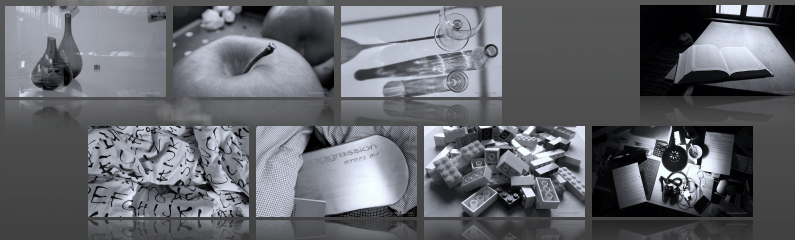


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l&tp perspectives | *the private*

creative writing project



l&tp perspectives | *the private*

creative writing project

- 4 **the uroborus morbus** – *beatrice ubbiali*

- 6 **gilded peel** – *thomas graf*
- 9 **an unsent letter to I.N.** – *allan levitov*
- 11 **an ode to the farmers' markets** – *anna muglach*
- 13 **the apple nobody needs** – *viktoria härtenberger*
- 15 **under the apple tree** – *elena zangerle*

- 17 **the essential stuff** – *moritz kroiss*
- 20 **mother knows best** – *shona millien*
- 24 **manus manum lavat** – *julian moser*
- 26 **my mom's daily visitor** – *andrea platzer*
- 28 **caught in-between alone** – *simone schwaiger*

- 31 **the pearl necklace and the praying mantis** – *johanna breier*
- 33 **a fateful dream** – *anna eller*
- 35 **reverie** – *felix oberhollenzer*
- 37 **alchemy in progress** – *julia sonnweber*
- 39 **soul full of words** – *hannah etzer*
- 41 **try again tomorrow** – *karin altenberger*

- 43 **sing me what I need** – *lisa maria oberhofer*
- 45 **the blanket** – *miriam prosser*
- 47 **the power of letters** – *julia thaler*
- 49 **man of her dreams** – *barbara wachtler*

- 51 **living under Orion/we grew so cold** – *isabella lonsing*
- 53 **under compulsion** – *laura stöckler*

- 55 **unbroken** – *veronika breski*
- 57 **the missing piece** – *elisa eisendle*
- 59 **the next moment** – *anja kluckner*
- 61 **a brief history of time** – *nargiz nurayeva*
- 64 **forgotten pieces** – *christina kiesenhofer*
- 66 **memories last forever** – *julia rier*
- 68 **I hope you step on a lego** – *greta tröber*
- 70 **private chaos** – *katharina turri*

l&tp perspectives | *the private*

creative writing project

- 73 **endless scrolling** – *marisa casartelli*
- 75 **messy desk, cluttered mind** – *julia gassl*
- 77 **a home that will never be** – *stefan leichner*
- 80 **thoughts of gray** – *katharina koch*
- 82 **the private song** – *daniel netzer*
- 84 **do I click on the link?** – *maria rudigier*

This sixth collection of short stories comprises the work of the students of the Language and Text Production course, MA Programme, in English and American Studies. The stories were written in winter semester 2022/23 as an exploration of creative writing and part of the **Creative Writing Project, Perspectives**, with a focus on *the private*.

The photographs have been chosen as an incentive to produce divergent and varied texts, with distinct writing styles, on a variety of topics approached from different perspectives.

From incidents in private homes to a museum gallery, from a local farmers' market to the streets of London or to an individual's most private thoughts and a most delightful unsent letter, moments of realisation, well-hidden feelings, wishes, hopes and regrets unfold in front of our eyes, as if fragments of a documentary on the everyday, with sensitivity, insightfulness and clarity.

Somber or playful, matter-of-fact or allegoric, each short story is well thought-out, often simple in style and yet most compelling!

violet stathopoulou-vaiss



the uroborus morbus

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by **beatrice ubbiali**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

She was staring at the oblong vases in the glass cabinet, not understanding whether they were suspended or laid on the white surface. A slight feeling of annoyance was seething beneath the surface of her consciousness, the museum had no captions for the artworks on display. Her mind was stuck on every piece and when she would come up with an explanation for a specific one, she did not feel the relief that eureka moments usually generate, as she could not get any confirmation that her thoughts were correct.

She wondered what the purpose of the vases originally was. Her fascination with morbidity – which she claimed to have inherited from her mother, as a disclaimer for when things got too weird – pushed her to conjecture they were canopic jars. Her reverie was once again straying into delusion, since the truth, she had to admit, was much less fascinating. The design of the vases was rather industrial, monochrome and linear. It somehow evoked the memory of a Charles Dickens novel, the title of which still dormant in her brain. One of the characters, the utilitarian teacher Mr. Gradgrind, conceptualised the students as “pitchers” that must be filled with facts, no space for imagination and self-development. Somehow – and strictly from this perspective – she identified as a vase too. An intellectual genocide had been carried out first by the educational system and then continued to be self-inflicted. She had been filled to the very brim with knowledge, and she took pride in it. She could soon establish herself as the more cultured part in a conversation and spit facts about almost anything in freestyle fashion. The catastrophic consequence of being wholly saturated, however, was that any small movement could cause overflowing.

A friend once called her square. He had mentioned it half-jokingly, in passing, but the sentence had triggered a butterfly effect of long-lasting intellectual impact. She knew it was a saying, a simple metaphor. She had always found it to be a particularly fit image for unbearably nitpicking people: squares are rigid, precise and edgy. The Rubik’s cube could not have been

another shape; out of the array of geometrical figures, the square is not the funny one in the bunch. She fancied herself more like a circle, maybe – to be fair and realistic – one tending to an oval. A self-proclaimed artist friend once drew her face and said its shape was exactly like the Hyperuranion idea of a face. Whenever she had to wear a high ponytail or a pompon hat, she felt she was cosplaying as an Easter egg. So, she was alternatively a vase and an Easter egg. Both delicate objects, usually with a limited lifespan.

Vases never lasted a lifetime; the more valuable the vase, the shorter its life. She had felt for some time that small cracks had started to stretch along her surface and had slowly come to cover great part of it. At the beginning, small drops were escaping the crevices unperceived, but the leakage had become progressively more consistent.

Suddenly becoming aware of the reflection of her face in the glass and fresh out of her self-flagellating stream of consciousness – which was lately turning into a recurring habit – she noticed two girls fidgeting with something in front of a painting behind her. She could not figure out whether their punk appearance made them look suspicious, or whether they actually were up to something sketchy. One of them had a green mullet haircut, the haircut of her dreams, which she had sported with great shame at age 8. She liked to frame the experience as a rebellious act, an attempt to disrupt the status quo of the village, when it was really just the result of the artistic impetus of an insane hairdresser.

A splashing sound snatched her from the meditative state she had plunged into and for the first time in realistically an hour, she averted her gaze from the vases.

Van Gogh's face was now covered in red soup, which made the portrait look eerily alive, as if blood was pouring from his bandaged ear. Many stories surround the circumstances of the artist's self-mutilation. Most experts agree the act was triggered by a furious row with fellow painter Gauguin, whom Van Gogh's brother bribed into joining Vincent in France to start an art academy. For years it was thought the ear, whom Van Gogh saw as a pawn of love, had been taken into custody by a prostitute, but later versions suggest the keeper was a hotel cleaner. The obsessive prying into Van Gogh's life felt to her like a violation, an unnecessarily cruel excavation into his private. Is the clawing down and dissection of one's intimacy the price to harness the love of the mass? To reassure loved ones, and probably himself, Van Gogh referred to his illness(es) as "a simple artist's bout of craziness". However, she felt, contrary to the mainstream discourse, that his creativity did not spur from depression, but in spite of it.

By talking about art, we deny art to speak for itself. It's a silencing of culture and the senses, by saturation of the first and a numbing of the latter. It is the modern obsession with interpretation, as Susan Sontag put it. A tendency to analyse everything, to over-charge with a meaning that comes from anywhere but the source. It felt like pressing the accelerator pedal without engaging a gear; the noise is deafening, but the vehicle stays immobile.

"Hard times" was the title of Dickens' novel. It suddenly clicked. Reality was the opposite of the pitcher theory. She had restrained herself in a cage of her own making. She identified with the vase, but all this time she was its content. She thought she was losing herself, becoming more empty, but she still existed, everywhere and all at once. Where she had been immobile, and where nothing new could come in, she was now almost ubiquitous; "a bit like Jesus," her fantasies of grandeur suggested.

[back to contents](#)

gilded peel

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by thomas graf

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

Lana was closely scrutinising the apple. Why had no-one picked it yet? After all, it looked perfect shining lushly in the beaming light of the room, and she felt flattered that the golden colour of its peel even matched her hair. A perfect peel encasing the adorable pulp within.

Lana always paid particular attention to her hair when attending a business meeting like this, as she considered it the most important part of her looks from a distance. She felt as if it attracted potential customers from even the remotest corners of the room, like an irresistible, blazing gravitational centre. After all, her golden hair perfectly enveloped her head, in which her mind resided—the seat of all her education and intelligence, which was the basis of her success as a businesswoman. The hair that emphasised her preeminent position in business by crowing the head everything depended on.

She had been preparing for this meeting since yesterday morning, indulging her hair with washing, rinsing, drying, lotions and all the other treatments she knew would accentuate its golden colour. Lana had brought the procedure to perfection. She did, however, see one thing yesterday that could skew the whole impression: those nasty roots. She should have bought new dye.

What Lana did not get was the reason why the organisers of the event had invited a farmer to the meeting. This was a business meeting, and not a market, after all. Attendees were supposed to share ideas, deliver elevator pitches, communicate their USPs, and form new alliances. What did all of that have to do with farming and apples? Admittedly, the farmer had delivered an unobjectionable pitch about the eco-friendliness of his produce, but he assuredly had never read any books on the matter. Even more so, Lana couldn't think of anything related to apples that could arouse the interest of ambitious businesspeople like her.

Lana considered herself one of the very few businesspeople in the room who would eventually achieve success. She had brought her elevator pitch to perfection over the course of the last couple of weeks, adding details and deleting others, rehearsing her intonation, and practising facial expressions again and again. Moreover, dozens of people liked and shared the stories she regularly posted on her social media sites, reflecting her impact as a successful businesswoman.

And best of all was that her parents had finally transferred the money for her new website to her, as she had discovered with a feeling of relief. She had just managed to have it launched for all the new clients she would acquire today. This would make a huge impression!

Lana's eyes drifted over the box that was now almost void of apples. She did not wonder why the other apples were still left, being so misshapen, full of spots and dents. Who would ever take such flawed specimens? But not this particular one. This one had apparently received all the arts of nurturing there were, with the result that it had acquired a perfectly even shape and radiant gleam. Lana could not even detect a single spot on its peel. Being so striking, the apple seemed like a perfect proof of the farmer's proficiency.

But what was wrong with the apple? Why had all the other businesspeople taken more deficient ones and left the immaculate one behind? Lana became suspicious. The farmer must have covered the apple with a thick layer of wax or chemicals she could not discern to make it look so perfect. Or something was wrong with its pulp. Probably everyone but her saw it was foul or floury or stale, to her embarrassment. Lana was certain of it.

