile of little toys. My sister's husband Thomas called them inside to eat.

They had arrived in the morning from Paris. We gathered together every summer at Mum's house in Éguilles, near Aix-en-Provence, where she moved when she split with my father. That was pretty much the only time I used to see them all in one place.

Janine and I stayed outside sunbathing. My groin was itching. The evening before she had shaved it completely when we took a shower together. She also trimmed very short what was left on the pubis. I liked it when she massaged the foam over my skin. She did a fine shaving job, without cutting me, but what I liked the most was when she licked the bare skin. It made me want to get shaved everywhere, just to get her to lick me all over the place.

But now, with the chlorine and the sweat, it was no longer fun. The sky was blue. I think it was thirty-nine degrees, at least. Cicadas were singing, and the wind brought a strong smell of pine trees.

I could feel her breathing while she was sleeping, almost snoring, I might say. For a few minutes, I considered jumping in the water, and then I considered going inside to make myself a Martini® with ice. Finally, I decided it was too much effort to do any kind of physical activity.

I contemplated the possibility of doing a serious assessment of the situation, while continuing to lie down, but again I realised it was too much mental effort. I preferred to stare at each of the little drops of sweat leaking out of her hair and falling down her neck. The drops were forming a pattern that I officially decided, if deciphered, could have led to a milestone scientific discovery that would have blown apart theories about space and time.

I was absorbed in decoding it when she woke up.

‘Hey,’ she said, yawning and moving her hair from her neck. I got pissed off, as she interrupted the experiment at the very moment when I was about to find the interpretation of the pattern. She’d ruined the scientific discovery of the decade, but I didn’t tell her.

‘Did you sleep well?’ I asked instead.

‘Not really,’ she replied. ‘Did you think about what we talked about last night?’ she asked without warning.

A tsunami of enormous dimensions was approaching, slowly but surely, after an exceptionally low tide. She was always like that. She was not used to having a grey zone between sleep and waking, where the brain starts to function slowly. She was either switched on or off.

And that was too fast a switch-on.

‘I simply fail to understand.’ I started, reluctantly, what was going to be a very painful conversation. I saw in a sharp, cold flash the destruction to which I was doomed.

‘You can disagree with me, but I want you to understand. We can’t finish all this without any understanding.’ She was truly committed to making it even worse and more painful than it was. I simply thought there was no understanding to be found. Trying to find a

rational explanation for something that was defying the laws of logic was an irrational act anyway. But, then again, if that whole situation was irrational then finding a rational explanation was just as irrational as the rest. So, she had a point.

‘You don’t want to see me again, or speak to me, or keep any kind of *connection* whatsoever. It is as simple as that. I fail to understand that, and I disagree.’ I spelled it out in the plainest manner possible.

‘I can’t keep in touch. I don’t keep any contact with my exes. It’s my rule, and I must stick to it,’ she said. ‘You will fade out.’

And that was the tsunami.

‘Fade out? How can you think that I will fade out? Or that you will ever fade out from me?’ I asked.

That was a pain I hadn’t experienced before. I didn’t know the grammar and the specific language that is spoken during break-ups, as it was the first time I had had one. The meaning of its codified words was uncharted territory. Everything looked so rough and unnecessary.

‘That’s what will happen. I went through this several times already,’ she replied.

‘I don’t believe you. This time it must be different. It’s about you and me. It’s not about other people that you met in the past. We are connected in a special way. No matter what,’ I said.

‘I don’t want, I don’t need *connection*. That’s exactly what is wrong,’ she said.

‘So, you want to disconnect from me?’ I asked.

‘You don’t understand anyway,’ she said.

We could have spoken for hours just repeating ourselves, again and again and again, making it all worse and worse.

The kids were back from lunch, screaming, laughing, splashing in the water.

We stopped arguing for an eternity of minutes. I continued to stare at her, hopeless and speechless. A sense of anxiety about what would happen next stole breath from my lungs.

‘I simply can’t imagine you out of my life,’ I told her again.

I jumped in the water. I had to leave the polluted magnetic field that we had created around us. The water refreshed my brain, but the hopeless feeling was not washed away.

*

Janine Karasu and I met for the first time in a tiny bookstore in Vossenplein, also known as Place du Jeu de Bal, in Brussels. I was taking my usual post-hangover Sunday afternoon stroll in the square. She was looking for some old medical school manuals. She studied neuroscience and had a passion for old books about the human brain. I found those kinds of books creepy, especially those with photos of split skulls, or those that described in intricate detail the procedures for lobotomy and electroshock treatments. That is how our first-ever conversation started. A casual interaction became a heated argument over the possibility of understanding what is going on inside our brains by observing electrical pulses of the nerves. The bookshop owner got angry. He told us that if we wanted to continue quarrelling over his books we should buy them and go elsewhere.

We ended up spending the rest of the day at the Chaff, a bar just beside the shop. I learned she had just moved from London to study in Brussels for a semester. She was doing her master's thesis on the neural mechanisms involved in emotions, mood swings specifically. She was studying the role of norepinephrine, an organic chemical functioning as a neurotransmitter, the way it increases arousal but also restlessness and anxiety in the brain.

I was intrigued, and I like to think that I implicitly agreed, after that conversation, to become her guinea pig to help advance findings on the matter. We ended up seeing each other every day, and three months and many experiments later, I realised that I was in love.

I happily encouraged her to satisfy her fantasies or research, whatever that was, and she did the same with me. The shaving idea was mine, I admit, while it was her idea to tie up my dick and balls with yellow shoelaces. It became a sort of ritual to be performed periodically according to the lunar calendar. That turned her on massively. She was sensitive to colour grading, and she repeatedly confessed to me that yellow and purple had a magical effect on her.

Janine had plenty of that kind of stuff on her mind: she was a foot fetishist, a cross-dresser. We tried several configurations of threesomes and a variety of bondage scenarios. She also got me to give her a golden shower, but only once, as it didn't turn out to be as exciting as the yellow shoelaces. I've always been extremely interested in sexual fantasies myself. I think they are closely linked to our boundaries. They can make us better people, more in tune with our nature, and they dare us to explore and expand our own limits. Repress them, and we become a paranoiac society of control. Obviously, I'm not speaking here about a complete anarchy of feelings, or any legitimisation of non-consenting actions. To make us feel good, we need to make others feel good, too.

Janine was born three years before me in Yeniköy, a wealthy suburb of Istanbul, but she had lived all her life in London. Her mother was a famous art dealer and curator. She got her reputation from mixing pieces from different styles and ages around common themes. It was not exactly revolutionary, but she had a talent for telling stories through art. She made a splash when she put together some ancient Phoenician statues with twentieth century modernism and early two thousands cybernetic art, around the theme of goddesses and power.

Janine's father Tarkan belonged to the same family as the Turkish writer Bilge Karasu, but he was far from literary. He worked in finance and had a huge office on the thirty-second floor of CityPoint® on Ropemaker Street, on the northern fringe of the City of London.

His wife took care of the office artwork with an installation called *Archaeology of Finance*, which left permanent emotional footprints on the clients that came in. One of his clients was Semion Mogilevich himself. It took Tarkan less than half an hour to convince the famous Mafia™ money launderer to buy the now-infamous massive package of collateralised debt obligations to recycle in Kalochori.

*

Janine didn't wake me up.

I could feel that dusty and sticky grey linoleum floor glued to my right cheek. That South American airport, except for the brand new tropical hall, was a linoleum cage. The blue and red neon of the Air France® logo was blinking outside their very closed office. I was lying in the foetal position in the corner of a long corridor. There

were no swimming pools around for at least a couple of miles. The air smelled of glue, instead of pine trees.

To my left, there was a small room with two airport security guards. They were dressed in yellow light-reflecting jackets, snoring while relaxing in their chairs. Playing cards were on the table, left over from the game they must have engaged in before falling asleep, and then a walkie-talkie switched on. I could hear buzzes of metallic voices saying sparse words with no apparent logical meaning. The wall clock in the cabin marked three-thirty in the morning.

The men in yellow will protect me, I repeated mentally. StockGame®, VotingGame®, swiping people. Work in progress. Janine. Roasted coffee beans. Flight delays. Labyrinths. The big samba disco dancing. Janine. I took the badge of The League of Young Voters™ from my pocket. My brain tried to connect the dots, feebly. It formed a map made by airport codes, mail delivery hours, abstract signs of mysterious meaning. That new, unexpected clarity came this time in the form of a list, a classic, logical and elegant ten-point list.

First. I was stranded in São Paulo, on my way to Santiago.

Second. Pancho told me to go back to Europe, and I tried to do so.

Third. I passed out in front of the ticket office, after seeing weird stuff.

Fourth. Nathan Ziggy Zukowski was trying to get hold not only of the elections, but also of the stock exchange markets all over the world, and who knows what else.

Fifth. It was not time to give up, but rather to find a way to bring my ass straight to Santiago, no matter what.

Sixth. They would know every single next step I made to try to arrive there.

Seventh. They would have erased any obstacle even remotely threatening Nathan's plan. Therefore, they would try to keep me out of the conference by any means possible.

Eight. There were too many Havaianas® in Brazil and in the entire world.

Ninth. I was probably really in that swimming pool a couple of minutes before.

Tenth. I had to find my luggage.

*

I stood up and went to the lost-and-found luggage room on Basement Level One.

The room was a continuation of the same banal corridor, narrow and long. The only difference was that there was an incredible amount of luggage piled up on one side. The bags were of all shapes and sizes, mostly ugly ones: a trolley with the American flag printed all over the rigid plastic; a pink Hello Kitty® suitcase with four wheels. One had a ghetto blaster sound system printed on it, which would have been a nice idea if it weren't for the bad graphics. Another had small, stylised vaginas alternated with a pattern of cactuses and sombrero hats. There was also a full series of bags with religious figurines; that series was cool. But the worst was an aluminium briefcase with a huge sticker photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

A solitary guy was there, working the first morning shift. He was operating a personal computer running an old Microsoft Windows® system, looking thoughtful and browsing videos on YouPorn™.

I showed my luggage receipt, and it appeared on the screen to be ready to be placed on the TAM™ flight to Santiago leaving in a few hours. A momentary relief. Something was finally working right on this journey.

But before leaving the office, I gave another sidelong glance at the pile of luggage. In between pink, fluorescent green, violet and scarlet trolleys made from the most polluting, smelly and cheap plastics ever produced on the planet, there was a metal grey reflection that looked like my Samsonite®. It was indeed mine, but tagless and nameless. Poor bag, she must have been frightened as, back then, they used to burn unclaimed or lost suitcases after a certain amount of time. I found that old-fashioned security procedure particularly disturbing. With every story behind each of them, burning someone's suitcase must have been almost like burning a house.

So, I was ready to go. Despite everything I still had all of my personal belongings and, partially, my mental faculties. There was only one thing left to do before setting off.

I had to announce my arrival to Pancho but couldn't be bothered finding another Wi-Fi spot. So, I asked the luggage guy to let me use his old computer to write a quick email.

*

From: Bastian Balthazar Bux
Date: Thursday 28 November, 4.40

To: Francisco Trafia
Cc: Rosalyn Fusa , Sandra Müller
Subject: R e : R e : R e : R e : COCHA – Ticket – BASTIAN/BUX.

Pancho,

I tried to change the ticket , but the Air France ® office in the São Paulo airport is closed until 8.30am. I ’v e already got my boarding pass for TAM F light 8234 at 7.35am to Santiago .

I don ’ t want to risk my luggage getting lost , plus I have no guarantee that A ir F rance ® will be able to fly me back to Europe for free . So , I am going to board the 7.35am flight.

When I land , around 10am , I will hop in a taxi and head for the conference location . I’ll call you if I can , although I ’ m still without a phone .

Best,

Bastian.

*

I looked at the screen.

Theywould know every single next step I made to try to arrive there; I recalled the sixth point of my recap.

I pressed select-all, delete, and wrote to Sandra instead.

CLEAR SKIES

I stepped inside one of the black cabs with a yellow painted roof, one of those Japanese hybrid cars that used to run on electricity and gasoline at the same time. I was tired, to say the least.

It was a sunny day at the Arturo Marino Benítez International Airport of Santiago de Chile. The thermometer outside the arrival hall marked 30˚ Celsius. It was ten in the morning, and the Ministerial Conference would conclude in two hours.

'*Por favor, vamos a calle catedral, a l'edificio Congreso*,' I told the driver.

'*Sin problema, señor*,' he replied. He was slightly overweight; I could see his hairy belly flopping out of the unbuttoned shirt. He was hairless in the middle of his skull, which made him look like a Cistercian monk out of a Trappist monastery in southern Belgium, those that make the good beer and cheese.

'*Muchas gracias. Y por favor, tomela ruta más rapida. Estoy de retraso, muy retraso*,' I said. Once he heard my funny accent, the driver switched to International English, which conformed slightly more to American English than to the variety spoken at that time in Continental Europe.

'The freeway would theoretically be the fastest, but there's some construction that's been going on for ages,' he said. 'They are putting sensors in the asphalt. They say it will be the first freeway in the world connected to the internet, whatever that means.'

'Whatever you think is fastest. I trust you. I don't have much time,' I said.

I was still wearing the winter clothes I had put on two days ago. Besides a short nap on the plane and the suspended time lapse when I passed out on the floor of the São Paulo airport, I hadn't slept properly for the past fifty hours or so. But against all the odds of the disgraceful odyssey I'd gone through, I started to feel great as soon as I touched Chilean soil. Passing through the border and claiming my luggage both went smoothly.

I felt like a freshwater turtle when it gets moved out of a bowl of stinky water, polluted by its own shit and food, to a large, fresh pond in the middle of a tropical garden. I carefully opened the garment bag that I'd dragged all over the world and started to undress in the car, feeling like a medieval knight ritually putting his armour on and getting ready for a tournament or battle.

The driver continued to speak to me in random bits of trivia. How great the summer had been in Santiago that year, warm but dry; which were the best empanadas in town; how Unión Española™, his favourite soccer team and defending champions for the season, was not doing as well as the previous year. More details about the specific process they were using to replace the tarmac of the freeway. The story of a Uruguayan rugby team whose plane had crashed in the Andes in 1972, and how the starving passengers decided to eat the flesh of their dead companions to survive. And so on.

While I had ignored most of his previous facts, at some point I realised that he was talking about wine. Apparently, his sister-in-law's uncle's brother produced one of the best Carménères in all of Chile.

'You guys drink Bordeaux in fancy restaurants, pay shit loads of money and think that there are no good wines in South America.

Bullshit. You guys have no clue. The only, and I say the only, real Bordeaux wine still existing in the world is from Chile,' he said.

I was having a hard time taking off my trousers on the back seat of the car.

He switched to an official tone of voice. 'The first person who imported French grapes to Chile was a certain Don Silvestre Errázuriz, back in the year eighteen hundred and something. This guy also hired a French oenologist to produce wine in the Bordeaux style.' He sounded like the voiceover of a *National Geographic* documentary from the 1960s, but with a South American accent.

In the meantime, I made a disappointing discovery. The light green boxers I was wearing didn't match the dark blue suit from the garment bag. I wished I could change them; I needed to change them anyway. I had worn them for the past fifty hours. However, it would have been way too complicated to have even considered embarking on such a mission, starting with the simple consideration that the closest pair of fresh underwear was as far as my luggage, which was locked in the boot of the car. But maybe, I thought, there was a way to access the boot from the back seat.

'Now, with all these batches of grapes that were shipped here, there was also the Carménère. They don't say this in Europe, but a plague nearly destroyed all the vineyards of France, just a few years after these grapes were imported to Chile. The plague afflicted the Carménère grapevines so that for many years the grape was presumed extinct. When the vineyards were replanted, growers in Bordeaux could not replant Carménère as it was extremely hard to find and difficult to grow,' he said.

The story was fascinating. For more than a century, we had been drinking fake Bordeaux and mistreating Chilean grapes as a

subspecies. The copy was the original, while the original was the fake. My world was literally upside down. The revenge of the southern hemisphere wouldn't have come from political activists, Bono Vox or fanatical terrorists, but by humiliating the most noble varieties of grapes in the Gironde.

Suddenly, I felt a sense of loss. It was not due to the number of bottles of banal Médoc that I still had at home, nor was it a Janine-related symptom. It was because of my belt. I could not find it anywhere.

I desperately looked in my computer bag but found nothing. I thought that I had lost it forever in one of the zillion security checks I'd been through in the past fifty hours. Just as I was about to lose all hope, my fingers swiped between the bunch of magazines at the bottom of the plastic bag, and there it was, lying like a hidden snake ready to bite its prey. It was at that moment that I gave up for good the idea of changing my light green underwear. I decided to put on the red socks with white dots that I had in my garment bag, which paired nicely with the red knitted tie, also white dotted, and which I was about to tie around my neck in a basic four-in-hand knot.

'So, the best part of the story is that none of us knew that our wine was the only original Bordeaux still existing on planet earth. Some French researcher discovered it and told us. Isn't it ironic and wonderful at the same time?' The driver was proudly coming to a theatrical close. I nodded.

'And do you know what is even more wonderful? It is that the brother of the uncle of my sister-in-law, the one I was telling you about before, he's one of the direct descendants of that famous Don Silvestre who brought the French grapes here,' he said, and at that point, as part of what by then seemed to be a well-rehearsed script,

he handed me one of his family vineyard's business cards, from where they were piled on the car's dashboard. 'If you have the chance, go there and say that you know me. They will give you a fifteen percent discount.'

*

We were still far from the city centre, and the bumpy, narrow, one-way road seemed endless.

'Here they are,' he said, pointing a finger towards three men in yellow. They looked suspiciously like the guards at Guarulhos Airport, and I jumped from my seat.

'What?' I asked.

They were waving red flags to divert cars onto a side road. We were driving at no more than twenty kilometres per hour. The van in front of us honked the whole time. The car horn vibrated directly inside my head, which was exploding with stress and fear.

'I mean the work in progress. Here they are,' he replied.

I suspected someone from the airport had transmitted the information that I had landed. Despite my radio silence with Pancho, it could have been one of their informers in Brazil, or maybe a more sophisticated system, like a sensor in my luggage or a digestible microchip someone had dropped into the last meal I had on the transatlantic flight. Nothing surprised me any more.

The idea that they connected me to the internet through a sensor inside my body made a lot of sense. The hallucinations in Brazil and some strange vibrations inside my head were proof of this. I felt pain in my lungs again, so I took a deep breath and tried to calm

down. I had almost reached my destination, despite all the efforts they had taken to stop me, and should have convinced myself that the men in yellow were only a coincidence. But then again, something was not totally explicable. Too many coincidences. I was locked inside a loop. It was insane, and the window of opportunity to arrive before the end of the conference was shrinking every minute.

At least the breathtaking view compensated for my anxiety. It let me think about something other than incumbent apocalypses and complots. The Andes dominated the background of the skyline as we drove towards the city centre from west to east. I imagined that somewhere over those mountains, the Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 with the cannibalistic rugby players must have crashed. There was still snow on top of the peaks, even in the middle of summer. The highest mountain in sight was Cerro Aconcagua, the tallest summit of all the Andes, on the Argentinian border. In that moment, I had a *déjà vu*.

KASPROWY PEAK

The sky was blue and clear on that glorious October morning, three years before my cab ride in Santiago de Chile. The Tatra Mountains dominated the skyline of Zakopane, as we drove towards the city centre from west to east. The highest mountain in sight was Kasprowy Peak, on the Slovak border. There was snow on the top. The breathtaking view compensated for my anxiety.

We were driving to meet Nathan Ziggy Zukowski.

That autumn, newspapers reported that Milan Mojš, Minister of Transport, Post and Telecommunications of the Slovak Republic, had been kidnapped. Mojš didn't have specific political weight and influence within the European landscape. But the fact that a minister was taken prisoner was news, making even more visible the irreversible cracks brewing within nation states' apparatuses years and years before the war.

The alarm bell rang also because the kidnapping was undertaken by the coordinated efforts of the students, without any planning, coordination or participation by any other parties.

Milan Mojš was taken hostage after he had had dinner in the Liviano Restaurant in Bratislava. It was by a joint assault force of the revolutionary student cells from Bratislava and Krakow, called Operation Foie Gras Ganache©.

That evening Liviano served, as a starter, a foie gras ganache with brioche. The menu also included a slowly baked goose-duck served with white and red cabbage as the main and pumpkin cake for dessert. No one remembered what wine the minister drank, but I

still like to think that it was Bordeaux, an expensive variety of the fake French one, obviously.

The minister owned a collectable Tatra® 603 from 1968 that he preferred to drive himself. In communist Czechoslovakia, only high-ranking party officials and heads of factories were driven in T603s. Former Cuban President Fidel Castro is believed to have owned a white T603 featuring air conditioning. That same make and model was parked outside the restaurant. There were a few lights in the parking lot, but not on the side of the car.

Mojš was still eating his pumpkin cake, and that night he was dining alone. He often liked to be alone at Liviano's, occasionally having conversations with the waiters and the chef himself, who'd known him for years. One member of the commando-style squad had taken up position on the back seat of the car while the other students hid outside. Mojš paid the bill. He stepped outside. He looked for his keys and got in the car. The guy hiding on the backseat smoothly injected a ketamine-based anaesthetic into his shoulder. The minister didn't even realise what was happening before he fell quickly, deeply unconscious. The other two members of the squad dragged him away, into some bushes. They reached a path leading to a parallel street. A plumber's minivan was waiting, and they drove him far away.

The lead commando had been coordinating the action through an app and wearable devices specifically designed for the mission, even though they were still in beta. An advanced upgrade could have been used for various operations of a similar nature, from robbing a bank to placing bombs inside government buildings, and so on. It was linked to a GPS®-based service and could locate moving targets by simply receiving signals issued from their phones, without the mark noticing. Basic, but effective.

Operation Foie Gras Ganache© was much more than a cross-border showing-off. Most of the newswires portrayed the story as a warning sent to the central authorities of Slovakia and bordering Poland. In reality, though, it was a subtle message to the rest of the forces involved in the civil war, aimed at bringing a new balance to the postwar negotiations.

That was the time when, within the Cygnet Committee, all kinds of buzz started to circulate. Delegates played power games amongst themselves. They were allegedly spreading the story that the coordination of rebel students was an anarchists' proxy, and they wanted to expel them from the committee to exclude them from negotiating the final terms of the war's resolution.

Somehow it was a clear sign that the conflict was fading out, replaced by other latent disputes buried deep under the aegis of a common enemy. For me, it became more and more wearisome to chair these charged sessions. The network of city mayors under rebellion was heading the faction that felt the most betrayed by the disloyal students. I could not stand such a climate of hatred and blackmail on all sides. That is why I flew to Krakow. I jumped into a car, and reached Kasprowy Peak to meet Nathan Ziggy Zukowski.