At that point, Lana realised that she couldn't risk eating an apple, anyway, as it could result in smudging her lipstick all over her face, thus making a mockery of herself. As it is, she had only recently had her teeth done to finally be able to radiantly smile on photos. Therefore, she had not found the right lipstick that would give the intended faint but pleasant colour to her lips, but used a slightly too strong one that may distract a potential client's attention away from her eyes—which she knew were the cynosure of all eyes from up close. Lana wanted potential clients to immerse themselves in the depths of her eyes to win them over.

Eventually, Lana turned around and strutted off. There were definitely more arguments that spoke in favour of leaving the perfect, golden apple behind than against it. It was time for her to mingle with the other businesspeople and work towards her bright future.

That night, Lana was lying in her bed staring at the ceiling in her dark room while reflecting upon every moment of the meeting. She had been able to deliver her elevator pitch eight—no, nine—times to different people and to distribute at least twenty business cards. The conversations had been so inspiring with many businesspeople delivering their pitches, explaining their USPs, and communicating their latest success stories to one another. What a triumphant experience! Finally, all her hard work would pay off and she would enter her golden age of business.

Yet again, so many of the attendees had complimented her on her gorgeous looks. Lana found such remarks unfitting, because she was a businesswoman and wanted people to remark on her business. Being used to that, though, she had acquired a habit of taking these compliments with modesty rather than delight. Nonetheless, such remarks were a welcoming invitation to talk business.

Lana had also been able to talk with the special guest of tonight's meeting, one of the most successful businesswomen from the area. The conversation had left her slightly irritated, though. Lana had initially managed to ensnarl her with her immaculately delivered elevator pitch and business details, but the woman had soon started to talk about places Lana had been to. It was really challenging for her to build a bridge from this drivel to business again. Lana was biting her lip with tension. Had she managed it?

And there was the unfortunate issue with the apple. Lana realised she had made a fool of herself, as she should have either immediately taken the apple or disregarded it. Standing there staring at the golden fruit was the worst thing she could have done, as everybody in the room could notice her hesitancy, which was unfitting. They would conclude that she wasn't able to finalise a decision, thus refusing her as a business partner. This must have been the reason why the woman only wanted to talk about nonsense rather than her business. Such a mess!

Lana sighed. She had done everything wrong, turning a promising opportunity to a total disaster. But she had learned a lot today and there would be another meeting soon. Maybe the other businesspeople would give her a new chance to prove herself and she would finally reach her golden future. Soon, so very soon...

Eventually, Lana's mind slowly drifted off into her world of dreams in which she usually saw herself as a paramount example of inspiration and admiration.

Oddly enough, though, she would only dream of apples that night.

[back to contents](#)

an unsent letter to I.N.

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by allan levitov

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

You left without saying ‘goodbye’. Not a touch of your lips, not a brush of your warm palms on my body – you just walked, leaving me behind like a forgotten toy lying in the dust.

I know, I had hurt you, Isaac – love can hurt, but it was the only way for me to express my feelings to you. It all went for the better. I know, deep inside you also know that without that ‘clash’ and, probably, without that pain you would have not become half of the man that you are now. You needed it more than I did. Don’t you worry, Isaac, I do not want any credit for your success; even though we both know how much I deserve it and how much I have worked for it.

“He and She were once as one. She had made him famous and rich. Then he walked” – a story as old as the world. Now that you have raised to the very zenith of your career, of your beloved science, you might think that I still keep falling and cannot stop. That staying firmly on a solid ground, feeling tiny sharp rocks pierce my – once gorgeous – skin, I might feel like I keep falling and falling into some bottomless pit, sour tears streaming down my cheeks. If you think that, you are wrong, Isaac.

You had never taken time to understand me. Never dared to get to my core – probably because you were simply afraid of what you were about to experience. What were you scared of, my dear? Were you expecting that some monstrous worm (probably corroding my heart from the inside) would prowl out and devour you? Or are you just a natural coward that has been hiding for all his life, trying to explain everything with beloved “physics” and “math,” and “natural philosophy”? Playing alchemist to achieve some illusion of control?

Do you really enjoy deluding yourself, pretending that you are in charge of things happening in the universe? That everything goes as it had been planned and the planets follow their orbits; and that *dos* and *don'ts* are naturally observed, and thus you are in full control?

Does the understanding that all this is a big lie make you hide under the bed and call for your mama?

You have offended me, Isaac, not because you walked. It is how you portrayed me – portrayed us – made me feel such disgust and fury. Had you announced to the world about our relationship as a poet “A thousand words cannot explain...”, I would have understood. Had you suffered silently in pain thinking of how you had foolishly lost me, I would have not pitied you, but I would have, probably, understood. But having left like a coward, you continued as such. The experience that we had together, all our ‘colors and fireworks,’ our passionate touch – you have narrowed down to a simple formula:

$$F = G * Mm / R^2$$

Five letters, three signs, and ‘a square’ – so pathetic of you, Mr. Newton, so miserable. Is that all you can say about us?

Now that you are a celebrity, a world-renowned scientist (some are actually calling you ‘genius’) and I am just an ordinary apple that happened to fall down on your head and ‘helped’ you discover gravity – but we both know, you would never have dared even this petty discovery without me. But is that “... = $G * Mm / R^2$ ” all that you have got to say?

I know, it is low to speak about exes, but Aristoteles saw all the Universe in me after merely touching my skin with his lips (I did not fall for him, like I did for you, Isaac). And Aristoteles – inspired by my glory – discovered the atomic theory that outlived him by millennia. Eve – who once was the first lady – had abandoned Elysium, the eternal bliss, just for one simple kiss of mine. And Adam followed. Even the Goddesses fought over me, each of them craving to be with me, and they threw their mortal minions – with terrible cruelty – into the maelstrom of the great Trojan war.

Now compare that with your desolate formula – does that make you feel great? Does that make you feel that for the whole eternity I would merely lie down, crying over you, rotting under the mother apple tree, hoping that you might come back? Does it, Isaac?

I do not want you back. I am strong enough. In fact, I might think of a new relationship to come. Yes, I know, Steve might look too eccentric, plus he is bald, and I never cared for bald men; but I know he will cherish and spoil me. He might start a whole company, or a world brand, in my name – like that guy did for his daughter Mercedes, but bigger. Steve will call that brand after me, and the millions will follow – they will want more of me and will not get enough of.

And your formula simply will not work because I am not going to fall again – not for you, neither for somebody else, my dear. You might want to edit your ‘math,’ watching me from the side, watching me rise – watching me go head over hills with my new darling. So, try coming up with some formula for that – this would be grand, because no scholar so far has discovered a formula for true love.

[back to contents](#)

an ode to farmers' markets

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by **anna muglach**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

It is Thursday. Again. Thursday, her favourite day of the week. It is far away from this week's Monday, but also quite far away from the Monday of the following week. It is also close to the weekend, but not too close, so she has left all the pleasant anticipation for all that is to come on the weekend. Thursday. Only two hours to teach and then the whole day to herself. Aside from that, the real highlight of this day is actually the farmers' market that she visits with an almost religious regularity that you could most definitely set the clock by.

What started out as merely accompanying her mother on her weekly grocery shopping trip evolved over time into a lifestyle she would never trade in for all the money in the world. Inspired by the abundance of healthy food at her local farmers' market she is now following a more sustainable lifestyle, incorporating seasonal, local and fresh produce into her diet. Meanwhile, she has also stopped eating meat altogether and gained a whole new perspective on nutrition and health. With each and every apple or carrot she purchased at her local market her appreciation for mother nature and therefore for fresh produce has grown immensely. By visiting the market and having conversations with the farmers, she has learned a lot about preservation, preparation and the value of food. She has also adopted new dietary habits.

As usual, while cycling towards her trusted farmers' market she mentally went through her shopping list. Physalis, pears, broccoli, spinach, pumpkin, peppers, onions. And, her absolute favourites ever since she can remember: apples. To make perfect things even more perfect, the apples would be in season now and, because of that, fresh and unbelievably tasty. With the apple season in full swing at this time of the year each farmer brings boxes after boxes of the ripe, red fruits to their stands. Her mouth watered at the thought. If you have ever had apples, picked from the trees and only a few hours later put on display at the market or spinach picked the day before or a tomato that ripened under the August sun as recently as yesterday or freshly peeled peas, then your mouth would water too.

She pedalled harder to get there as quickly as possible, to get a hold of the freshest and most gorgeous fruits and vegetables. She passed a large, big-chain grocery market. Dozens of cars were parked in front of it. She caught a glimpse of the long queues at the checkouts. The girl could not understand it. Why do people still make their way to the big grocery chains to buy overpriced food that lacks quality? Also, the flair of a grocery store would never come even close to the one of a farmers' market. You never feel relaxed pushing the shopping trolley through crowded aisles, all while speakers blare out loud bad quality last year's hits. Cold, fluorescent lights evoke the feeling of having your teeth looked at by the dentist and always searching for what you actually need but never ever finding it in the seemingly never-ending and chaotic aisles, makes you feel as if being trapped in a maze. Her thoughts wandered to the modern food industry, which pays no respect to the environment, to animals and ultimately to the people who work in it. This industry consistently moves further away from nature and what it has to offer for humans. All the GMO-seeds that are used in commercial food industry, making thousands of people sick every year. Her daydream, which felt more like a nightmare now, continued to all the fruit and veggies at the store that are not allowed to properly ripen in the fields or on the trees. There is long-distance shipping and even gassing to speed up the ripening process involved. Such practices make the fruits and vegetables taste bland and stale.

Just thinking about all that made her frown. What about all the beautiful connections that you make when visiting a famers' market? Can you really make them at a grocery shop, too? Verena comes to her mind. Verena, together with her husband Christian, runs the largest fruit and vegetable stand. Their boxes, filled with the latest harvest in all colours and sizes and smells, are stacked neatly in rows, with Christian putting them where Verena tells him to. The elderly couple has always been vegetable farmers, hoarding a wealth of knowledge about every vegetable that can grow in these latitudes. Verena would always have an abundance of advice for every health problem, advice she passionately shares with everyone. Customers kindly call her "Walking Pharmacy". Christian, silent and untroubled, never speaks much, but when he does, it always comes from the heart. "How was school, do you still like the kids?" Not a week goes by without him asking her this particular question, which is then followed by questions about university and/or her dog. Always in this order. She enjoys his attention and is always beyond amazed about their ability to remember everything until the following week.

There is also Alex, sandwiched between a stall selling honey and another stall selling flowers. Alex sells the best cheese in the whole of Innsbruck. He always hands her a small piece of his selection of the day to taste. Just thinking about the soft dairy product with the strong flavour made her pedal over the last few meters to the farmers' market a little bit faster, leading to small beads of sweat running down her neck and back.

Out of breath and sweaty after her extra fast cycling, she pushes her bike in her usual spot at the bike rack. She can already sense the buzzing vibe at the market. Then she hears Alex shouting: "Cheese, come try the best cheese," and smells the unmistakable sweetness of the recent apple harvest. As she walks enthusiastically through the vibrant market all the way to Christian's and Verena's stall, she sees that even more boxes than last week are stacked onto each other, making her regret that she did not bring an extra tote bag.

"How was school, do you still like the kids?"

[back to contents](#)

the apple nobody needs

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by viktorija härtenberger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

It is a usual Friday - just like many other Fridays of the year. Ella comes home from work, bolts down noodles from yesterday and changes her clothes to go downtown to enjoy the afternoon with her friend Jill. She opens her oversized walk-in wardrobe with anything but excitement. Standing in front of her neatly organised closet and staring at the same outdated clothes as every day, she mumbles dissatisfied,

“I don’t have anything to wear anyway – I will just wear my favourite jeans with a casual T-shirt.”