*

Nathan Ziggy Zukowski had been the commander-in-chief of Operation Foie Gras Ganache©. Five students, two from Bratislava and two from the Krakow cell, as well as an Erasmus student from Barcelona, formed the team. It was gender-balanced, including a representative from the LGBTQIA community.

At that time, Polanski's supposed son was a young, ambitious rebel still studying at the Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Applied

Computer Science of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. There was something in his attitude and look that made him a naturally charismatic leader.

Nathan was beautiful in a wild kind of way. Blond with dark green eyes. He defied all clichés among his peers and dressed like a dandy aristocrat from the late nineteenth century, though he always had the latest high-tech gadgets. He loved to refer to the Italian counterculture intellectuals of the late 1970s, such as Toni Negri and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, coupling those readings with linguistics essays and cyberpunk novels.

He was convinced that the empire had to be destroyed from the inside out. That violence was a necessary tool to tear down the established order, to create a better political system with power to the people. He was a step ahead of the anarchists. He was a step ahead of everybody else in his lucid vision of the future. He declared on several occasions that he had a mission to build a new order out of the current chaos, and he took himself seriously when he said it.

The first time I met him was at the second meeting of Cygnet. He managed to be nominated as the official representative of the students on the Committee, but their selection took time. They could not agree on the methodology for an election, which made them lose the opportunity to participate in the inaugural meeting. Nathan was an underdog in the internal competition, coming from a small university that had not been involved directly in war operations so far. Others were better placed than he was, at least on paper, such as the leader of Thessaloniki Airport Crash™ or the president of the Spanish students.

Nevertheless, he managed to beat everyone against all odds, with a strange dose of ambition, political savvy and theoretical bragging

about world revolution. He kept the position and continued to raise his profile with great shows of diplomacy towards the other representatives on the Committee, while continuing to be involved at grassroots level and decrying other student leaders publicly as ‘bureaucrats of the revolution’.

It was, therefore, not a surprise that Nathan himself was leading Operation Foie Gras Ganache©.

My mission was to deliver the unfortunate Minister of Transport, Post and Telecommunications back to the Slovaks. The negotiations were shockingly smooth and quick. I sent Nathan a text message explaining all the rumours going around following the kidnapping. He suggested that I come personally to pick up the minister and to have a breath of fresh air in the mountains.

They had spirited him away to the meteorological station of the Kasprowy Peak at almost two thousand metres above sea level. We had a special permit to drive the car as far as the base station of Kuznice. From there we entered the zone controlled by the rebel student forces. The driver and my assistant had to stay in the car, as previously agreed. I was the only one permitted to go up to the peak via cable car. I thought I would have been alone on my journey to the top, but Nathan himself welcomed me into the funicular vehicle.

‘Hey Bastian,’ he said, smiling, then grabbed my hand to help me climb inside. ‘I am happy you made it. Was the trip okay?’

‘Well, you know, some tension at the Krakow airport. A bomb exploded in baggage claims,’ I replied.

The mayors’ network controlled most of Krakow, but the troop contractors hadn’t completely surrendered and still held the airport.

‘I’m truly enjoying it up here,’ he said. We were climbing towards Myślenicke Turnie where we would change to another cable car.

‘I bet. It’s peaceful. You guys closed all the facilities, and you’re all alone over there,’ I said.

‘You know, the revolution should not be televised. But joking aside,’ he continued, ‘it wasn’t easy to conquer the peak. We besieged the observatory for two months before taking it.’

The cable car transfer station was getting closer. I could see part of its grey concrete structure smashed to pieces by shell fire, and the rest pockmarked by rifle bullets.

‘But now, no one can disturb you over there. You’ve completely cut off the mountain,’ I said.

I could recognise the sparse pattern of fortified posts perched on various points of the slope below us.

‘Yep, and we were lucky they banned drones and planes in the Acts, or we would have been wiped out in minutes,’ he said.

We arrived at the midpoint and changed cable cars. I was looking further away from the panoramic window.

‘Did you know that the first passengers travelled on that cable car in March 1936, after only 227 days of construction?’ he asked.

‘I read it on Wikipedia®,’ I replied.

‘But I bet you don’t know that up here we’ve found ultimate proof of the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life,’ he said. Nathan always carefully studied anyone he did business with. He had a talent for finding funny details that made his interactions unique. In my case, he knew he would spark my attention with astronomical subject matter.

‘And you want me to believe you kidnapped the Minister of Telecommunications of Slovakia to conduct some experiments with him at the observatory, and send signals to exoplanets Kepler-22b or 452b,’ I replied.

‘Mojš unfortunately has no key to deciphering messages from outer space,’ Nathan said, ‘but he has good taste in cars and food. We had a few nice dinners with this view.’

The cable car was almost at the peak.

‘I didn’t tell you that we also brought the chef from the Liviano Restaurant. We didn’t kidnap him, just hired him for the past few weeks,’ he said, and I wondered why I was not surprised at all.

‘So, now that this is over, will you come back and join the next committee meeting?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Did Eustace complain a lot about the kidnapping?’ he asked. Eustace was the representatives of the mayors’ network in the Cygnet.

‘Yeah, he was truly pissed off. I told you over text message,’ I said.

‘He’s going to cool down when you bring back the minister,’ he replied.

We arrived at the upper station and stepped out of the cable car. I could now admire the whole Tatra range.

‘Everybody will be happy, they just need to have patience and wait. And I must ask one favour in exchange for the minister’s release,’ he said.

‘If I can,’ I replied.

‘It’s about the first point on the next meeting’s agenda. You must postpone it,’ he said. One of the few powers of the chair of the Committee was to decide when an item was going to be discussed. The request seemed feasible and not particularly burdensome, as we could in any case have handled the item next time, so I nodded. Business was formally over. I could finally take a breath of fresh air in front of the grand view.

We went inside the derelict observatory. The rest of the Operation Foie Gras Ganache© assault force was gathered around a table with Milan Mojš, waiting for us. They served a shot of vodka each to mark the end of the operation. Then, the minister and I rode down the mountain and went back to the car.

‘Milan Mojš freed: a breather for Europe’s peace,’ the newspapers said. ‘Hope for Europe,’ ‘Mojš’ release gives peace a chance.’ And so on.

When the existence of the Cygnet became public, this episode was celebrated as one of the first tangible results of the activities of the Committee. Analysts wrote that the negotiation to free Mojš catalysed ceasefires and war resolutions in the following months. Nathan calculated all of this. The operation guaranteed him respect within the rebel student forces until the end of the conflict, but it also allowed him to gain ground with other Cygnet members.

As for the agenda point he asked me to postpone, that was a decision on binding principles and common methodologies for holding the first European elections after the war. As promised, we postponed the item, but it was never discussed again because it turned out unexpectedly to be the last meeting of the committee.

The rebel students eventually joined the anarchists. But that is another story and shall be told another time.

The sky was blue and clear.

TOURISTS OF DEMOCRACY

We were approaching the city centre. The profile of the Andes began to disappear amongst the buildings. The orthogonal urban grid grew denser as we drove through the mix of neoclassical buildings that made up the older part of the town. I was almost ready. I combed my hair to look as stylish and well-groomed as I could. I put on sunglasses, a pair of the famous foldable Persol® 714, as worn by Steve McQueen in *The Thomas Crown Affair* ©1968 United Artists.

I opened the taxi door and exited with a slow, deliberate step. Now I looked cool, not a baggy, grumpy guy stranded at the airport, but a real smart-ass ready to fight Polanski's alleged son in the arena.

The Trappist cab driver left me outside the gate of the building that had hosted the National Congress of Chile until 1973. It was a white, square construction, with a monumental entrance: two lion statues mounting Mary-Inanna's eight-pointed stars and two rows of six Corinthian columns that made it look like an ancient Greek temple. That is where, over the last two days, the Third International Conference on Electoral Devices had been taking place. My pitch about The League of Young Voters™ was supposed to have happened the previous morning, but I'd obviously missed it. Plus, I gave up writing any kind of speech after the P.A.R.I.S.™ incident.

No one knew I was arriving, but my name should still have been in the security system, as well as at reception and the check-in desk. The guard at the gate checked the security system and provided an affirmative response. I was on the list as a VIP, so I could skip the metal detector.

A girl in a pale rose dress with white buttons and a boy with a red bowtie and deep blue shirt stood at the reception desk. I took off my sunglasses, and they showed me the way to the check-in desk, where another girl dressed in an identical pale rose dress and another boy with a red bowtie and deep blue shirt waited. They handed over my badge with no further fuss.

Everything looked like this was the most normal and banal business trip I'd ever made. It was like entering a parallel universe. Time was ticking differently and yet anywhere in the world, the time zone, rules and rituals were all the same. Along with my badge, I received a copy of the agenda and a bag containing a USB stick from the Chamber of Commerce of Santiago as well as a plastic pen from Chile's national office of tourism.

At that time, people got USB sticks at every conference. Inside the bag there was also a map of the city, a folder for spare papers and, to my greatest delight, a Nokia N_2® tablet.

On the conference agenda, my name was struck through, with the word *apology* handwritten over it in red pen. I wondered when I had ever sent any *apology*. The conspiracy idea thickened in my head again. I was now even more certain that Pancho and a bunch of other people had been paid by Nathan to keep me out of the conference in an orchestrated conspiracy.

I couldn't be sure, but to organise such an operation he must have got hold of airline managers and air traffic control centres around the world. He must also have hired fake flight attendants and the best DJs in town to organise that improbable rave inside the arrival hall of the São Paulo airport. Not to mention Janine's doppelgänger.

At that moment, I saw Pancho arriving from a side door.

'Bastiàn?' he asked in his Spanish-Chilean accent.

‘I’ve made it,’ I replied.

‘I thought you were on a plane back to Europe,’ he said.

‘The travel agency was closed in São Paulo. I was already checked in for Santiago,’ I told him. I was polite, providing the least amount of information about my past few hours. No glimpse of emotion was evident in my tone of voice.

‘We missed your presentation yesterday morning at the conference.’ He was trying to be nice.

‘I had a hell of a trip,’ I echoed.

‘But you have a plane back? Correct?’ he asked.

‘Well, yes, the same one that you originally booked for me,’ I replied, and again, that now seemed suspicious.

‘I asked because you came on a different flight,’ he said.

‘Yes, but you booked it, and it’s the airline’s fault if the schedule went wrong. Isn’t it?’ I said.

‘Sure,’ he continued, ‘you can send me the PowerPoint® of your presentation from yesterday. We will put it together with the conference materials and circulate it among the participants, so that they get it even though you didn’t show it yesterday.’ At that time, this kind of material was always prestored on the USB sticks that were given out. However, I’d informed him two weeks before that I would not have a PowerPoint®, further proof that he was simply lying to me.

Pancho was lying in the plain, subtle, anonymous way that civil servants learn when they prepare to pass those improbable tests to reformat their brains, in order to comply with the machinery of worldwide Kafkaesque regulations.

You may remember, PowerPoint® was a program developed by Microsoft® in the middle of the 1990s and, back then, it was the widespread standard for 2D presentations using a ‘projector’ linked to a computer. But it also designated any kind of presentation, made with any software, that was destined to be included on those Chinese-produced USB sticks provided at conferences. A projector was the hardware used to give the presentations. It was a machine generally set up in front of a plain wall or in front of a mounted white screen. Through multiple rays of light coming out of that machine, a still or moving image would be projected on the screen or wall. It was the direct ancestor of our Holojector Drones®.