Stuck in her considerations of how she could assemble her outfit, she loses track of time. “Jill must be already waiting,” she realises. So, she grabs her stuff in a hurry and rushes to the café where her friend, indeed, is already waiting. Jill chose their favourite table situated in the corner next to the window where they can perfectly watch the hustle and bustle of the city. Sunk in a squashy armchair, she is reading the menu. Not even seated, Ella asks impatiently, “Is there anything extraordinary on the menu today? I feel like treating myself to a nice drink. I desire something delicious to sweeten my weekend.” Before Jill can answer, they hear the click-clacking of the waitress’ high heels. Having overheard their conversation, she says promptly, “Well, for you we have a special offer this month – the egg coffee. It is a coffee with a topping consisting of a mixture of egg and sugar.” “Well, it sounds delicious... Hmmm... Let me think...,” mutters Ella and hesitates for some long seconds. “Of course, you could just take one of our traditional coffee specialties such as Espresso, Café Latte, or Cappuccino,” the waitress starts listing and Ella hastily interrupts,

“You don’t have any specialties I fancy. I’ll just have an ordinary café.”

Ella tells Jill about her friend Frieda, who is an author and is invited to receive an award in Vienna. She mentions how she asked her to accompany her on the trip and explains that she

would have liked to, but does not have anything suitable for the occasion, as the theme of the evening is the colour *rosé*, just like the colour of the wine. Brimming with enthusiasm, Jill immediately offers to help. As they don't have any urgent business, they decide to continue the afternoon shopping.

Two dresses are waiting for them in a shop located in a side street. Ella would have liked a long dress for this special occasion. Obviously, the first one only barely covers her knees. The second dress, disappointedly, has shoulder straps – not for her. As they step out of the store Ella says indignantly,

“They don't have an appropriate assortment.”

The next store is Jill's favourite one. It has a piece for every occasion you can think of. The friends are browsing through the wares when Ella finally spots a very particular one. It is long enough, and in the required colour. Her eyes sparkle with delight for a few seconds until her expression turns bitter again. The dress is a size too small and there is only one more left which is two sizes too big. Ella frustratedly storms off yelling at her friend,

“This store doesn't even offer enough sizes.”

The two friends decide that this not-so-special Friday turns out to be an unlucky one and choose to part. The evening sun already casts long shadows on the ground, but still dazzles a bit. Engrossed in the beauty of the evening mood, she almost forgets to stop at a supermarket to buy some groceries for dinner. As she follows the smell of freshly baked bread she realises, “Oh no, I forgot that this supermarket does not have tasty wholewheat bread. There is just this odd bread that has the consistency of gum.” As she scans the assortment of bread, her eye catches another wholewheat. Ella contemplates,

“Why can't they just have normal bread? It has pumpkin seeds on it – I hate those.”

While listing her complaining, she glimpses an old man strolling around seemingly confused. He pauses here and there to examine a fruit or a box and then resumes his journey through the huge cathedral of consumption. All of a sudden, a buzzing sound materializes behind her. It is the old man wheezing and looking apparently quite weary. He is inspecting a bag full of fruits and starts wondering, “These apples seem to be quite big nowadays. They have to be chemically treated.” Ella has just realised that he must be talking to her as he shows her his apples, holding them uncomfortably close to her face. “They are, indeed, huge,” she confirms, stepping one tiny bit back. Not believing her eyes, she gives the apples another closer and much clearer look. “Excuse me, Sir. Those apples are not apples, those are mangos!” Ella replies shedding light on his theories. The old man answers baffled, “What? Mangos? Never heard of them!” He must be mumbling something behind his grey beard, but she cannot comprehend any word. However, with every second that passes, his eyes appear more and more furious. Ella feels extremely uncomfortable in this situation, so she tries to avert his gaze. To get her attention back, he justifies his anger,

“I don't enjoy buying things nowadays! They just have so many options nobody needs, and the essential things are impossible to find in this flood of groceries!”

Ella points to the real apples and leaves. Looking pensively at her groceries, she reflects,

“No shopping today. There is nothing I need.”

[back to contents](#)

under the apple tree

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by elena zangerle

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

Autumn sun shines in his face. “Alright, I gotta hurry up before the sun sets,” Geralt thinks to himself, grabbing his running shoes as he leaves the apartment in a hurry. Nowadays, it is not so easy anymore to have a healthy lifestyle. All the sweet temptations, the fast food, the stress, and the long working days make it quite difficult. Without his daily running, he would eventually go mad, so exercising is basically his therapy. Therapy that costs nothing but gives a lot of benefits in return. Especially since the new job came with lots of extra hours and smaller lunch breaks, his focus is even more on taking the time to reset and relax. Geralt takes a quick look at his newly purchased apple watch and starts his tracking program.

Taking a break right on top of this beautiful hill, his eyes wander through the mesmerizing landscape, and he spots a woman, as she, in a concentrated manner, desperately tries to mix the right colours for her painting. Amused by this sight, Geralt decides to take a closer look at what the young woman is doing. He tries to think of a funny line he could utter or a joke about what she is doing, but as soon as she turns around and their eyes meet, it feels as if he were struck by lightning ...

The sun rays suddenly seem stronger, the chirping of the birds softer and the leaves more colourful. The early afternoon sun glimpses through the branches of the apple trees and the soft autumn breeze kisses her rosy cheeks. Her skin is as red as the apples and her eyes sparkle like the morning dew. “It’s beautiful... I... I mean... your painting. I quite like it,” he tries to phrase his thoughts whilst getting closer to the woman and the painted canvas. She starts smiling at him and raises her hand right in front of his face: “Would you like a bite?” He must look a bit perplexed since she tries to reassure him: “It’s delicious, I promise.” Hesitantly, he reaches for the deep-red apple in her hand and takes a large bite. Never has he tasted something so flavourful and crisp, that is earthy and refreshingly acidic at the same time. It is as if all his taste buds were revived. “I tried to paint those apple trees all day long, but it seems I can’t find

the right red tones to do those apples any justice,” she mentions whilst pointing at her picnic blanket. “Do you want to join me for a moment? I should probably take a break. Sometimes I need to refocus.” With his mouth still full of the last bites of the juicy apple, he replies: “Actually... I was in the middle of an important...”, he nervously points at his apple watch, “hmm... you know ... maybe for a few moments.” They sit down and Geralt enjoys the last remnants of the apple in the midst of the enchanting apple trees.

Both enjoy each other’s company. The woman explains her work in the artistic field and how she gets her inspiration from these beautiful landscapes. Every season has its own specialties, but warm autumn days, just like this one, are her favourite. “There is something dream-like about those days – I wish I knew how to captivate their magic,” she sighs. Geralt babbles about his busy work life in the city, and the young woman hangs on his lips. They laugh with each other as if they had known one another for ages. “I have never had such a flavoursome apple as this one,” Geralt admits as he holds the apple core high up in the air and throws it into the small creek, which meanders around their picnic spot. The woman nods in agreement: “The apples around here are much sweeter than in the city. From time to time, you just gotta get out of the traffic and revive you senses in this environment.” In his heart he knows exactly that this is what he needs to do more often. He feels how this is what life is about. Life is short. Enjoy the sunrays. Even the last one of them... The last one...

All of a sudden, the grass, which he was lying on, feels as cold as ice. No chirping birds. He realises that the sun has long set, and in his confusion, he looks around but there is nobody in sight. “She is gone,” he sighs wistfully. “Time must have passed by extremely fast,” he whispers to himself, “How stupid can I be to fall asleep in such a wonderful moment. She must think that I was bored of her. Oh lord, I have ruined everything... and I don’t even know her name.” Disappointed that this afternoon passed by so swiftly, he collects his running shoes, folds the picnic blanket, and takes a last glance at the magnificent apple trees.

Like every Sunday afternoon, he is sitting in the park, reading his favourite book. Some kids are playing in the grass, and he is enjoying their laughter. Being that young and unbothered must be exhausting. The old man decides to go to the produce stand, where a local farmer sells his goods. “Ah, Geralt, nice to see you,” shouts the salesman. Without thinking, he reaches for the shiny red apple and takes a large bite. The taste, the feeling in his mouth – it feels as if he suddenly were in his twenties again. A sour melody in a full-bodied flavour with a candy-like outflow. A hard skin that reveals something soft at heart. Time stands still while he feels the warm sunrays on his skin. He listens to the soft voice of the young woman and watches her curls dance in the wind. Her sweet giggles are music in his ears. He can’t shake the feeling that this is more than just remembering a dream he once had as a young man...

[back to contents](#)



the essential stuff

photo: violet mathopoulos-vois © 2022/23

by moritz kroiss

photo: violet mathopoulos-vois © 2022/23

“Friends are the family you choose (~ Nin/Ithilnin, Elven rogue).”

— Jess C Scott, *The Other Side of Life*

Human beings need so profoundly little to live, to fulfil their daily basic needs. Apart from food, drink and shelter, people especially need social contact or, even better, friendship. This is along the lines of what Lydia told her friends over her second glass of wine that evening, just after Magnus had started a discussion over the meaning of life. Not word for word, but, basically, to what the group had decided to dedicate this week’s “serata da vino”, as they called their weekly gatherings in Rachel’s living room.

“Friends are the most important thing, no matter where and how you live...,” Anton began, just after Rachel’s grandpa’s old cuckoo clock had struck midnight. When nobody answered right away, as nobody knew whether he would say another thing or not, he decided to continue: “Imagine your perfect life!” – “What even is a perfect life?” Magnus asked him somewhat interrupting his little speech. Anton replied patiently, “Just imagine you had the things you would wish for, or circumstances you would wish were different, or the place you would rather live or whatever. I think that if you had all of that, but were lacking social interaction and, more importantly, your best friends to share it with it would simply not mean anything anymore.”

They had these evenings, usually on Thursdays, just to have drinks and enjoy each other’s company. They did not always have wine, as Magnus and Rachel did not even like it. Magnus thought the “rancid fruit water” tasted “astringent” which was why he preferred to drink Cuba Libre. Rachel all too often found herself wishing to talk about something more fun or play some games for a change. The talks had become a little too philosophical during the last weeks, she found. Still, these people were her best friends and she was keen to keep updated on what was on their minds.

“I see,” she weighed in for the first time, as if she had been waiting for the right moment, “so if someone offered to pay you a million per year for tuning a Ferrari each week in your own workshop at the seaside of Monaco you wouldn’t trade us for new friends?”

“Well, if you put it like that...” Anton replied ironically.

“I have to side with Rachel on this,” Magnus began, “because technically, everything we enjoy or rather everything that makes us feel good about anything, about life altogether, is based upon release of dopamine. As long as it does not get too much at a time, dopamine release on a regular basis is what gives us joy. It is caused by a variety of things, and from a strictly scientific standpoint I doubt the necessity of the three of us to secure Anton’s happiness.”

Lydia had rolled her eyes back the moment Magnus began his sentence and from there on just listened with a countenance of witnessing a colonoscopy. Finally, she decided to speak before Magnus could say anything else. “Oh stop it! You can’t explain everything with science. He would miss us, of course. Also, it is a fact that humans need social interaction to be happy. I know there are people who deem their purpose making money, saving lives, or climbing mountains, even. At the end of the day though, we all need someone to hug and share our stories with.”