‘Thanks, but I don’t have a PowerPoint,’ I replied. We were walking down a corridor that circumnavigated the hemicycle of the former Senate, and I glimpsed a series of golden leaves stuccoed against the white walls.

‘Are you really sure you don’t want to give out a PowerPoint?’ he asked again, but I couldn’t stop to think about how striking it was to be in that place, not so much for its architecture, but for its symbolism. The building had been home to the main democratic institution in the country, and ceased to host it when the military dictatorship took over the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. The reasons for the absence of its original function, rather than its current use and look, moved me profoundly.

‘You didn’t have time to make a PowerPoint during the trip?’ he insisted.

‘No, no,’ I replied.

‘But how would you make your presentation then? Perhaps you might want to put together a quick one right now,’ he continued. ‘I

can lend you my laptop with PowerPoint® installed, if that is the problem?'

'Honestly, I'm against any PowerPoint,' I replied.

'What do you mean you're against PowerPoint?'

'I'm not against PowerPoint, I'm against PowerPoint presentations,' I replied.

'But everyone uses them. It's not something to love or hate,' he said.

'I'm against the conformity they bring to presentations. Plus, they bore me,' I said.

'But I'm afraid people expect you to deliver a PowerPoint,' he said.

'I also expected to arrive two days ago,' I said, and we continued walking.

'I hear you. But you're lucky, the conference is not over yet. Mr Zukowski's final keynote is about to start, and then there is our minister's closing speech,' he said. 'We can squeeze you in.' He showed me the entrance to the hemicycle, through a beautiful wooden door.

I entered a magnificent room with a finely frescoed ceiling; a glass dome in the centre reminded me of the Cupola™ of the International Space Station®. I took the badge of The League of Young Voters™ from my pocket, just to see it once more.

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‘Democracy is not a resort where you come and go. It’s a lifelong contract.’ Polanski’s alleged son stood at the podium, which was an antique carved piece of tiger oak with adjustable top and columned base.

‘We will ban the tourists of democracy,’ he said. The ecstatic crowd, which was composed mainly of civil servants and second- and third-ranking politicians sent on behalf of their ministers, applauded.

‘I’m delighted you gave me the honour of this address to announce a revolution that will change the concept of democracy. Forever.’ His slick, minimalist black suit and white shirt contrasted with the neo-gothic carvings of the podium, fitting his futuristic discourse.

‘Sometimes, the largest enemy of democracy is not the regime nor the ruling class. It is the fear in our heart,’ he said. ‘The true innovation derives from the vision. The ability to look at the world and see what others cannot see. The construction of the vision is the most important asset and is rare in our time. But having a vision is not enough. Innovation requires that the vision can be realised.’

Applause. And from my seat on the left corner of the first row, I could see the camera moves of the WEBTV networks standing on the higher balcony of the hemicycle. Some of them were zooming in to frame the podium, others were trying to catch a glimpse of the emotions from the audience. I focused my sight on the third row, where a woman in her late fifties, wearing a violet sari wrapped around the waist, with one end then draped over the shoulder baring a midriff, was staring at Nathan, hypnotised.

‘We need to understand people’s dreams, change the world from an ordinary one to one that doesn’t exist yet,’ he said. I looked at the crowd, and I felt they were all diving into the same experience of

mystic self-transcendence I'd seen in the gaze of that Indian woman. Dozens of civil servants raised their eyes to the glass dome as if they were praying.

'Today is an historic day. Plebiscitum® will be adopted by twenty-three electoral systems and fully implemented by the beginning of next year. The official agreement will be ceremonially signed in the library next door, after the closing of this Third and last International Conference on Electoral Devices.' He paused, leaving the podium and starting to casually walk back and forth on the small stage, slowly. It all sounded solemn and well scripted. It was indeed an historic moment.

'The new system will be very easy to use. So easy that we plan to lower the voting age to eleven years old, after the first year of successful implementation in the adult cohorts,' he said. On the background, there was a PowerPoint projected, with pictures of happy citizens smiling while swiping the new app.

'Stage one: plebiscitum® will be implemented as an educational project. Citizens will be trained.' He showed a corresponding slide.

'Stage two: a set of policy decisions will be submitted to citizens via the app. The results will constitute binding opinion, subject to the ratification of the Parliament.'

He moved to the next slide by clicking on the small remote control, which he then wore as if it were a suit-pocket handkerchief. 'In stage three, all issues will be discussed via the app, and a voting algorithm will connect plebiscitum® to a new Miniaturised Wearable Voting Device, the MWVD®, implanted in each citizen.' A photo of a luminescent microchip tattooed on the left arms of two youths appeared on the wall. 'And they will look good,' he added. I looked at the crowd again, and they were all smiling.

‘Stage four.’ Again, he changed the slide, this time casually pressing the button of the clicker without even taking it out of the suit pocket. ‘The voting algorithm will finally be able to automatically and constantly calculate the political preferences and behaviours of the population. This will be based on a set of data collected by sensors included on everything owned by each citizen. In this final phase, the original voting app will switch back to being an educational and infotainment tool for kids,’ he said.

The plan was grandiose, to say the least.

‘These governments will be tuned up with democracy 6.0, which will cut the costs of governance to a sixth of what running the old-fashioned means of electoral representation costs today.’

This was light years ahead of the rudimentary tinderpolitics app he had described a few days before in the Rover Hangover. Plebiscitum® was more like Trojan horse malware, starting a chain reaction to dismantle elections.

In computing, a Trojan horse, or Trojan, is a generally non-self-replicating type of malware containing malicious code that, when executed, carries out actions determined by the nature of the Trojan, typically causing loss or theft of data and possible system harm. Trojans often employ a form of social engineering, presenting themselves as routine, useful or interesting to persuade victims to install them on their computers. In other words, it’s a destructive program that masquerades as a benign application. Similarly, plebiscitum® would have acted as a backdoor, contacting a controller, aka the voting algorithm, which could then have unlimited access to any physical activity or material goods owned by citizens.

While Trojans and backdoors are not easily detectable by themselves, devices may appear to run slower due to heavy processor or network usage. Malicious programs are classified as Trojans if they don't attempt to inject themselves into other files, like a computer virus, or otherwise propagate themselves, like worms. Contrary to that practice, twenty-three governments had officially accepted to download and install a Trojan horse in their political operating systems, and they were even conscious of its consequences.

I believed I was witnessing the collective suicide of the concept of human-led government. The era of machines was truly starting at that very moment.

'Everybody will be happy because the central voting algorithm will calculate the optimal mix of policies ranked according to the behaviours and choices people make every day. How people spend their money, for example,' Nathan continued, 'or how they use their technological devices.' Another slide appeared, this time showing a complicated mathematical formula.

'It will be democratic, because its settings are scientifically regulated to give the choices and behaviours of each citizen equal weight in the final calculations.' A big, yellow smiley face appeared on the last slide. He paused, and walked back to the podium. He put his hands on the adjustable top, and stared at the audience.

'The era of tourism democracy ends now,' he concluded.

More applause.

I trembled.

I could imagine the data flow being processed and transmitted everywhere. But I didn't fear the advent of a supranational

surveillance dystopia, dominated by one single person. That seemed so old-fashioned. I pictured, instead, the world stuck in a gigantic and constantly repeating Groundhog Day. Any behaviour or choice crystallised by data would be pumped into the algorithm and generated not by the unpredictability of human nature, but by a tamed statistical pattern of past behaviours and choices. As that old Soviet saying goes, the future was certain.

Everybody would be happy.

Plausibly, the most immediate consequence for state apparatuses would be to dismiss all elected officials and act via spokespersons with simple job descriptions: to announce daily the results of the calculations of the algorithm, to dispatch them to the director-generals of ministries, to smile at cameras and to look good.

Everybody would be happy.

The old dilemma of technocracy as opposed to democracy was going to be resolved. Or not. Nathan had just announced that a democratically set algorithm would run the technocrats. The alleged illegitimate son of Roman Polanski seemed once again to see further than me or anyone else.

Everybody would be happy.

I remembered the huge advertisement boards all over the airport in São Paulo. StockGame®, another of Nathan's Trojans, would have been connected to the same terminal as plebiscitum®. As it was shown on one of his slides, the massive data stream would have flown to a central server physically located at Kasprowy Peak, inside the decommissioned meteorological station. Nathan had got it as a gift from Zakopane's mayor, who was one of the former members of the commando team from Operation Foie Gras

Ganache©. He'd excavated an enormous subterranean lab inside the pure granite of the peak.

So, I also guessed that the financial markets would have the same fate as the electoral systems. First there would be a learning period to calibrate the algorithm, via the swiping app, and then the complete automation of seamless self-regulation. If unpredictability was going to be discontinued from that worldwide legalised gambling then, I thought, Nathan was not just taking over financial markets. He was wiping them out.

I turned to the room. The woman with the sari stood up while applauding, and her colleague sitting in front of her followed, together with the one on her left side, and then the one on her right, and then one after another, all of them. They didn't stop until Nathan left the stage, and went back to his seat, which was in the same row as mine, just a couple of people away.

I imagined disparate data streams flowing in that dark cave: electronic, semiotic, mechanical, biological and psychic, fibreoptic circuits, mathematical abstractions, electromagnetic waves, human eyes, neurons and synapses. Luminescent cables, different colours, flying in every direction, wireless sensors enabled to absorb all existing political and financial metadata. People's behaviour. Fridges worldwide being opened and closed. Apps downloaded. Hedge funds betting. Driverless cars moving passengers to specific destinations. Kisses being kissed. Slaps being slapped. Walks being walked. Insurance being paid. Stocks being sold. Chairs being sat on. Planes being crashed. Cows being eaten. Condoms being lubricated. Pills being ingested. Heartbeats beating.

Everybody would be happy.

He was not changing democracy. He was going to make it obsolete.

POWER. POINT.

Nathan seemed to truly believe in what he was doing and, with his effective rhetoric, he didn't seem to be driven by a godlike phantasmagorical vision of controlling everything and everyone. His declared goal was to make power structures disappear. But he carefully considered the fact that, technically speaking, the only way to achieve his goal was by selling, not by fighting.

The applause eventually ceased. Chile's Minister of the Interior stood up and took the floor.

'The results of the MWVDs® implanted in the test group produced results differing by only 0.05 percent from the results of the placebo apps used by the control group. This proves a major step in the use of wearables,' he said, explaining the detailed statistics of the experiment conducted at their elections the previous November.

I couldn't stand any more of this bullshit. It was hopeless, and I was restless. That restlessness made me horny, and willing to be anywhere else than in the same room as these people. I checked the free Wi-Fi password of the ex-Senate hall, messaged Sandra and then downloaded and logged into Grindr® on the Nokia N_2® they gave me in the conference bag. The plan was basic. I would start to spam with messages on that app, with no mercy, logic or filters, the whole gay-bi-sphere of Santiago aged between twenty and thirty years old. Like that, I should have a fair chance to find an acceptable date in time to get away from Nathan's lemmings as soon as I had finished the formality of my speech.

Hello □, or even simpler, *hey*, were two optional preset starting lines for potential conversations. *How are you* □ would be a positive

response. If I didn't get any answer thirty seconds after my first line, that would mean time for a second question from me, something like, *what are you looking for? :-p*.

Basically, no sophisticated dialogue, even just *looking?,* could have worked. Copied and pasted, over and over. If the conversation went deeper and further, *I am free now* would be the next piece of information I would share. On Grindr®, five or six replies constituted a deep conversation, by the app's measurement standards. *Can you host?* That would have been the final assault. Like a siege in medieval times, I would be just a few steps away from battering down the main doors of the castle.

'But before I make my conclusion, I would like to introduce you to a final guest to the conference.' The minister was still speaking. 'I was informed he had some issues with his flight schedule, and he arrived here only a few minutes ago. Let me give the floor to Bastian Balthazar Bux, executive director of The Federation®, here to present their new project, The League of Young Voters™.'

Applause again. This time the people's faces looked a bit tired. The climax of the conference having passed, that last speech must have been an unnecessary obstacle between them and the Champagne® waiting in the other room.

I had to act as if I was totally ready for it. I stood, took the Nokia N_2® with me on stage, shook hands with the minister. Went to the podium, and smiled at the woman in the sari.

'Thanks a lot, minister. It is an honour for me to address this audience at the Third International Conference on Voting Devices, despite my late arrival. Thanks a lot for this opportunity,' I said.

I theatrically held the Nokia N_2® in my right hand, acting as if I would be reading a presentation or a speech from it. I kept Grindr® switched on instead, and got started.

'You might expect me to deliver a PowerPoint® today. I will have to disappoint you; I don't have one. But I am here to show you how The League of Young Voters™ will increase your power. Point.'

The joke kind of worked; people laughed, which was a good sign. I checked my screen briefly to see what was going on with Grindr®. In the best-case scenarios, people were starting to reply with naked pictures; in the worst-case, people blocked me, either because they didn't like me, or because they were annoyed by me insisting too much.

'So, let me introduce you to The League™.' I slowly took the badge from my left pocket and showed it to them. 'You can see here a blue badge with a hot air balloon, but this is so much more than that. It is the hope for continuing democracy in this century troubled by wars, conspiracies and populism,' I said.

'Young people today don't care about who is saying what. Young people today care about what is being said by whom. This is the simple principle of The League™,' I continued. People seemed slightly confused.

I looked at the Nokia N_2® screen, pretending I was following a precise script, and took the chance to copy-paste my hook-up requests to a couple of good-looking twinks.

'I'll give you an example. The most annoying people on a dating app are those who start a conversation, almost arrive at a final line and then fail to answer any more. Forever,' I said. 'There must be a pattern, an explanation for those mysterious silences, but I have never deciphered it. It constitutes one of the big mysteries of the

universe, second only to the possibility of discovering a wormhole in the space-time continuum,' I continued. I had the impression that people were intrigued by that storyline, so I went with it, buying precious time. In the meantime, I moved off the podium. I didn't want to mimic the same choreography Nathan had scripted earlier on. So, I stood in the middle of the stage, one hand continuing to hold the tablet and the other swaying.

'Young people get the same impression about political parties and elections. Politicians are like those girls or boys they meet online. They start to flirt with them. They engage in a conversation. They almost get to the point of setting up a date. And then, after the election, they vanish into thin air. No action performed,' I said. I looked at the sari woman, and she was listening carefully. The metaphor turned out to be more sensible and fitting than I had expected. It opened a new set of possibilities for how I could guide the speech forward. Meanwhile, I was more and more interested in getting some of the guys living nearby turned on and convincing them to host me right after that speech. Also, I was less metaphorically pissed off with a specific boy from the app. He was called Felipe and we seemed to be close to securing a deal when he mysteriously stopped all communications.

'The League of Young Voters™ will put an end to all this,' I said. 'Politicians will not turn off the youth electorate any more. The dialogue will continue. Not by swiping right and left, but by engaging in real conversations with them.' I expected applause to mark my pause, but the room was silent.

Meanwhile, I got another wave of replies on Grindr®. Half of the guys were simply off my radar. (I still had taste.) Another quarter rejected me vehemently, like I was carrying the plague. Some of

them read my status and insulted me. Some wanted to fuck me, but I wanted to be on top.

I could not hold the speech much longer, but I still had to cover at least five more minutes to ensure I was on track.

‘And don’t tell me none of you ever thought it would have been easier to get laid than it really is,’ I continued. ‘I’m sorry if you thought so. Getting laid requires effort. Requires time and dedication. Most of you will agree with me,’ I said. I heard someone coughing at the back of the audience. I didn’t stop.

‘Getting elected requires equal effort and dedication, and if you think that there should be no elections any more because they require too much effort, or because it would be cheaper without them, then you are wrong. Really wrong,’ I said, and I specifically gazed at a delegate in the first row.

Although he looked different, aged and tired, I recognised Eustace, the former representative of the mayors on the Cygnet Committee. He had traded up after the ceasefire and became the director of the European Commission’s EAEP™, the Executive Agency for Electoral Procedures. His presence echoed Nathan’s request to postpone deliberations about electoral procedures back in the Cygnet.

‘You’ll never think it’s not worth getting laid because it requires too much effort. And yes, apps can help you get laid faster, but you still need to have some talent to convince people. Otherwise you’ll get no fun,’ I smiled. More people were now coughing in the room; it sounded like a sudden collective respiratory tract infection.

‘To conclude, I will get back to this badge.’ I took it out of my pocket again, waving it at the crowd, and continued. ‘A few days ago a similar badge flew to the International Space Station®. If I had PowerPoint, I would be able to show you impressive pictures of

it floating in zero gravity, and probably you would have been impressed by it. But I don't have a PowerPoint. However, you have the power. Point. Use it, don't get used.'

No one reacted. I stood still for a few never-ending seconds. And, for a moment, I felt that this entire mission had been one massive, intercontinental fuck-up.

The Minister took the floor again. 'Thank you for coming, Mr Bux, and for your *enlightening* presentation,' he said, and he invited me to sit down.

Even then, people didn't applaud.

Nathan was still sitting in the front row. I turned my face towards him for a second, and I caught him silently staring in my direction, with a fake empathic look as if he was almost embarrassed for me. I couldn't stand it any longer.

'I would like to thank all the delegates who came to this memorable Third International Conference on Voting Devices,' he said. 'Allow me some final words about the virtues of innovation. We are marking an important step in changing our tools, but we must adhere to the principles of democracy. This is a milestone for our century's political evolution.' He continued for a while along those lines.

I was sitting, stressed, ashamed and overwhelmed, so I went back to man-hunting, horny and restless. Horniness provided interoperability within the system, and it connected me with others on the app in a purely syntactic way.

On Grindr® there was no room for ambiguity in the exchange of messages, nor could one's intention be shown through nuance. People were pretty much interchangeable units, at least within

categories formed by a few clear variables: age, measurements, body type, and a few other details such as eye colour and hairstyle, sexual preferences, fetishes. Shells of flesh, bones, dicks and ass.

Some of them were hot guys; most were not. Those connected within a kilometre of the conference room were either too fat or too hairy for my tastes. Some wanted to marry, but why would they look for that on the app? Why would they searched for open-ended contracts and get frustrated within the free market of deregulated flesh? That app was full of nicely packaged derivatives of love, based on unreliable assets but branded as the best bets in town.

The minister was almost done, finally. At my end, I had a shortlist. It was time to choose between the three guys that had replied and said they were able to host me.

The first guy was truly beautiful, blond with dark green eyes and a wild look. He seemed exactly like Nathan. I even suspected it could have been Nathan, faking his GPS® position so that no one else connected in the former Senate chambers would believe it could be him. What made it more suspicious was that after a few exchanges he didn't reply any more, nor did he tell me his name.

The second candidate was a Cuban-Flemish tourist. He was twenty-two, with curly hair and sexy brown skin. He seemed to be as sweet as sugar cane, but he was with his boyfriend in town. He was taking time to reply because he wasn't sure if meeting me was a good idea. His name was Henri Manzanita.

The third was a Chilean of twenty-five, named Pablo. He seemed to be fair, not fat and hot enough to satisfy my hunger.

GEOMETRY OF CONSCIENCE

When in Rome, do as the Romans do, I thought, and I finally picked up Pablo. He lived on Calle Chacabuco, which Grindr® geolocalised as being around two and a half kilometres from me. I didn't care to sit through the closing remarks or the tired reception to follow, so I decided to go straight away.

I went to the receptionist to ask for my stuff back. He was gentle, and again, the ritualistic aspect of the procedures adopted by those clerks at conferences amazed me. Their kindness and trained smiles made everything feel as though I was just in another plain, normal and boring conference checkout that could have been taking place at any time, anywhere in the world. It gave me a sense of security. It was a familiar fix within such an ocean of insecurity. I checked out, he smiled at me again and kept looking at a screen, scrolling down some indeterminate lists of people, supposedly the participants list.

I went outside. It was midday, the sun was shining gloriously and the gardens of the former Congress were in full summer bloom. A triumph of palm trees, horse chestnuts and Cedars of Lebanon. I put on my pair of Persol®s, and decided to walk through the city centre on my way to this guy's apartment, to get a glimpse of the local atmosphere and gaze at the famous Palacio de la Moneda.

If it wasn't for the season's change, I would have thought I was in Spain or southern Italy, rather than on the other side of the world. After half an hour or so, I arrived at the exact address marked on the Nokia N_2®, and I had a flash of embarrassment. I thought again about my light green underwear, which I hadn't changed in the car. I was suddenly ashamed as I reckoned it didn't match my socks.

That was potentially more problematic than its smell, but then I hoped that would have been fine with the guy, so I rang the Interphone™.

‘I’m up on the eleventh floor,’ he said in a swishy voice.

I entered and went up the lift. The building was old, and the lift still had one of those slots that once upon a time had required a little coin in order to to go up. Luckily the coins were not needed any more, as I didn’t have any Chilean pesos with me anyway. I pressed the button with eleven marked on it. The buttons were round, made of dirty white plastic that had yellowed over time. The lift smelled like dried tomatoes. The trip was relatively long, or else the lift was dramatically slow.

When the automatic door finally opened, I saw this Pablo guy waiting for me outside his apartment door, made up as a drag queen, dressed only in a frock coat and a big hat trimmed with feathers that bobbed and bounced as he moved. He was dancing like a maniac, and ‘Believe’ ℗1998 Cher was playing in the background as I watched the scene, standing still inside the lift.

He was using a hairbrush for a microphone, which he held with one hand, while he frantically moved the other one around his face – obviously part of his choreography. The frock was long and purple, covering his legs down to his bare knees, and embroidered with golden oriental decorations. He vocalised a high-pitched tone, ear-piercing and so completely out of tune that he scared my ass off. I took advantage of still being in the lift, and of the fact I hadn’t said a word to him yet, to press the button again to go down to the ground floor. The metallic door closed, and a few minutes later I was back on the street, my ears relieved.

*

This Pablo guy had turned me off completely. I was alone again, dragging my luggage around, restless and without a precise plan. I walked here and there for a couple of blocks, when I unexpectedly came across a triangular pond in the shade of an enormous, greenish, geometrical building.

I stopped, realising that this was the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, which hosted the memorial to Chilean dictatorship and honoured the many people murdered for the lost cause of democracy. That seemed quite a symbolic and appropriate place to bump into, given the circumstances. I read somewhere that Alfredo Jaar, the father of Nicolas Jaar, the electronic psychedelic musician, had designed the memorial.

The place seemed deserted. The door of the museum was closed, and I went down the staircase towards the underground memorial. No one there either. Then on my way up I spotted a lonely guard, sitting in a shady corner beside the concrete wall.

‘Are you here for Alfredo Jaar?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

‘Well, it’s lunch time. They are coming back at three,’ he said.

‘That’s a long lunch break,’ I continued. ‘Pity, I’ll leave soon, and I’ve come from far, far away.’

‘Yeah, but they’re eating,’ he replied.

‘But I’ll never see it again,’ I said.