“She’s right! Also, this is a rather redundant discussion. The fact that he already knows us can’t be undone. It was proven that it is harder to meet really close friends the older you get,” Rachel added.

“Yeah! Well... actually, I don’t know about that...” Lydia attempted to continue, somehow still in thought about Rachel’s statement. “Anyway, think about it, about how dull our lives actually are...” - “Excuse me?” Magnus interrupted her with a hint of irony in his voice. “Yeah yeah, sorry, I can only speak for myself, of course, but what makes my life especially interesting are evenings like this! I think you would all agree with me here, wouldn’t you?” Lydia finished her claim.

Anton nodded vehemently with a smile on his face. Despite the others uttering their accordance in opinion verbally, his reaction appeared to be the clearest and strongest. After nobody said anything else, he decided to speak: “Absolutely. I have to say, we don’t even think let alone talk about such things that often. We don’t even meet often enough!” He laughed.

“That is true!” Rachel agreed. “But that’s the issue, exactly!” Lydia said. “People are so fed up with living up to certain expectations. Don’t you think the majority of people just fill their lives with tasks they feel like they must do and not want to do?”

“I do.” Rachel agreed. “During my semester abroad in Brussels I felt like the city was full of such people. At university, I got to know students our own age who just live to tick boxes. It was the other Erasmus students I did most things with, and had the most fun with, of course. The others were nice, too. Still, it wasn’t the same. Their lives seemed extremely planned out and there was a schedule for everything. You couldn’t just ring them and ask if they would like to go out that same evening.”

“Right, you told me about that!” Lydia remembered.

All of a sudden, Magnus was in thought contemplating his own life choices. Rachel’s statement reminded him of his own life in a peculiar manner. Listening to what she had said made him feel unhappy. Somehow, it had sounded like an insult to all goal oriented people. Was it wrong to strive for success? Is one a worse friend if one is less spontaneous? Is there something off

about discipline? He decided to carefully touch on the issue: “Sure, company and free time activities are just as important as a structured day to day life –“

“I think work-life-balance is what they call it nowadays,” Anton interrupted him. His utterance carried a bit of humour. Had to be the wine slowly kicking in.

“Yeah, sure, but is there something wrong with being a bit less flexible due, say, some other obligations?” Magnus allowed himself to continue.

“Of course not!...” Lydia instantly said. “... I mean, there are times during my semester when I’m so stressed out that I don’t even care when I have to tell you guys or others ‘no’, it leaves me totally cold. I imagine you often feel the same, Magnus? Although, look who I’m telling!” she laughed.

“Yeah, but for law students, I guess, stress in life is generally on a different level,” Rachel added.

Magnus instantly felt less guilty when Rachel showed some understanding, but he just got out “yeah, I guess”. After a short pause, he added ironically: “Unbelievable what we all go through for the sake of our future, haha! Truly though, these evenings mean so much to me. However, most of the times I only realise that during!”

The others laughed heartily and even Anton seemed to show some sentiment: “Same... ..I actually don’t want to imagine what life would be like without you guys and any ‘rancid fruit water’.”

“Yes!” Rachel shouted. “You guys are my rock!”

Everyone knew she said it jokingly, the only way they really touch upon their feelings when there is a nice and genial atmosphere. Still, they knew each other well enough to know she meant it. They all did. Everyone found themselves in deep content, mirth, and appreciation of each other’s company. It was not about the similarities in daily routines or success, not about the taste of drinks, and not about any burdening necessity to congregate and catch up every now and again. Life, in its most treasured and essential form, happened right in this room. Around this table. With these people.

[back to contents](#)



mother knows best

photo: violet mathopoulos-vaiz © 2022/23

by shona millien

photo: violet mathopoulos-vaiz © 2022/23

The delicious scent of roast chicken started to fill the entire room as Morgana finished polishing the second wine glass. The glass sparkled like a diamond as she placed it on the table. She was almost done setting the table for dinner, only the candles still missing. As she went to fetch them, her mind started to wander.

Is this really a good idea?

She placed the fluorescent candles onto the pristine white tablecloth and admired her work, quite pleased with the way the striking purple seemingly gave the silverware and the rather plain looking arrangement a pop of color.

She will be here soon.

As if she had broken out of a trance, Morgana turned to the kitchen to check on the food. It was simple, something she was actually able to cook, though she knew it wouldn't live up to her guest's standards. Everything looked as nice as she could possibly manage, now she just had to wait.

Why did I agree to this?

She started fidgeting with the bottom of the Merlot-colored velvet that was draped over her body and hugged her curves nicely, mindlessly playing with the fabric. Only the best for her esteemed guest.

Why am I so nervous? It's just my mother.

She jerked when she heard the doorbell.

She's here.

She quickly straightened the crumpled fabric of her dress – her mother would have a fit – and checked her hair one last time before opening the door. Her mother looked well, a smile – quite fake – on her face as she hastily pulled her into her embrace. Although her mother tried to hide it, Morgana could feel her smooth out a small crease she had missed at the back of her dress.

Of course.

Her mother then pulled something from behind her back and shoved it towards Morgana: flowers – to brighten up her drab apartment, as she claimed.

I knew she hated my apartment.

She thanked her mother, told her to make herself at home – she knew her mother felt uncomfortable – and proceeded to search for a suitable vase.

This was a bad idea. She'll just criticize everything.

She cut the stems, placed the flowers inside a vase she had received from her friend Maddison – it looked nice – and set them on the table next to the polished wine glasses. She needn't have bothered with the candles – the flowers were clearly superior.

Shouldn't have expected anything else.

Morgana quickly plated the food, trying to arrange everything in a way she had seen in the book her mother gifted her when she moved out, and dinner was served. Clink – a toast to finally being able to meet up again. The conversation that followed was shallow – her mother mainly talking about how incredible life was. She had joined a new country club because of her husband's passion for golf and, naturally, it was extremely luxurious. The only real problem was the Hansen Family – apparently they were not 'classy' or 'versed well enough' in country club culture.

The same as ever.

The mother – she felt like she had to – reluctantly asked her how she was doing – specifically asked her if she was still with that 'horrible' young man.

If you actually cared, you would know that we're still going strong, possibly close to tying the knot.

She told her it was the same old thing, that Jack was busy with work in Taiwan. She wouldn't dare bring up the idea of possibly marrying him with her mother. She was in her last year of university, almost ready to start working as a teacher.

I know that's not good enough for you.

Her mother forcefully swallowed a piece of potato and quickly changed the subject. Morgana's cooking had become much better, as she claimed, accompanied by a large fake smile. She was so glad her daughter had tried something else for a change – not make that ghastly curry she ate so frequently back home.

Jack actually loves it, especially when he comes home from his business trips.

The topic changed yet again. Her mother suddenly remembered that Morgana's sister Elizabeth had just recently got a job at this prestigious law firm and was getting married to a very wealthy architect, and that she was so proud of her.

We all know you like Lizzy more than me, mother. She has always been your perfect angel.

When they finished their meal, Morgana quickly excused herself to put the finishing touches on desert. She had baked a moist chocolate cake – the one that her sister has always called chocolate heaven – and still had to place a few decorations on top. Baking was one of her favorite past times – the reason Jack had left for Taiwan with a couple of more pounds than he had originally planned. As she carefully placed the delicate chocolate butterflies onto the thick icing, she caught her mother carefully examining the apartment from the corner of her eye.

What is it now? The plants are in the wrong spot? The curtains too short? Or is the TV not centered?

She carefully brought the cake to the dining table. Her mother looked surprised as she saw the intricate decorations. Morgana cut two slices – careful not to hurt the butterflies. Her mother, naturally, asked for the smaller slice – she would never allow herself to look like Dotty from the country club. She complimented the cake – probably the first compliment her mother had ever uttered for her. But, of course, the curtains should be like snow, not eggshell – fits better with the ebony – and there should be a fern plant instead of a cactus – makes everything more sophisticated. As usual, Morgana tried not to show her disappointment.

Of course, nothing is to your liking, mother.

Her mother quickly started talking about Elizabeth again – how she was so excited to see her baby walk down the aisle looking like a princess and marry that ‘handsome gentleman’. She would hopefully have grandchildren soon, too. They would be a perfect beautiful family, and she would spoil her grandchild – hopefully a girl – rotten.

Lizzy doesn’t even want children, but I guess you just ignored her when she tried to tell you.

A quick glance at her watch, it was time for her mother to leave. She had always tried to be very ‘efficient with her time’, she claimed, although Morgana knew her mother simply did not wish to spend much time with her. Her mother whipped out another one of her fake smiles and said that they had talked for so long. It had barely been an hour. She quickly stood up, grabbed her fur coat – mink she claimed – and rushed to the door. Naturally, it had been great to see Morgana again – they should do this again soon. She briefly hugged her daughter – not even trying to hide her desire to finally escape this prison – and off she went.

We both know you hated every second of this – well, maybe not the cake.

Morgana strolled to the window and watched as her mother hastily left the building. She turned back towards the kitchen – a mountain of dishes awaiting to be cleaned – and sighed. That would take a while. She grabbed the first plate – her mother’s dessert plate. Her thoughts wandered back to her mother’s compliment. She wanted to be happy – had always wished to make her proud when she was younger – but she simply couldn’t bring herself to. Her mother had always criticized her every move – perhaps the compliment was some cruel form of sarcasm.

There’s no way it was genuine.

Morgana picked up her mother’s wine glass next. As she saw the scarlet lipstick on the rim, a surge of anger overcame her and she started to forcefully scrub at the stain, attempting to remove any trace of her mother from her apartment. The next thing she knew, crimson droplets decorated the sink and the remains of the wine glass. She sighed deeper, threw away the shards of glass and dressed the rather large cut that had formed on her hand. She would finish washing up tomorrow, she simply wished to rest.

She is so exhausting. It's like she sucks out all of the life in me.

As Morgana finally felt the comforting warmth of her bed, her mind wandered to her mother one last time. No matter the exhaustion, the disappointment and the anger she felt when interacting with her mother, they would always see each other again. They were family, after all. But first, she needed to regain her strength.

I'll see you at Lizzy's wedding, mother.

[back to contents](#)



manus manum lavat

photo: violet mathopoulos-vois © 2022/23

by julian moser

photo: violet mathopoulos-vois © 2022/23

The shadows of those empty bottles started deepened when mom finally started yelling at him. Again.

His name was Jordan, a 19-year-old school dropout, who had decided to make his living by dealing drugs – and spending his money on alcohol and marijuana. If only his mother ever knew. He told her that he was working for a construction company, day in, day out. He wasn't at home much anyway. Only on some evenings during the week, when he would enjoy a glass of wine at the dinner table.

And then there was his mother, Maria. A hard-working, determined, and tenacious lady, who had been working day and night to be able to care for her son. Being employed as a cleaning lady and simultaneously doing some hours as an assistant for a child with special needs at the local school, she tried everything to keep her little family together and grant her son a fulfilled life, a life full of opportunities. Jordan never got to know his father. He had left his mother and fled the country the moment he found out that she was pregnant – and took the easy way out.