‘Mmph,’ he paused. ‘I’ll open it then,’ he said, and he showed me the way outside the courtyard of the museum. We took large steps

that brought us in front of a black door. We went inside a small atrium that held a table and another black door.

‘You enter on your own. It’s dark, but don’t worry,’ he said.

I entered, and it was indeed dark. I waited for a few minutes. My pupils dilated and got used to the lack of light, but the place was completely sealed. Not a single photon penetrated its depths. So, even with highly dilated eyes, I couldn’t see anything. Then a flashing light appeared, blinding.

Slowly within such a triumph of white light, silhouettes of thousands and thousands of men and women, dead or alive, who had witnessed the violence of the military regime in Chile appeared. The ceiling and the floor, which were two huge mirrors, reflected them infinitely. It lasted for three minutes, but felt like an hour. Time was decompressed.

Then it was dark again, but it was not really darkness, because I was left with the trace still fading in my vision, entering my consciousness through the optic nerve, at the spot where the eyeball meets the retina and is blind. All throughout was silent. The door opened, and I went out, with these pixellated silhouettes still waving in front of my blinded eye. While climbing the stairs, I couldn’t stop thinking that the past and the present, after being visually connected underground, were being biologically projected into the future, as I carried the visual memory dotted with fragments of history back into the outside world. And I thought again about Nathan, plebiscitum® and the way he had planned to crunch data to lock us in into an everlasting present.

Still dazed, I greeted the guard, who was visibly half asleep on the same shady corner at the top of the stairs where I had left my luggage. I took my stuff and checked the map I had downloaded on

the tablet, noticing the station for long-distance buses was not that far away. I decided to give it a try and get lost somewhere.

*

Buying any ticket at the bus terminal of Parajito wasn't easy, even if the place was more organised than chaotic. There were at least four or five bus companies, and I was confused by their conflicting timetables, fares and queues.

'*Por favor, un poco más deverdad y decencia*. It can't be the same as last year, when all the Pullman buses were delayed for half an hour,' a woman with a huge shopping bag was shouting. 'My bus, number 404, should have departed that day for Viña at 3.25. It arrived at the terminal at 3.50 and left at four. And please, don't lie to me. Don't tell me it was a one-off. It's not because of the traffic. Tur Bus® respects the timetable. Pullman is the one that fails us,' she said.

She had a printed A4 sheet of paper in one hand and her bag in the other. I presumed that the sheet must be her bus ticket. A security officer was trying to keep her calm; he kept pointing a finger at the display.

There really was a generalised delay due to a traffic jam, but she just wouldn't calm down. She was so pissed off that she threw the plastic bag in the security guy's face, screamed once more and left.

The security guy searched my face for some show of empathy, but I could only roll my eyes to show my understanding. It seemed enough for him to feel he was not alone. He nodded back and walked away, probably to his supervisor.

I decided anyway, as a precaution, not to take a bus from Pullman; they weren't even trademarked. I was going to take a Cóndor® bus, even if it reminded me of the horrible Peruvian song I was allergic to. This company would take me to Valparaiso. The bus was brand-new, all violet reflecting the corporate branding, with red flame stickers on the two sides. I sat towards the middle, by the window, hoping that no one would sit at my side.

Slowly, the bus filled up. The angry woman arrived with her huge bag. She brought it up instead of leaving it in the luggage trunk. She passed by my seat, looked at me, pondered for a second whether to sit by my side and then continued towards the back.

*

I closed my eyes, and despite the seat being uncomfortable, I fell asleep and started dreaming.

It was a moist dream, underwater.

'*Como te mira, dime como te mira*,' they were all singing in a chorus. Their arms were moving up and down. The water covered the rest of their bodies, leaving out only arms and multicoloured swim caps. They were in a swimming pool in the middle of the mountains, with pine trees and clouds in the background. It smelled like the forest. It was rainy, but the rain didn't stop the dance. I pictured fifty or more people in the pool; it was quite a precise dream.

'*Como te mira, como te mira*.' They jumped out of sync, screaming.

It was a reggaeton collective class. Aquagym™, to be precise, one of those aerobics fitness classes conducted in a shallow swimming pool that were fashionable then among housewives in their fifties.

The trainer was a muscled guy in his late forties with tribal artwork tattooed all over his left arm. The artwork continued onto his chest and further, touching his belly button.

‘*Como te mira, como te mira*,’ he was screaming. ‘*Vayas*,’ he said as he led the crowd.

Janine was in the dream, this time wearing a fuchsia bikini and a fluorescent green cap. She was splashing all around, happy and smiling. The fifty-five-year-old woman beside her was struggling to match the rhythm. She was frantically trying to keep up the pace, and she was annoyed by Janine continually splashing water in her face.

I tried to get Janine’s attention by screaming and waving, but the trainer gave me a look, which was meant to bring me into the loop of the beat with the others. Janine was, in any case, looking elsewhere. Then I dived, and underwater the bellies of the ladies were moving in a funky way with the beat. They were all enormous and magnified by the water. I could barely hear the music any more.

Everything was softened, underwater.

*

I opened my eyes. We were already out of the city, on the motorway. It took me a while to orient myself. Not in terms of the exact location between Santiago and Valparaiso, but in terms of which means of transportation, which side of the world, which historical epoch I had landed in when opening my eyes.

I was not alone. A guy with Panasonic® RP-HTX7™ headphones was sitting beside me. He had curly black hair, a red- and

white-checked cotton shirt buttoned up to the neck with the sleeves rolled up, and something familiar tattooed on his arm. I looked at him for a while, not really looking, just staring at an empty space between my seat and his left hand. There was a part of me trying to understand where I'd ended up and why I was not in my bed at home waking up from another strange Janine dream. But that was only for a split second, then I got back to reality.

'*Hola, todo bien?*' he asked me, smiling, noticing I was a bit lost.

'*Sí,sí, bien,*' I replied and yawned in front of his face.

'*Estás muy cansado?*' he asked.

'*Mucho. Estoy viajandodesde muchisimo tiempo y no dormínada,*' I said in an understandable way, but it was clear that I couldn't speak perfect Spanish.

'You mean you haven't slept for long? Do you want to speak in English?' he asked.

'Yes, I mean that. Let's speak in English. I'm definitely too tired to speak Spanish,' I said.

'How long since you've properly slept in a bed?' he asked.

'I think by now, sixty hours or something like that,' I replied.

'*Jejeje*, what a coincidence. I've also been awake for about that long,' he said.

'Really? Strange coincidence,' I said.

'Did you have a big party time in Santiago? What did you take?' he laughed.

'I didn't take anything. I was in Thessaloniki a couple of days ago, and from there I went to Munich, then to the P.A.R.I.S.™ Then I

missed the plane to Santiago, and I stayed overnight. I took a plane to São Paulo,' I continued, 'then when I arrived, I missed another plane to Santiago. I spent another night at the airport. I finally took a plane to Santiago. I arrived this morning and headed straight to a conference. Attended it for half an hour or so. I gave a speech, then I strolled around the city centre and I finally ended up on this bus,' I said, avoiding any details about my related paranoia.

'Oh my Goddesses, we have a space traveller here,' he said.

'And you? Why didn't you sleep?' I asked back. 'You look so fresh, though.' I wondered where this guy came from; I mean, he was such an oddity within all the hurly-burly, but he seemed to be an oddity of the pleasant kind.

'I had my shift at the hospital,' he replied. 'I usually work for fifty hours in a row once a week.' He was the first person I had spoken with in the past week that was not a politician, a former revolutionary, an airline employee or a drag psychopath. I guess I also gave him a weird look. It felt as if he had been teleported onto the seat next to me straight from a moon base.

'So, we were both not sleeping properly because of work,' I said.

'Well, I was surely working. I don't know much more crazy shit you must have gone through while travelling, though,' he replied.

'By the way, I'm Bastian. And you?' I asked.

'Andrés, *encantado*.' We shook hands. It was customary at that time to shake hands when introduced to someone. This was before we started to commonly use WeChip® touches.

'I hope you don't listen to reggaeton,' I said.

'I hate reggaeton,' he replied.

‘And what is the song playing on your phone?’ I asked.

‘‘Los Adolescentes’ □2010 Dënver, a Chilean song,’ he said, and he handed the headphones and his Morph® to me. It was a long, metronomic glam guitar riff with a danceable synth and a four-four beat, accompanied by a full chorus of singers. I really liked it. It was fresh and simple, and it worked. The whole moment worked.

‘There are quite a few electro-indie bands that I really like here in Chile,’ he explained. ‘Dënver is one of them. It’s a boy and a girl that used to be a couple, then broke up, but who knows. A bit like the White Stripes™.’

‘I think they are really cool,’ I said. ‘Mainly, I am so, so relieved you don’t like reggaeton, really. When I listen to it, I feel like I would be better off chained to a loudspeaker in one of those bars where people dress like they’re at a cheap wedding party.’ He laughed. ‘No, really. I am serious,’ I said. ‘Can you imagine, after having spent sixty hours and four flights to get onto this bus, the moment I opened my eyes, the first thing I hear is something like ‘Sexy Movimiento’ □2007 Wisin & Yandel?’

‘Oh, no, poor thing!’ he replied.

‘Anyway, I’m happy now, and I like it here. Plus, it is sunny. I wish it could be sunny all the time in Brussels, too,’ I said.

‘Whaaat? You mean it’s not sunny during the summer?’ he asked.

‘*Bof*, no. There are no sunny seasons there. Sometimes we have sunny days, but it’s not a season, more like a series of sporadic one-night stands,’ I replied.

‘Aha, Brussels seems to not be the place for long-term relationships,’ he said, and in that precise moment his tattoo started to glitter blue and yellow sparkles. At first, I thought it was

sunlight shining somewhere, but then it looked like some sort of luminescent lead had been implanted under his skin.

‘What is…’ and while I was still finishing the question, his phone, which I was still holding, started to blink the exact same coloured pattern that was shining from a luminescent tattoo on his arm, which was unmistakably looking like the one from Nathan’s presentation. It vibrated and emitted a trill that lasted a few seconds, until a push notification materialised on the screen, then the light stopped on both his arm and the phone. *Your personal data has been permanently erased. Data transmission to the central server has been discontinued. The future starts now #TBH*.

‘Mmmh, I always knew that stuff they wanted me to test at the hospital wouldn’t really work,’ Andrés said.

‘Who? What?’ I was confused.

‘That new widget,’ Andrés replied.

‘But I mean, what is it?’ I asked again.

‘Well, something they implanted to test for the elections, just a few weeks ago. But I don’t know how…’ I didn’t make him finish the sentence, and I stood up to reach the Nokia N_2® from my bag in the overhead compartment. I almost ran over him, as I was sitting by the window, and I made a bunch of apples and oranges from a basket belonging to the passengers in front of us fall over, together with a bunch of other groceries. Andrés patiently went to collect them all over the corridor, and exercised some damage control with the fellow travellers who were already shouting, ‘*Cabron, cabron*’.

In the meantime, I could hear from behind me a couple of other similar trills that lasted a few seconds, unsynchronised. I switched on the tablet, typed the Wi-Fi code of the bus and opened

NewsPage™. There was nothing about plebiscitum®, just a couple of articles about the conference which had just closed, then the local news was filled with sports news and the like. I switched on Twitter®, but nothing. In the same moment, Sandra called me on Skype®.

‘I’ve tried to call you for the past two hours. Weren’t you just finished with the conference?’ she started off.

‘I’ve been giving up, Sandra,’ I replied. ‘My speech was true shit.’

‘I know, I’ve been following the livestream. I almost thought you were actually on a dating app while speaking, instead of reading from that tablet you kept waving at the audience.’ As usual she was a smart-ass.

‘I don’t know what happened to me. I’ve been crashing,’ I said.

‘Please stop whining. Listen to me,’ she continued, hurriedly. ‘It took me a while, but I managed it. I made the #TBH, the big hack. I broke into plebiscitum®.’

‘Holy Mary-Inanna.’ I was confused.

‘I entered the system with the same kind of back door I used to place orders when I was at that Emirates® refugee camp,’ she said. I was listening now, carefully. ‘I tried to tweak it, flushing files around, all sort of hacker’s tricks which are not even worth explaining, nothing worked. The damn thing continued to normally process data. Nathan did a good job with the algorithm over there,’ she continued, faster. ‘So, I thought about BreakupShop™. Actually, you made me think about it, with your little sentimental drama at the bar in Thessaloniki. I recalled their code – it’s open source. And automagically, plebiscitum® crashed.’

‘Wait Sandra,’ I said, ‘I’m mad tired. Can you spell it out for me as simply as you can. Pretend you are talking to an idiot.’

‘Okay, sorry. I meant that as soon as I remembered about this open-source code from the BreakupShop™ I had the idea of slightly modifying it, customising it for plebiscitum®. I then put that modified code in Nathan’s algorithm, and I made it crash. Is that clearer?’ she said.

‘Yes, but why didn’t you tell me you were doing this? I could have looked less moronic at the conference if I had known about it,’ I asked.

‘That was a perfect cover-up. They didn’t suspect anything about what was going on. Nathan was calm and savouring his victory, while watching your defeat. And, let’s be honest, last time we spoke in São Paulo you didn’t sound… how to put it… you were wedged. I didn’t say anything. But I was convinced you would have crashed at some point. And I couldn’t simply sit on my couch, let all that happen. I’m sure you’ll understand. I would never overstep you,’ she said.

‘But now? Are they going to fix it back? What will happen?’ I asked.

‘Have a look yourself at the livestream from the conference, they just reconvened the session. You left at the best moment,’ she said.

I opened the livestream channel in another browser window. The scene was dramatically different compared with when Nathan gave his speech earlier on. A bunch of delegates were standing up, this time shouting and booing at him. Nathan was uselessly trying to explain he would fix the system, that this was just a temporary flaw. I could see the woman in the sari walking away from the room. Eustace sitting holding his face in his hands. It was chaotic.

‘I need to close the conversation, now, they’ll track us otherwise. Let’s speak when you’re back and rested,’ she said, while I was still watching what was going on.

‘Sandra?’ I asked.

The line was gone.

I stared at the screen, motionless.

‘You almost got into a fight because of the apples,’ said Andrés, back at his seat. ‘And all you had to do was check stuff on your tablet?’

‘You don’t understand,’ I said.

‘What? You get their stuff rolling all over the bus, and you tell me I don’t understand?’ he said.

‘I was trying to figure out what’s happening with that thing that stopped working inside your arm,’ I replied.

‘I just got a text message from the government about that,’ he said.

‘And?’ I asked.

‘They say to stay calm in case there are other weird sounds or blinks coming from my sensors. That there is nothing dangerous going on,’ he said.

‘They must not know what’s really going on either,’ I said.

‘Well as long as they say it’s safe. But it’s weird,’ he replied.

I imagined we might have just escaped the trap of an algorithmic autocracy.

Andrés looked at me, baffled. ‘Are you still there?’ he asked.

‘Sorry, I was just… let’s put it like this, they were just trying to test this device, right?’ I said.

‘Yeah, that was a test, that’s what they said at the hospital. I thought it was just one of the assignments they gave to us randomly,’ he said.

‘Well, then just think of the test as a failure,’ I said.

‘But they told us it was high-end tech, the stuff of the future,’ he replied.

‘I’m not totally sure, but I have a theory,’ I said. ‘Do you remember CDs?’ I asked.

‘Sure I do, I still have some at home,’ he replied.

‘And do you remember Digital Compact Cassettes®?’ I asked again.

‘Not really.’

‘Here you go. That was high-end technology around thirty years ago supposed to replace analogue cassettes. We were supposed to be flooded with Digital Compact Cassettes®. But it never happened,’ I said.

‘So, what do you think will come instead?’

‘Well, that I don’t know. But whatever it will be, we can’t even imagine,’ I replied.

‘All right, all right. Let’s forget this failed test. I have an admittedly insane idea, but if I don’t ask you this, it’s just, you know, it’s going to mess around in my head for a while,’ Andrés said.

‘What?’ I replied.

I looked outside the bus window. We were almost in Viña. The trip had gone faster than I thought.

‘I can teach you more Chilean bands, and I want to keep talking to you, you know. I have no idea what your situation is, but I feel like we have some kind of *connection*. Right?’ he said.

‘Yeah, me too,’ I replied.

‘Yeah, right, well, great. So, listen, here’s the deal. You should get off the bus in Viña del Mar and come with me,’ he said.

‘What?’ I was surprised.

‘Come on. It’ll be fun,’ he insisted. ‘What was your plan anyway?’

‘Well, I was supposed to end up in Valparaiso,’ I replied, ‘but all I really know is that I have to catch an Air France® flight in Santiago at 5.15 tomorrow afternoon. Besides that, I can do whatever I want.’

‘So just come,’ he said.

We were about to arrive. I noticed that the rest of the passengers headed to Viña were already standing up, gathering their things and waiting. It was like when the aeroplane has landed, but hasn’t yet stopped, and people are already up, getting their hand luggage down and queuing for the doors, even though it barely saves them any time.

The bus stopped.

‘Let me get my bag,’ I replied.

AFTERLIFE

The woman with the big plastic bag was having yet another argument with yet another security guy at her destination. The security guy was nodding at her. The Viña terminal was much smaller than Parajito and overcrowded. It was rush hour.

‘So, first, we should go to the supermarket to buy food,’ Andrés said, ‘and then we will go to my place to cook and drink. Does that sound like a plan to you?’

‘Yeah! Great,’ I said.

The supermarket was big. It was not much different from the European supermarkets of that era, with one key difference: avocados were called *paltas*. *Paltas* were cheap and the basis of anything a person would eat in that part of the world. So, we obviously took quite a few of them.

‘We will make pisco sour,’ he said.

‘Pisco what?’ I asked.

‘Pisco sour, our national cocktail, made with pisco liquor, lime, sugar and ice,’ he explained.

‘Sounds good,’ I said. Whatever he would have made, it would have been just as perfect. I needed someone taking care of me that night more than anything else in the world.

‘Well, you should know that here in Chile this pisco sour is a big deal,’ he said. ‘Especially because Peru also claims it as its national drink. According to me, that’s a battle so stupid, I leave it to the people who have the same brain size as the ones interested in the

Starbucks® red cup in the United States. Buuut, I can give you some insider info.'

I was intrigued. I would be delighted to write an academic dissertation about a nationalist dispute over an alcoholic drink some day. It could even be a good basis for a mystery story: the smuggling of cocktail recipes at the border, involving several assassins and a love affair. We were inspecting the liquor section of the supermarket, where there was a whole aisle just for the many varieties and brands of pisco.

'Most of the people in Chile really value the Peruvian pisco sour, saying that it's supposed to taste better, but I wouldn't really know. I'd love to think it's purely Chilean, but since we are neighbours, it might just be a common drink.' He paused to check and choose two bottles. 'All I know is nothing beats my pisco sour with honey and ginger that you are going to taste tonight,' he said.

Later, I did some research on the subject, and it seems that the cocktail originated in Lima, Peru, and was invented by a certain Victor Vaughen Morris, an American bartender, in the early 1920s. Morris left the United States to work in Cerro de Pasco, a city in central Peru; then he opened his famous Morris' Bar in Lima, and his saloon quickly became a popular spot for the Peruvian upper class and English-speaking foreigners.

The pisco sour underwent several changes until a certain Mario Bruiget, a Peruvian bartender working at Morris', created the modern Peruvian recipe by adding angostura bitters and egg whites to the mix. Peru even celebrates an annual public holiday in honour of the cocktail on the first Saturday in February. The main difference between the two versions is that in Chile they don't use eggs and angostura, just the lime, pisco and sugar, plus various other ingredients according to each person's recipe.

‘Well, there’s one thing I can tell you. In Chile they like to sour everything,’ Andrés said, drawing out the last word for comic effect.

I imagined a plethora of things that could have been *soured*, starting with the obvious, such as other drinks. Coffee sour, mango sour, cola sour, vodka sour, beer sour, bloody sour, Cosmo sour, sex on the sour, sour sunrise, caipi sour, martini sour. And so on. All sorts of food: chicken sour, lamb chops sour, spare ribs sour, lasagne sour, pizza sour, *palta* sour, pancake sour, banana sour. I imagined these being cooked and eaten simultaneously for dinner, at that specific moment, across the whole of Chile. I pictured shops filled with Morph® sour, vacuum cleaners sour, blenders sour, toothbrushes sour. Literally, everywhere, people must have been dancing disco sour.

*

We were listening to ‘Panda’ 2012 Astro. It sounded like the southern hemisphere’s equivalent of MGMT®, not a simple copy-paste with Spanish lyrics but the actual musical equivalent. Andrés’ pisco sour with ginger and honey was cosmically orgasmic.

He had a small but cosy apartment on top of a hill at the very border between Viña and Valpo, but it could have been anywhere. The anonymous buildings could have fitted into any kind of residential suburbia, but the simple geographical fact that the Pacific Ocean was just a few kilometres away made me feel like a sailor from the sixteenth century.

‘Given the choice of anyone in the world, who would you want as a dinner guest?’ I had started to ask him random questions as the pisco settled in my veins.

‘You,’ he replied. ‘No, I’m kidding. I think that would be the love of my life, so I could at least get to meet him for fucking once. And you?’ he asked.

‘I think I would invite Michael Collins,’ I said.

‘Who’s that? Wait. *Jejeje*, I know. We had an Irish pub named Michael Collins in Valpo. It was horrible, always full of drunken Australian backpackers. They played very loud and cheesy music,’ he said.

‘Not the Irish Michael Collins. I mean the astronaut. He was the Apollo 11 crew member waiting alone while his two fellows were moonwalking, taking pictures, collecting rocks and becoming superstars,’ I said. ‘It must have been fucking dreadful to have been alone, orbiting on the dark side of the moon.’

‘I would be super scared,’ Andrés said.

‘That is why I would like to cook for him and ask him what it was really like.’

‘Okay, my turn to ask something. If you could live to the age of ninety and retain either the mind or the body of a thirty-year-old for the last sixty years of your life, which would you want?’ he asked.

‘Body,’ I said, with little consideration. ‘You can always do new stuff as long as you can move, and I would sincerely be curious to see how my mind would evolve without stopping it for sixty years.’

‘Exactly! I agree,’ he said.

He prepared another batch of pisco sour, and we ate some *paltas* with a bit of salt and pepper. They were delicious, a totally different taste from the avocados I was used to in Europe.

‘That was a heavy question,’ I said. ‘Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?’

‘I’ve always secretly thought I’ll die of a previously unknown sexually transmitted disease. It’s going to be so stupid,’ he said, ‘seriously.’

‘You must have been one of those guys that used the #TBT when people in Europe were panicking about The Big Transformation a few years ago,’ I replied.

‘I admit, I was always asking people if they were #TBT free, especially European tourists,’ he said, and then I jumped his turn and asked another question.

‘Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be and why?’ Pisco sour was flooding my system.