It was raining cats and dogs that Wednesday evening. The sound of the raindrops hitting the tin roof ferociously sounded inimitable. Jordan was sitting at the dinner table when Mom finished work and entered the apartment after a long day at work. He never contributed to anything at home. He didn't cook, he didn't clean up, he wouldn't lift a finger. The only things he was good at, at least that's what Maria thought, was drinking, smoking, and making a mess. Sometimes she'd wonder what she had done wrong in educating her son, why she had been working so hard, having put everything she used to love aside. "Jordan," she screamed with her distinct harsh voice, "get your life together and DO SOMETHING." As always, he wouldn't care. He would just take another sip of his Seyval Blanc, stare at her and grin. This had happened repeatedly; everybody would lose count of how many times the same situation had

occurred. Only this time it was different. Although Maria loved her son, she just couldn't tolerate his behavior and bear his attitude and presence in the room any longer. "Get out of my house," she shouted. These were her last words. Jordan was scared stiff. He dropped his glass of wine, looked at her and almost whiningly asked: "Why, Mom?" She, on the other hand, still with a bitter, raw voice responded that she couldn't bear with his addiction to alcohol any longer and that both of them must pony up something in order to make living together feasible. It hasn't been easy for a long time. Maybe it was her exhaustion and tiredness speaking to her only child on that evening, she thought to herself.

Dead silence. Jordan was paralyzed.

After a couple of breaths, he got up, headed directly towards the fridge, took an empty bag, and filled it with all the remaining bottles of alcohol. Maria's whole body ached. Though, once again in a lame voice she added: "I love you, Jordan; but it needs the two of us to make living together possible." Maria felt stressed. Maria looked stressed. Maria was stressed. And after all, she was most distressed.

He didn't take any things with him when he left home – but his bottles of wine, of course. For the first time in his life, Jordan started to reflect on his demeanor and came to the realization that he may have to do and change something in order to give meaning to his so far miserable and pathetic life. Walking down the dreary and inglorious streets that surrounded their neighborhood, he started to remember a line when he had to read *The Great Gatsby* in middle school. Specifically, there was this one quote on his mind:

"First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you." – F. Scott Fitzgerald

Wandering in total solitude, Jordan started to ponder upon his mother. Was she right, after all? It seemed as if he comprehended that he just hadn't been the son his mother had wished him to be. He sat down at a beach by the ocean when he started to feel the waves tickling his feet as his mother would do with her soft-caring hands every other night when Jordan was a kid. As the darkest hours hit and he was still contemplating about life, his eyes locked on a family. The four of them were walking in this soft clear night. They seemed happy. They seemed as if they were the kind of family one would imagine when the concept of family crosses one's mind.

Again. Jordan turned his head and looked at the bottles of wine which had been placed right next to him. As he followed this family closely when they were strolling along the beach, his right hand grabbed the bottle and without hesitation he started to drink. And drink. And drink. The liquid courage crept down his throat and soon after envenomed his blood. Jordan was torn. He would never have a family like this, he thought. Hence, it was his conscious choice to fall back and drink.

He had learnt about the consequences of excessive consumption at school. He would just never picture himself being at this exact moment. Fair enough, he just wasn't there as often and as long as those normal teenagers his age.

After finishing the last drop of liquor he had brought, those shadows deepened again – metaphorically. He got up and headed right ahead towards the ocean. Jordan felt the water tickling his toes, his shins, his legs, his waist, his stomach, his chest, his neck, his head.

[back to contents](#)



my mom's daily visitor

photo: violet mathopoulos-vois © 2022/23

by andrea platzer

photo: violet mathopoulos-vois © 2022/23

On a Thursday afternoon, the sun cast long shadows as my mum stepped outside with a glass of sparkling wine in her hand. She waved to our neighbor, Kathrine, who came through the gate of our backyard with a second bottle of liquid joy in her hand. My mom had already opened the first one and set the outdoor table for the three of us. She poured Katherine and me a glass.

* glug, glug, glug *

Kathrine and Gemma have or had known each other since their childhood. They first met when Kathrine's parents moved into the charming, old, rusty orange, two-story house with moss green shutters in Reed Avenue. Our home bore less charm, since my great-grandfather had not even bothered to paint the exterior facade. The building was a big, ugly block with the outer layer of grey render still visible. My ancestors only followed the first two principles of good architecture: durability, and utility – beauty was dismissed. I was born into a practical-thinking family. Even though I was an admirer of beautiful things, I did not really care about our home's outer appearance. If my parents bequeathed it to us at that moment, my sister and I could sell it for a fortune, as real estate prices had reached astronomical levels. The size of the property played a crucial factor, while the building itself was worth nothing; buyers would tear it down and build something from scratch. They would ruin our beloved garden, utilize every square meter, and put another apartment complex with no personality in the rows of Reed Avenue. At least that is what happened to every single-family dwelling that was sold in the neighborhood to some real estate sharks.

Kathrine had also brought some olives, capers, and *pane caresau* from Italy. That is where she and her husband always went on vacation. As we were sitting in the garden, Kathrine told us how they had travelled from one Italian village to another, drank Prosecco from different regions and enjoyed their last days in Castiglione before heading home. When it was my

mother's turn to talk about her summer ventures, she described my parents' visits to grandma and to Greece. Crete was special to my parents because they had spent their honeymoon there.

I could not figure why they kept visiting the island since their marriage had been a farce for at least ten years now. They married young when my mother was expecting my sister at the tender age of 19. My parents had always insisted that they tied the knots because of love, but my sister had learned better and refused to believe. I used to find it laughable, but now I could only see it from a more sinister perspective. My presumption is that they never separated because they could not afford to buy each other's share of the expensive house. I once presented my mother with an article that said couples were more likely to stay together for the shared property than for the children, and she agreed. Since it was Gemma's childhood home, she could not bear the thought of selling it and neither could I.

Melanie, my older sister, had never been affected by our parents' fights the way I was. The reason was probably because I had always been more emotionally connected to both of my parents. Even as a child, my mother would complain to me about her husband's missteps and how he treated her. She told me how she used to go to dancing classes as a teenager and how he forbade it once they got married, for he did not want her to dance with other men. Or how he always insisted on going out at weekends while she had to stay at home with us. Now I could clearly see that it was not fair of her to put all her emotional load onto me. And to make matters worse, as I grew older, I realized how bitter she had become. Resentful towards my dad, constantly nagging, and always pitying herself when she was home alone. She became this sad 'blob' that pours herself a glass of red wine to 'sleep better' and lays in front of the TV as soon as she comes from work. Even if my dad was the reason Gemma cut ties with all her friends in her twenties, she now chose to stay lonely in her forties – my dad would not care anymore if she went out. Kathrine, with whom she shared her longest friendship, had always been there. Convenience was probably the central connector of their friendship. From the first rays of spring sunshine to the last warm ones in autumn, a neighbor would simply shout to the other, "You thirsty?" and they would share a bottle or two of bubbly wine in one of their gardens. Those were the times when Gemma felt happiness. Even though the best friends complained about their lives, on-and-off diets, and other neighbors, I was content to join them as it meant I got a break from the grumpy version of my mum. It felt good to see her in a better mood.

* pop *

Another bottle was opened. "How was the wedding?" Kathrine inquired after Gemma was done talking about her summer vacations. "Beautiful!" I exclaimed. "The venue was gorgeous, the bride stunning – her dress fit her like a glove – and the guests were relaxed and partied till dawn. Oh, and it rained! Even during the ceremony, but no one seemed to mind. The atmosphere was exuberant," I elaborated. Gemma added, "It was truly magical. The dress was perfect for her. Unique, just like her. You could see how happy she was when they danced all night." A fortnight ago, my sister got married. My mother always insisted how perfect they had been.

I loved my sister dearly, but anytime she spoke about her happiness, I felt pressure build in my throat. It had always bothered me how my mum rendered them as the perfect match. She would never say such things about my boyfriend and me. Were we not perfect? I mean, we did have our struggles and fights, but wasn't that normal? I looked down at my glass of wine and took a large gulp.

[back to contents](#)



caught in-between alone

photo: violet mathopoulos-vais © 2022/23

by **simone schwaiger**

photo: violet mathopoulos-vais © 2022/23

Once again, I got to that point.

At last, I entered my apartment.

I made my way to the kitchen. I didn't want to reach for it anymore – but rationally I cannot avoid it. Outwardly, it appears silent. Silence. Solitude. Stillness. Complete motionlessness; but deep inside it is ferocious. It cries out for me. It longs for me. It dominates me. I have always been such a strong character; physically as well as mentally – strong-willed, determined, muscle-bound and sometimes even defiant... but this made me weak... on almost all levels...

I was worried for a long time that someone might now see this weakness; however, at this point, I wouldn't even spare a thought! I walk further, further through the darkness of the kitchen straight to where my suffering began and where it usually ends...

... in the refrigerator, by the right compartment at the bottom – on the wine rack...

I don't know what happened? How could that happen?

The wine rack – a liberating and simultaneously threatening sphere, nestled within my beloved and deceptively, allegedly secure intimate privacy; toxic and redeeming – our relationship hasn't always been like this... those outwardly and seemingly so innocent and sweet old purple grapes, transformed into an insidious brew, awaiting me on the wine rack, alluring and lurking, not having always possessed me – years ago, I used to possess them. Our relationship has changed gently and gradually over the years. Slowly but surely, it has changed. Almost imperceptibly.

I don't know what happened. How could that happen?

I used to be tall, athletic, muscular, strong-willed, determined, and ambitious. I simply knew what I wanted, whether professionally or privately. I had numerous hobbies, many loyal friends, an exciting job, and a gorgeous, well-read wife.

We lived in an incredibly spacious house with a magnificent garden. I was financially secure, I earned well. I was attractive, popular, loved, admired, adored – even worshiped! I was successful, beautiful, and smart – I was simply an ultimate catch! I was the man every mother-in-law would long for and every woman could fall for. I had everything one could wish for and everything one could dream of.

However, besides all that there was something that enriched my life the most and made my heart burst with love – Eileen – the most wonderful daughter anyone could wish for. Eileen. My pride and joy – Eileen. We chose her name wisely; it means sunshine and that describes this unique human being perfectly – she is the personified sunshine. She beams with light and radiates warmth. No matter how dull, dreary and grey it is, Eileen always brightens up your day and manages to put a smile on your face with her cheerful nature. Just a simple glance at her deep-blue sparkling eyes and a fleeting eavesdropping of her voice and to her joyful laughter and you are suddenly entirely enveloped in sunshine; surrounded by unconditional love, warmth, and happiness. Eileen simply spreads cheerfulness; her bubbly manner not only brightens up your day, but it also paints a tranquil, blazing sunset in your soul, which simultaneously warms your heart. Forever.

I led a delighted, contented, and fulfilling life and nothing and no one could ever ruin that. No one! Never! Nothing! But really nothing?

What happened? How could that happen?

I had never been drinking excessively. Never. I have always been an extraordinarily regimented, health-conscious, and disciplined man. Sportive and disciplined men don't drink much. They simply don't. I only drank occasionally – now and then, as society expects of us; sometimes a beer after work with colleagues, a drink on a cozy evening in front of the TV, or a glass on a special occasion. A completely normal and unobtrusive relationship to the fateful liquid.

... but then it happened...

Monday. 14th November, 2022.

I was at work, chatting with my colleagues, a pencil in the right hand and a cup of coffee in the left. A simple phone call. A normal phone call. A perfectly ordinary phone call. One of those routine everyday phone calls that you just answer and would never think anything dreadful of it; but this time, a seemingly normal phone call changed everything. I felt like I had been struck by lightning. The cup of coffee fell out of my hand and broke into a thousand pieces; thousands of white shards on the floor, poured over with the dark, warm brew. With this cup, my life also shattered into a million tiny pieces, shrouded in the dark cloak of death. Death. Demise. Dead.