‘Easy. I would save my Morph®,’ he replied.

‘If I still had my Morph®, I would save it, too,’ I replied.

‘What? You don’t have it any more?’ he said.

‘Some fuckers stole it in Thessaloniki,’ I said.

‘Really, that sounds more dreadful than being left alone orbiting the dark side of the moon,’ he said.

‘Totally. Can you imagine? I had to come to Chile without my Morph®. Can you believe it?’ I was screaming, drunk.

‘Dreadful. Dreadful!’ He was drunk, too.

‘Those fuckers. They took it away from me while I was kissing my ex-girlfriend’s doppelgänger,’ I said, and I thought about my phone

again. I had all the time in the world to mourn its loss, and I was fine with it, but not. I thought about Janine again.

‘Who are those fuckers?’ Andrés asked.

‘There are several of them. They were everywhere. The woman who looked like my girlfriend was one of them,’ I said, ‘she must have taken it while sneaking her hands in my pants.’ I recollected the moments at the Rover Hangover.

‘But why? I mean, it doesn’t make any sense.’ Andrés was confused.

‘What doesn’t make any sense?’ I asked.

‘First, you seem so emotional about that woman looking like your girlfriend, or ex or whatever. Second, you claim that she took your phone while touching you down there. Third, many other people were involved. Sounds like a conspiracy theory,’ he said.

‘It’s a long story. To make it short, I was an obstacle for someone, but not any more.’ I continued, ‘These people knew one of my weak spots.’

‘Your ex.’ Andrés stared at me. ‘But why?’

‘Because I hate break-ups, and that was a hard break-up. I have only had one other break-up since, and that was just before I started this trip.’ My eyes felt red.

‘Go on,’ he said. ‘I am interested.’

‘I simply can’t cope with the idea of breaking up. It’s not a natural thing,’ I said. ‘When me and Janine split, my lung collapsed. I ended up in a hospital bed with a pneumothorax and got high on morphine.’ I sipped the pisco sour again. He did, too, listening carefully. ‘Not that I didn’t enjoy the morphine. That part was amazing, but still. A collapsed lung is not fun.’

He stared at me again and asked, ‘But you just had that other break-up, right?’

‘Actually, no. I mean yes, but not really. It’s true, that was the first time I had been in a stable relationship since Janine, but the way it ended, a BreakupShop™ message from his side, just made my fragile equilibrium crack and sucked me back into that insane loop.’

‘But then what?’ he asked.

‘Before I started dating my last boyfriend, I basically let my relationships die before a separation could have qualified as a break-up, or else I simply didn’t engage in an exclusive situation,’ I said.

Several times I’d thought about writing a manual on avoiding break-ups or a field guide for contemporary romantic cynics. I even developed a comprehensive theoretical framework that combined elements of polyamory, queer theory and post-structuralism. One of my reference points was Roland Barthes’ *Fragments of a Lover’s Discourse* ©1977 éditions du Seuil, obviously.

‘I became quite good at all sorts of techniques,’ I said.

‘Such as?’ he asked.

‘Such as ensuring I always had crushes on the wrong people. Or intense crushes on the right people but in impossible situations – that way it would be impossible to end up in a relationship,’ I said, and he looked at me again. It was hard to bear that look. It was deep and inquisitive, but at the same time sweet enough to make me feel he was not going to judge me for what I was saying.

‘So, basically you are a mess,’ he said. ‘It must consume a huge amount of energy either to have no feelings or to feel high-pitched feelings that lead nowhere.’

‘It’s intense,’ I acknowledged.

‘Intense but tiring. Personally, I wouldn’t be able to cope with it,’ he said. ‘But why have you put yourself up for all this?’

‘Because I *disconnected* with Janine,’ I replied. ‘I thought *connection* was all that mattered, and she hated me for that.’

‘Everyone wants to be *connected* nowadays. It’s normal,’ he said.

‘Everyone except Janine. She had this crazy theory that *connection* is different from *conjunction*, and the latter is to be more highly regarded. She wanted to convince me that *conjunction* has an impact on the neural mechanisms involved in emotions. She published a lot about it. First in her thesis and then in specialised journals. Eventually it became well-respected stuff, at least in certain circles. But I’m still struggling to believe it,’ I said.

Andrés was listening, staring. In the background, not too loud, ‘Théorème d’Archimède’ ℗2004 Ricardo Villalobos was playing, the electronic chimes stopping time and space.

‘And that is when she wanted us to be in *conjunction*. She was saying that people change when they conjoin. That they become something different from what they were before,’ I said. ‘I didn’t understand. I didn’t care.’

‘*Connection* is the simple wiring of brain activities, an effect of mechanical functionality,’ he said. ‘*Conjunction* results in a fusion of bodies, elements and minds.’ I froze. He had repeated Janine’s words. ‘Love changes the lover, and their combination creates a meaning that didn’t exist before. That is *conjunction*,’ he said.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I just quoted Karasu, Janine Karasu,’ he said.

‘Yes, that’s my Janine. How in hell do you know about this?’

‘*The International Journal of Applied Neurosciences*, volume eight, spring 2013. We have a huge library in the hospital, and I need to find ways of spending the long hours there as the night guard. I can’t be on Grindr® all the time. I don’t understand everything about what she wrote, but that part of the article hit me hard, which is why I learned it by heart,’ he said.

‘But that is just… whatever,’ I said.

‘But this girl, Janine, she must have done so much harm to you. I mean, she broke up and left you behind to prove a scientific theory. You ended up in a hospital. She made you almost incapable of having relationships any more. It’s not clear what kind of relationship you had with this boy, your most recent ex, as it seems to have been erased from your system just like that hack earlier today on my Morph®. All that drama sounds just like a Brazilian telenovela with an HBO® series twist,’ he said.

He was now preparing another pisco sour for us both. My head was spinning.

‘Wait, wait,’ I replied. ‘I never said anything about her dumping me.’ I stared at him. I flashed back to that swimming pool in the South of France. I smelled the pine trees again. Janine was looking at me. I was sweating. I could feel the drops travelling down my cheeks. I was all over the place. She was giving me a glass. No, it was Andrés. Whatever. I threw it out.

‘I dumped her,’ I said.

‘What?’ he said.

‘I dumped her,’ I repeated.

There was a pause in which Andrés spluttered. When he found his words again, he opened by smacking my arm. ‘And you’re making all this fuss over it?!’ he screamed.

‘Yes. I am making a fuss out of it,’ I said.

I didn’t feel particularly ashamed. At least once in a lifetime everyone falls into an irrational loop. But I realised that it was the first time I was seeing that story through someone else’s eyes and, I must say, it felt weird.

‘So, do you plan to make a fuss about it for the rest of your life?’

No one had ever spoken to me like that before. But I didn’t feel under attack. Even if some kind of neural impulse was pushing me to defend myself, another larger part of my nervous system was floating in an InfinityPool® of pisco sour. It felt calm, comfortable and careless.

‘Maybe not,’ I replied.

‘Maybe that’s a good idea,’ he said.

He stopped speaking. I put on ‘Futile Devices’ ℗2010 Sufjan Stevens.

My lips and my tongue were sticky, glued to the empty glass.

I was going to have break-ups again.

The future was certain.

I smiled.

Soundtrack

In order of appearance:

‘Everything I Do, I Do It for You’ 1991 Bryan Adams
‘A Fistful of Dollars Theme’ 1965 Ennio Morricone
‘Dignity’ 2008 Thessaloniki Airport Crash
‘El Cóndor Pasa’ 1933 Daniel Alomía Robles
‘Ladies and Gentlemen We are Floating in Space’ 1997 Spiritualized®
‘I Robot’ 1977 The Alan Parsons Project
‘Wave’ 1967 Antonio Carlos Jobim
‘Cygnet Committee’ 1969 David Bowie
‘Tell You (Today)’ 1983 Loose Joints
‘Believe’ 1998 Cher
‘Sexy Movimiento’ 2007 Wisin & Yandel
‘Los Adolescentes’ 2010 Dënver
‘Panda’ 2012 Astro
‘Théorème d’Archimède’ 2004 Ricardo Villalobos
‘Futile Devices’ 2010 Sufjan Stevens

BONUS TRACK

‘Afterlife’ 2013 Arcade Fire

Patrons

a a
Rasmus Aberg
Kavita Ahluwalia
Alfonso Aliberti
Eli Allison
Gabriella Almberg
Richard Amalvy
Jérémy Apert
Arina Babjuka
François Balate
Jason Ballinger
Nicholas Barrett
Uuree Batsaikhan
Soraya Belghazi
Alice De Bevoise
Georg Boldt
Jennifer Bonboire
Pascale Boulanger
Michael Brenner
Marko Bucik
Luca Carrara
Antonio Cennamo
European Volunteer Centre (CEV)
Klavdija Cernilogar
Maxime Cerutti
Gregory Claeys
Maarten Coertjens-Magazin
Iolanda D’amato
Maria Demertzis

Elise Drouet
Tomek Dzido
Johan Ekman
Tamara Evans
Anber Gemma Evans
Jonathan Even-Zohar
Francesca Fabbri
David Ferreira
Pier Luigi Fratini
Viviana Galli
Andrea Garnero
David Garrahy
Emanuel Gerth
Andrea De Gioia
Charles Godin
Tamara Gojkovic
Joshua Goodman
Paola Grauso
Christoffer Groenstad
Ajsa Hadzibegovic
Ines Mayol Hernandez
Lodewijk Heylen
Laura Horn
Gabriel Hugonnot
Pia Hüttl
Samuel Jsdv
Janine Keersmaecker
Bastian Kenn
Zouhir Khelili
Dan Kieran
Lina Kirjazovaite

Honey Kohan
Olga Kuderko-Berg
Konstantinos Kyranakis
Elisabetta Elisa La Gala
Kis Leany
Yann Lebout
Christophe Leclercq
Magdalena Liskova
John Lisney
Eliza Lozovska
Matteo Lucatello
Janina Mackiewicz
Hiroshima Mandee
Paola Maniga
Charles Manoury
Mame Manzomo
J Scott Marcus
Giovanni & Maria
Mario Mariniello
Alix Masson
Christina Mercuriadi
John Mitchinson
Diego Montoyer
Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol
Margherita Movarelli
Virginia Mucchi
Carlo Navato
Katarina Roth Nevedalova
Matti Niemi
Juha-Pekka Nurvala
Johanna Nymsn

Damir Omeragic
Giovanni Corbo & Maria Paschou
Vera Pasynkova
Marko Paunovic
Mark Per
Mark Perera
Jess Petter
Wolfgang Petzold
Diogo Pinto
Justin Pollard
Vincenzo Porcaro
Marguerite Potard
Stefanie Poulton
Nicolò Pranzini
Anna Quagliata
Matteo Quattrocchi
Tine Radinja
Jessica Rao
Simone Rossi
Antonio Porcaro & Carla Rouge
Heather Roy
Luca Scarpiello
Arthur Schiller
Bettina Schwarzmayr
Alfredo Sellitti
Bruno Selun
Laura Shields
Henrik Söderman
Sara Pinheiro Stocker
Johan Strid
Simone Tagliapietra

Giacomo Toffano
Antoine Tonneau
Pavel Trantina
Gabriele Trapani
Sara Van den Eynde
Simon Vandereecken
Scarlett Varga
Loranne Vella
Bucci & Viola
Gaetano Vivo
Merel Wackwitz
Mike Walker
Pat Walshe
Erika Widegren
Anna Widegren
Derek Wilson
Luciano Zaami
Giorgio Zecca
G Zucchini