Eileen – my little radiant angel Eileen – died in a car accident; and with her a part of me died as well. Our sun has set. The light and the unconditional love in my heart were extinguished. My heart gropes in the new darkness; my joy is gone.

Since then, my life has been in shambles.

My wife and I separated. Unfortunately, we couldn't get through it; too immense was the pain of our loss.



the pearl necklace and the praying mantis

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by johanna breier

lyrics: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2023/23

I am late for work the alarm didn't go off at the time it should have I wonder what project my boss will assign me today but today there is no time for breakfast I just need to find my pearl necklace it's on the nightstand but fastening the necklace takes so long I have my keys my wallet time to go – Ah!

It did it again. This damn necklace, its stings hurt so bad, and I still haven't got used to it. But it's right, I have nowhere to go, and nobody's waiting for me. Does the necklace know that I'm alone? That I don't have to go to work? That nobody is waiting for me? It just feels so heavy round my neck, but I can't take it off, it's the only thing that reminds me of her, and of my old life. Anyways, I guess I do have time to have breakfast, some bread and jam will be the meal of the day. As a child, I had never really noticed how dark the forest is. Although the sun is already rising and the first rays of sunshine gently touch my skin, the forest out there still seems cold and dark. My mom put dog-ears into the dictionary every time she found a word she liked, *but I cannot stand them they just make a book look so ugly and used but I cannot fix it it comes back again I still can see the line where it used to be I have to flip it back and forth it's not working oh no it's ten already I need to hurry I have my necklace my keys my wallet – Ah!*

The necklace. It bites me every time I touch the door handle. And now it feels extra heavy on me. I can barely stand under its weight. I just wish somebody would take it off of me or at least help me carry the weight of this damn pearl necklace. It never seemed to be so heavy when my mother wore it. It just seemed like a normal necklace. But from the time I first wore it to her funeral, it just got heavier and heavier. Despite the occasional stings and its weight, I've worn it ever since. It reminds me of her. And there were times when I actually liked its stings and its weight. It gives me the punishment I deserve. But now our relationship has changed. Ever since I got to this cabin it has stopped me from leaving, from making her proud. Mama loved

this dictionary. She said it's from her father. Maybe I should have a look at it too. Grandpa had written his name in the upper left corner on the very first page of the dictionary. My mom added hers right underneath. The very first word in the dictionary is just an "a" since it is the first word of the alphabet and also a determiner. The list goes on with A1, A2, A3 and so forth, nothing new to find here. On the next page it says abaca, abacus, Abadan – abandon. *The necklace suddenly feels so heavy flip to 'b' avoid 'a' the necklace gets heavier by the minute my breathing gets quicker breaking point culpable demand disgrace expectations guilt loss regret remorse shame stress I cannot breathe the necklace is so heavy I need to go outside I need air I cannot stand up everything is so heavy Mom's crutch the door it's too far I cannot do this I don't want to handle this I don't want to think about this the door handle – Ah!*

It's never been so bad. I'm on the floor in crippling pain. A teardrop rolls over my left cheek. Everything is so quiet, so lonely, I can hear the teardrop as it reaches the floor. I know what the necklace wants, but I cannot provide that. I cannot deal with it. It's even more painful than the stings. I wish I could just go back to work and silence my grief in projects and meetings and business dinners. It worked so well when she was sick. But ever since the funeral, ever since I put on this necklace, nothing works anymore. The necklace finally seems to lift its weight off of me and allows me to get up again. I go back to the table. Abandon – to forsake completely; desert; leave behind. That's what I did to her. That's what the necklace wants to punish me for. I know that. I acknowledge that. I am reminded of that every single day. But I cannot change it anymore. It's done. She's dead, and I'm alone and miserable. I should have known better. She was always there. We didn't have much, but she somehow always managed to put dinner on the table, to provide, to be there. She was alone, just like me. I just wanted to make her proud. All that money, all that prestige, all the designer clothes and all the jewelry is useless now that she can't see any of it. I just wanted to make her proud. But I should have been there, I should have supported her.

My vision is blurry from the tears but through the window I can see something. It looks straight into my eyes. Is that a praying mantis? I need to take a closer look. I get up, run towards the door, step on the porch, and walk to the window on the left side of the cabin. The praying mantis is gone. But I am outside. I am wearing my pearl necklace, and I am standing outside. This time, it doesn't sting, it doesn't weigh me down. I am upright and outside. I am free.

[back to contents](#)



a fateful dream

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by anna eller

foto: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

The morning sun wakes me up; I am so dizzy that I can not even open my eyes. My tiredness makes it impossible for me to move and my headache is almost killing me. So, I decide to stay in bed for a bit longer and sleep in. It only takes me seconds to drop off and I start dreaming the most puzzling dream.

...

In my dream, it was Friday night, and I was in my bedroom, trying to decide what to wear for my night out. It was the red dress which caught my attention, as I found it was appropriate, so I put it on. I went into the bathroom and flat-ironed my long black hair until all my curls, no matter how small, had vanished into thin air. I put some make-up on and, of course, red lipstick, which suited my dress. Before I hopped into the cab, which I had called before to pick me up from my apartment, I grabbed my golden purse. As soon as I met up with my friends, we made our way into the city and to our favorite bar. Lots of people were already there dancing; as usual, we joined them. We had some drinks and a lot of fun. After hours of dancing, I was exhausted and wanted to rest a little, so I sat down at the bar. Soon after, a handsome young man came along and asked me to have a drink with him. I was thirsty anyway, so I agreed. Although he was not a native speaker and had troubles with the English language, we had a long, entertaining conversation and he told me that he had moved here from Spain not long ago and was still trying to meet people. We had a few drinks together and we laughed a lot. He looked like an open book. Hours passed while we were talking and as I looked around, I found out that my friends had already left. The bar was almost empty – only a few drunken guys were still there, ordering another beer. I decided to stay for a last drink with this stranger whom I really started to like. When I told him I was leaving soon, he asked me to share a cab as we were heading towards the same direction anyway. Why not, I thought and agreed to the offer. After having finished the drink, we went outside to look for a cab. Out of nowhere, a strange

feeling came over me. Everything looked different. The light from the street lamps was blurry and the words of my companion sounded as if they were coming from far away. Was there something in my drink? I couldn't hold on to that thought for long. In an instant, I blacked out.

I opened my heavy eyes after having heard a noise. I felt like I had heard a car door slam. It took me a moment to clear my head. It was not my cozy bedroom I was in. After moments of sheer confusion, I realized I was in an impersonal terrifying hut-like place, lying on a nondescript couch, surrounded by dust and spider webs, freezing to death without a blanket. The uninhabited room hadn't been heated for ages. A living creature would not choose to be there. A disgusting smell rose to my nostrils. I could not locate the source of the stench for sure, but it felt unmistakably as the smell of decay.

I tried to wrap my head around this weird situation I was in. It was a wild-goose chase. As my frightened gaze made its way through the filthy room, my eyes locked on a big open book on a wooden table in front of the only window. It looked like a dictionary. I raised my petrified body and moved it cautiously towards the book. I started turning the pages frantically. They felt cold and moist. Upon closer inspection, I noticed the dictionary was translating English to Spanish. My blood froze. That could not be a coincidence. My unfamiliar companion from last night must have brought me here. What had he planned? I could never imagine. I was certain that person would appear in any moment. With every passing second my anxiety grew. My gaze wandered past the book and out of the smudged window. Trees. Nothing but trees.

What seemed like a mystery to me was that until the moment I laid my eyes back into the hut, I had not noticed the torn pieces of paper on the wooden walls. I skimmed them hastily. They seemed like mantras and were impressing a strange reality on me. The written messages were along these lines: 'My hermit existence is a blessing', 'I have been looking for a retreat so long - now I have finally found it'. I felt brainwashed. Everywhere I turned my gaze, similar messages would materialise.

I heard a key in the door lock. I got goosebumps. My heart was beating terribly fast as my gaze turned towards the door. My body solidified.

...

I hear a loud voice. Someone is calling my name. My heart misses a beat as the shouts get louder. I try to match that voice to someone. I suppose the voice is my roommate's. I open my eyes. I am in my room. In my comfy bed. In a familiar environment. It was just a dream. Everything was a dream. Relief. Such a relief. The door opens and my roommate enters.

The moment I turn over to greet her I can see it clearly. It is not my roommate. It is the stranger from the bar.

[back to contents](#)

reverie

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by felix oberhollenzer

lyrics: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

My eyelids are heavy. I am covered in cold sweat. I try to open my eyes but realise they are already open, staring into nothingness. Is it still pitch black outside? It's normal for me to wake up before my alarm goes off but never in the middle of the night. I close my eyes again in an attempt to fall back to sleep, but, even though my body is completely exhausted, I can't. I thought spending some time at my family's old log cabin in the mountains, where I always used to spend my winter holidays as a child, would bring, at least temporarily, some peace to my mind. When I came here yesterday evening, it truly seemed as if time had stood still in this place for the past thirty years. The constant but light snowfall, the ice crunching under my boots, the smell of wood burning in the fireplace, the squeaky hardwood floor and the warm wool blankets on the sofa – everything, absolutely everything has remained the same. The fact that this nailless, screwless and glueless little hut made out of whole tree trunks has been built by the bare hands of my ancestors has always fascinated me. The moment I stepped over the doorstep, the time between my youthful past and my conscious present collapsed in a split second. It all evoked those distant, yet suddenly still crystal clear memories of some of the best days of my life. At the same time it was a painful reminder of the person I have become and of how much I have changed since then. I can't recall the last time I have felt anything that even remotely resembles the joy or excitement of those bygone, wonderful winter days. I've lost sight of who I am. I toss and turn, think of my contemptible existence, bury my face into my pillow, rethink of my contemptible existence, then toss and turn again. It's as if the silence is screaming at me. I guess four hours is all the sleep I will get this night; might as well get some work done.

Parting ways with the warm imprint of my body on the mattress, I slowly slide from under my comfortable covers and get on my feet. My head is pounding, and I feel like I'm not getting enough air. Must be the altitude. I tiptoe on the cold floor out of the bedroom, fetch some water and a pack of aspirin and head to my desk in the living room. After struggling for more than

five minutes in the pitch dark room with the tangled mess of cables to find the light switch of my desk lamp, I open my thick, 1992 edition of Black's Law Dictionary that lies in front of me on page 486. The fact that I deeply despised this book to death back in my college days should have warned me about the fatality of my career choice. Only a couple of years ago, I was still trying to convince myself that being an attorney is the career I had always strived for. Endless and painstaking studying, failing the Bar exam again and again, stacking up six figures of student debt, having to settle for \$8 an hour document review jobs for years, ungrateful clients, no days off for months. I was confident, without a doubt, that everything would be worth it once I had become a partner in my firm. Well, I've reached this supposedly life-changing and incredibly rewarding step towards the top of my career one year ago, and now I'm here, all alone and at my worst. I have no greater purpose or reason for being that drives me anymore. But I guess the world keeps turning, no matter whether one is keeping up or not.

I try to concentrate on the huge pile of documents that need to be drafted until Friday, but my head won't stop throbbing. "I really need to get some fresh air," I say aloud to myself, as I stand up and walk towards the entrance of the hut. I feel how I am getting dizzier and dizzier, my lungs are craving for oxygen as I rattle the door that should open outwards. Is it actually frozen shut? It wasn't that cold outside when I arrived here. Next, I try my luck on one of the small square windows that open inwards. I have trouble finding the window lever in the darkness. Now that I'm really awake, I start wondering. It suddenly strikes me how strange it is that absolutely no light shines into the hut. Wasn't the clear starry sky, which I'm not used to in the city, slightly disturbing me when I fell asleep yesterday? With anticipation I notice how the window gives in to my pulling, when suddenly a cold blast of ... *snow?* hurls my unprepared body forcefully to the ground, knocking the wind out of my lungs. I immediately feel the reflexive physical shock while I need some seconds to get my bearings, to realise what has happened and at the same time give way to the involuntary mental panic.

The hut has been buried by an avalanche overnight. My whole body is shaking. I feel my heart beating against my ribcage, while I am irrationally hyperventilating and sucking up what little oxygen is left in the hut. I pull myself together, stand up and dial the emergency number while nervously pacing back and forth in the little space available, waiting for an answer. "181, what is your emergency situation?" The female voice is met by a desperate mixture of screams and sobs, in which I quickly but thoroughly explain my plight and position. But all that comes back is 1, 2, 3, 4 seconds of silence before I shout "Hello" into the phone several times to no avail. Contrary to my expectations, I do not fall back into panic but remain calm in the middle of the literal storm, both physically and mentally. In the ever-increasing dizziness caused by the lack of oxygen, I sit back down on the edge of the bed, whereupon I experience the greatest epiphany of my life. Looking my fate in the eye, all the problems that have been tormenting me, occupying me so much, five minutes ago and that made me sink daily into an ocean of self-pity for the last half of my life have suddenly become completely trivial and meaningless. I have had the solution for all of them, literally in my own hand. I feel such a terrible yearning to live again, there are so many things I want to do, I desire to do, I want to experience. My body is slowly giving up, the light of the desk lamp that is still on begins to disappear under my closing eyelids.

The alarm bleats loudly. I jolt awake and suddenly my lungs fill with air. I look around the room cautiously. A beam of light shines through the windows and assaults my eyelids, a warm, yellow glow permeates the room. My neck hurts. Has the desk lamp been on the entire night? Have I been sleeping on my arm the entire time? Has this all been nothing but a dream?



alchemy in progress

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by julia sonnweber

lydia: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

It was the 21st of December 2022 – the day of the winter solstice. The longest night of the year was creeping upon the population of the northern hemisphere. But there was still at least half an hour left until the world was to be completely swallowed by darkness. I looked out of the fogged window, impatiently. A few lonely snowflakes fell silently on the ground. I came here so no one could disturb me during what I was about to do. My grandparents' little country cabin in the middle of the woods seemed like the perfect place to perform the ritual. All I had to do was to flutter my eyelashes and they would eagerly hand me the rusty key.

“Who are you anyway?” you must surely be asking. My name is of no importance but – of course – if you were to ask me in person, I would not deny you an answer. I am Lydia, a twenty-five-year-old college student. I am an art major and desperately trying to set foot in the brutal creative field.

“Then why are you freezing your legs off in this cold hut in the middle of the mountains if you could have stayed at home, cozily seated in front of your desk, painting something?” you might ask. To draw or not to draw, that is the question. You should know, I have been stuck in a creative rut for at least a year. Some of my fellow students refer to this as an ‘art block’. Now you know my tragic fate. My brain, my heart, my soul long for creative release. If drawing were the equivalent of breathing, then I would be suffering from dyspnea. I looked down at my tiny hands with my delicate fingers. “You truly have an artist’s hands!” my father would always say in reference to them. But these tools of creation had not painted in a long time. My fingers were spotless - disgraceful for an artist as we usually wear dried paint like a hunting trophy, reminding us of our recent creative excesses. Even the blisters I would always get after using my paintbrushes – which were so worn out that their splintered wood would push into my fingertips - had healed weeks ago. Father did not know about my artistic struggles – no one did. This was a battle I had to fight by myself.

Pale white light shone through the window. It lit up the dust floating through the air, making it look like tiny little fireflies. In front of me was a plain wooden table. The polished top was the only surface the receding light was able to illuminate. On a barely noticeable wooden stool sat a gigantic die made out of plush. I stared to my feet, where my backpack lay. My sketchbook and some drawing materials were sticking out of it. My head turned back to the fluffy gambling device. Isn't creating art like rolling a die? Sometimes you roll a three – resulting in something mediocre. Sometimes you roll a one, the weakest number – resulting in scrunched up paper and migraines. But there is always the possibility – one to six – to roll the masterpiece, the six eyes of the die.

A crow tapped its beak on the window and let out a blood-curdling caw. I flinched. A glimpse at my wristwatch revealed what was mirrored by the advancing darkness. Soon it would be time. After swiping away the cold sweat on my forehead, I reached into my backpack and took a book out of it. It landed on the table with a loud thud, not due to my anger management issues, but rather because it was heavy as a brick. With the palm of my hand I swept the dust away, only to reveal golden letters proclaiming “THE ART OF ALCHEMY”. I determinately opened the ancient book, laying out its contents in front of me like a predator its prey's intestine. The author included a short preface on the origins of the craft. Apparently, alchemy originated in Ancient Greece. During the Middle Ages, it was referred to as ARS MAGNA and it was written in Latin. Alchemists can be considered the precursors of modern chemists and pharmacologists. However, the craft was also seen as serving artistic endeavors.

Surrounded by shadows, I could hardly see the writings in front me. “This is the way,” I exhaled, and my warm breath filled the emptiness in front of my freezing face. The rule of transmutation – that is, Alchemy – is to trade something in order to receive anything of equal value. Through a spell, I was about to offer my left hand to receive the talent of Picasso. But when turning the pages of the book, my restless brain got overwhelmed with complicated formulas, transmutation circles, spells, instructions, et cetera. A third of the book was dedicated to a dictionary – Latin to English. This was the content I was looking for. Formulating a spell could not be that hard, right? All I needed were some key words and I would be able to figure the rest out by myself.

I froze and slammed the book shut in a whim. Only now did I notice the damp air. The old wood, which had been exposed to the seasons for many years, creaked eerily. Apart from that, I sat in silence and felt imprisoned by my own thoughts, my own actions. Was this the right thing to do? I opened the book again and stared at the following definition: “Alchemy is the art of metallurgy. It is founded on the quest for the stone of the wise, and it seeks for the ultimate technique for transforming raw metals into precious ones, such as gold.”

Is this not what art is about?

Transforming our raw thoughts into something beautiful on canvas?

“Alchemy is a process of transformation.” Thus, at its essence, art is an alchemical process.

I realized that I did not need any form of witchcraft or cheap tricks. Everything I needed was already at my disposal.

I grabbed my sketchbook and started drawing.

[back to contents](#)



soul full of words

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by hannah etzer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

His love for language made even the loneliest room feel exciting to him. Learning about new words in order to be able to describe the emotions he felt, the interactions he had and the wishes he dreamt about was something that filled him with both determination and satisfaction. And there he was sitting in his father's hut surrounded by rough mountains, their peaks seeming as if they could almost reach the clouds. Out here, he'd always felt as if he could see things a bit more clearly, almost as if the air up here washed away the haze that more than often covered his eyes.

He opened one of the windows for a short moment and went to himself a cup of coffee in the small kitchen. Earlier he had been using the dictionary that was now lying open on the table. When the young man came back into the room with the steaming coffee in his hand, he immediately noticed the work of the little breeze that had entered through the tilted window: it had turned over a couple of pages. He gazed at the two pages in front of him. One word in the upper left corner caught his attention. It was the entry *passion*.

'Passion...' the man thought, but then got distracted by an abrupt sound which seemed to be the window hitting its frame. He had to do some work, but somehow his thoughts always drifted away from his tasks and shifted towards the concept he had noticed earlier in the dictionary: *passion*.

That reminded him of a poem he'd stumbled upon a few weeks earlier, but the exact words kept escaping him. That was why he decided to look for the poem. The little piece of paper on which the poem was written must have been somewhere in the hut, but he wasn't sure anymore where exactly. He looked frantically under the pile of papers, but the piece of paper was nowhere to be found. Then, the young man approached the shelf on which there were many of his books and other belongings. He searched in the folder in which he frequently put things that he cherished but kept for when he would finally devote his time to look through them

properly. Once again, the piece of paper wasn't there. 'Hmm, okay. I'll surely find it sometime soon,' he thought to himself. All of a sudden, the piece of paper he had been looking for was there, lying on the floor right in front of his feet – it must have been somewhere in one of the books, and when he opened it, must have fallen out.

So, in his hands, he now held the piece of paper which said:

*In the midst of it all,
when your heart doesn't seem to beat as strongly for something
as it used to do,
close your eyes, breathe in,
breathe out and try to restart.
Return to yourself, listen to your heart to find out what's moving you
and hold onto it.
Inspiration will find you again, and passion will follow.*

He read the familiar lines once again; now, however, the words hit him much harder. Why did they resonate with him so much now? What was different? And in that moment, he realised something fundamental. When other artists created with colours, he had always been the one painting with words; now, he felt as if his colours had run out.

It was in that very moment that he took a pen and started to write again, months after the last time he had done so. The man wrote about not being able to find inspiration and about him feeling as if he was the one exuding negativity, when he had always been the one avoiding being surrounded by negative emotions. He wrote about having words at his disposal but not being able to connect them – similar to a painter wanting to paint in purple, having red and blue at hand but being unable to mix the two. He was writing excitedly, and when he finally stopped, he noticed that he still possessed the ability to turn thoughts and emotions into words, that he still possessed the ability to turn words into art.

The young man had been writing for a couple of hours, deeply absorbed in thought, and noticed that it had already got dark outside. But that was exactly his aim: to completely focus on his own emotions and be able to reflect without being distracted. That was the reason why he came to this hut every once in a while. After a day of reflecting on what moved him, he always felt exhausted and refreshed at the same time – exhausted because it wasn't always easy for him to completely focus on himself and refreshed because he enjoyed having the chance to tap into his emotions.

He was now sitting at the table looking around him. The dictionary was in front of him, opened on the table at its usual spot. He realised that his passion for language had never dwindled. It might have been that he was so distracted by everything around him that he hadn't really been able to focus and draw on that passion recently. A single line on the small piece of paper still echoed in his head.

*Return to yourself, listen to your heart to find out what's moving you
and hold onto it.*

It took him a couple of seconds to process this sentence once again. Then he looked down and saw that he actually already had the most important things that could inspire and fuel his passion: pen and paper. In that moment, he clearly saw that it was still there, his soul full of words.

[back to contents](#)

try again tomorrow

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by karin altenberger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

For hours he had been trying to look up this one specific word. It always had this special meaning for him, but still he never knew what it actually meant. He sat there, alone, as he always does, at his desk working his way through the books. The word should be right there, it must be! The sun shone brightly through the window illuminating his desk, but still; dark clouds circled his head as he sunk into the next book, irritated by himself and his lack of knowledge. Everything around him seemed to be lit up by the sunlight of a bright day in spring, but still; it felt dark around him. He had no time to lose, his obsession with the word grew as time went by. The ticking of his clock grew louder and louder. The words in the books started to become a blur. Each word looked the same and none of them could satisfy his need. He felt lonely, stressed, in fear. He needs to find the word; he just must. There is just no way around it, he must find it. There is no way to stop before he finds it. He has no other chance. The word has to be found.

Suddenly, his phone shattered the silence around him, tearing him out of this endless spiral. Suddenly from his thoughts, it took him a second to realize what was happening. Without a second thought he automatically reached for the phone: “Hello?” “Hey, it’s me!” her voice rang through the device. His mood suddenly changed; he swiftly took stock of his surroundings. It felt as if he had stepped out of a black maze he had been trapped in for hours before. He felt like someone had pulled away a black bag from his head and suddenly he could see what was happening around him the whole time. The room felt bright and warm, and he felt happy, in peace. The word was suddenly forgotten, it did not matter anymore. The only thing that mattered in this moment was her. “Hey, are you still there? How is your day going so far?” she asked. In an instant he was transported into another world. Her voice made him feel safe. He was not alone anymore. He was happy. He didn’t even think of his former obsession. Just hearing her voice changed his mood, his day, his life. “Still knee deep into your books?”

she finally asked, steering his thoughts back to the word he was looking for. “Yes, I am still looking for THE word. But I haven’t found it. Not yet!” “How come you are so determined to find this word, why don’t you just let it go? It doesn’t matter what the word means. It doesn’t matter what books say about it. It doesn’t matter that you can’t find it. The only thing that matters is what it means to you. Anything else is not important,” she added. He thought about it for a moment. What would he do if he stopped searching for it? What if he just forgot about it? “Maybe you are right, I should just let go of it,” he moaned. “Oh, really? Wow, so I wanted to ask you whether you would like to go out with me tonight? Get some dinner and drinks and just have a great evening. Now that you’ve let THE word behind you, we should celebrate! I’ll pick you up at eight. See you later, bye!” And with that she hung up the phone.

He sat there thinking about what had just happened. The room was so quiet. The last rays of sunlight shone into the room and warmed his face. The table was filled with several opened books and clustered paper. The clock struck three and the radio in the back started to play a familiar song. He felt free. He was looking forward to this evening with her. Eating dinner, having some drinks, just talking to her, having fun, and living a normal life. Maybe she was right, it only mattered what it meant to him. He shouldn’t care about what is written in the books.

Today is the day my quest ended, and I can finally start a new life.

He was very excited to meet her, and he felt like she had freed him from his cage. The word didn’t matter any longer. She made him feel alive and alert. As the evening went by and the time had come to say goodbye his feelings crawled in from all around him and he felt like something was swallowing him up and he thought by himself: “It is okay, I will have to try again tomorrow!”

[back to contents](#)

sing me what I need

by lisa maria oberhofer

“You’re just a sad song with nothing to say”
(Disenchanted by My Chemical Romance)

Today the letters are spelling out a sad song, and I, in turn, feel their sad notes tugging at my heart. I long for yesterday’s song which was full of happy words and uplifting metaphors. But today, the letters are not willing, or perhaps not able, to provide me with an uplifting message. The songs have always come easy to me – one look at the letters and I can immediately tell you what today’s song is about. I have been told that the letters don’t speak to other people the way they speak to me, and that makes me sad, since I cannot imagine a world without the letters and their songs. The music has been there for as long as I can remember, but I learned very early on that the letters speak to me and only me. When I was younger, I attempted to explain the letters and their songs to other people, convinced that everyone should be able to experience the beauty they provide. My attempts at showing the letters to other people were fruitless, however, and the adults in my life chalked up my excitement to a child’s overactive imagination. As I got older, I stopped trying to show the letters to other people, quickly realizing that once you reach a certain age, people tend to stop replying with the gentle amusement reserved for a child’s wild ideas and rather start replying with the tentative concern reserved for people whose mental health they determine to be rather fragile. For a while, I worried that the letters and their songs might vanish from my life when I grew up, but as of today they are still here, strong as ever.

I trace today’s letters and try to decipher how their song came about. It feels sad, but not in a grieving or depressing way. Rather, it feels melancholic, like blankly staring at a wall for hours after a devastating event, unable to fully process the flood of emotions that come with such a shock to the system. The songs often reflect the state of my life at the time, and this one is no different. The tune and mood of the songs don’t necessarily just reflect events in my personal

life, but often events affecting the whole world. Months upon months of world-wide tragedies have built up to the point where every new day seems like an impossible challenge and every passing second feels like it is bringing the whole of humanity closer to our inevitable doom. It's an all-encompassing feeling that no matter what we as a whole or I as an individual do, the end is inevitably approaching and there is absolutely nothing that can be done to soften the blow or cushion the impact of that fatal strike.

Hopelessness and anxiety burrow themselves deep in my chest, making it seem like I am being crushed by a heavy weight that makes breathing nearly impossible. I can feel my hands starting to sweat as my heartbeat speeds up. The impending panic attack is almost unavoidable, but I am determined to make it through. I count five things I can see: the white wall, the wooden floor, the cloudy sky outside, the tiny sparrow fluttering through the air, the pen in my shaking hand. I continue with four things I can touch: the rough denim of my jeans under my damp fingers, the smooth surface of the table, the hard plastic of the chair, the cool metal of the bracelet on my left wrist. As my heartbeat slowly but surely calms down again, I count three things I can hear: my own shaky breathing, the faint sounds of a neighbor moving around in their apartment, the soft pitter-patter of the rain outside. Two things I can smell are easy to list: the citrusy notes of household cleaner and the garlicky remnants of a semi-successful cooking experiment. And lastly, one thing I can taste: the extra-strong minty chewing gum I keep here precisely for situations like this one. The intense flavor usually helps with shocking my body and brain out of a panic spiral and back into reality. Taking a deep breath in through my nose and out through my mouth, I glance back at the letters. They seem almost sheepish, as if trying to apologize for nearly causing a panic attack, but the song remains unchanged. Still melancholic, still hopeless, still a sad song with nothing to say.

But it isn't always like this. Just yesterday, the letters provided me with a happy, uplifting song that inspired me to finally drag myself out of the apartment and take a walk to the nearby park. It's nearly spring, and the first brave flowers are tentatively shoving their heads through the rough soil battered by a cold and harsh winter. I wandered around the park aimlessly, taking in the beauty of the resilient buds of flowers determined to leave the struggles of the long winter behind them and embrace the warm awakening of spring with all their might. Yesterday's song had managed to fill me with hope that maybe, just maybe, not all was lost and that there was perhaps still a way to turn things around to get to a happy ending. Well, maybe not a *happy* ending, but at least a moderately agreeable ending. Today's song is a stark contrast to that feeling. Hopelessness and fear are familiar enough to almost feel comforting at times, whereas hope (or God forbid, happiness) feels so foreign it's almost scary. What if I was wrong to hope for a better outcome yesterday? What if today's song is right and there is no point in trying anyway? But... what if yesterday's song was at least partially right? What if today's sad song is just a small step back in what is otherwise a journey forward?

And so, I stare at the letters once again, trying to determine what they are telling me, trying to determine how to go on.

[back to contents](#)

the blanket

by miriam prosser

“Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, you have been talking about it for such a long time now, but there is no coming back afterwards,” she said to herself and mumbled *no coming back*, repeatedly, over and over again. “How did I even end up in this situation again?” she thought and tried to remember the beginning of the end of an era.

I am pretty sure we all felt stuck at some point in life. Constantly feeling the need to escape somewhere or to a moment, we felt different. We felt happy. *Happiness*. Going to bed for a chance to dream about those happy memories instead of chasing them in real life. But what had kept her from pursuing them was the fear of missing out on moments with her loved ones. She had already lost so many of her family members, so she promised herself not to be absent that much, as she might miss a precious moment. But then there was this other fear of missing out.

Missing out on the life she had always dreamed of – travelling the world. Of course, she was travelling, but she had mostly thought of making a solo trip – Eat, Pray, Love style – but life went in a different direction. She had finished her studies, started working in her dream job and been with the person she thought she was meant to be with. She also lived at home and thought of creating her own space there. Everything was planned. Stiff and dry. She felt trapped. When she was overwhelmed with negative feelings, she hid behind her bedsheets and tried to escape into her dream life. Just a dream away. That one place. It was a place where she felt safe, where she felt at peace and at home. A place where she could just be herself and not have to worry about all the sorrows and sadness of life. Sadness has always been a big part of her life. When she was just four years old, she lost her father to cancer, and by the time she was 18, her family was just half as big as it used to be. People grow old and die. That is the circle of life, of course, but she had never imagined that it would hurt so much, that she would still be able to cry whenever she thought about those last memories she had of those loved ones who had left her—those who had left too soon.

She tried to fit into society, but she always struggled as she was never the talkative one, the pretty one or the one everyone liked. She was edgy, but that was what people always told her that they liked the most about her – that she was different. Though she never wanted to be different. She just dreamt of a life everyone else around her had. As life went on, she passed the various stages of life, she fell in and out of love, lost friends whom she thought would be there forever, but when she was left behind by someone, that was the hardest to deal with for her. She repeatedly returned to the five stages of grief, but she was never able to reach the last one. *Acceptance*. Denial, anger, bargaining and depression were involved in her life constantly.

After having spent time in the depression stage and having spent some time crying, she then always felt the need to reinvent herself in her mind going into the acceptance stage. Colouring her hair or trying out a new style. Sooner or later, she went back to being just as she used to be and felt OK with it. But recently, she had found a new way of coping. She tried to be OK with her sad self for some moments but then come back and only look on the sunny sides of life. She had come a long way and was happy that she had finally found a way she could deal with her feelings correctly. Was that finally the stage of acceptance? Her sad self had moved in the background. She felt happier.

“Your cousin died last night. Her family was with her, and in the end, she was at peace with her illness,” her mom told her one morning. She was broken. She left the room and went straight back to bed, to hide behind the blanket, wanting to dream of the reality she had previously escaped to so well. It took her days to leave her safe space and return to work. Even though she was not close with her cousin, the fact of losing yet another family member to cancer was something she could not deal with right now. *She was at peace with her illness*. How? How was her cousin able to make it to the stage of accepting, and she could not? She knew that if she wanted to overcome this big wave of sadness, she would have to do more than just hide behind her sheets and dream away into her fictional reality. She would just have to do it. There was also the fact that she finally accepted that she never went through all five stages of grief. She had always circled around the four ones, never making it to acceptance. But before that, she would have to come back to her happy self. One final reinvention, but this time, she would do it right.

Therapy. Although it is common to get help if something does not seem right in one’s body, it feels like doing something illegal when going to therapy. Like having committed to something no one should know but would be so important to talk about. Something most of us would need but only part of us commits to. Feeling embarrassed, since going to therapy is still seen as a taboo in most circles of society. I am pretty sure that most of us might have gone through a traumatic event in life, or even more. Deciding on going to therapy is not an easy step, but a necessity when suffering or having suffered from so much pain. It feels as if someone lifts a burden from your shoulders as if there is someone who helps you carry that heavy backpack up that mountain you always wanted to reach the summit of.

And so she did it, and she was happy to stand on top of that mountain. She was able to accept the fact that there are things in life an individual is unable to change, that people come and go and that she is not alone and never will be. There was no going back, and she was happy that she had made it. Talking to a therapist helped her mark the end of an era. The start of a new life. Nevertheless, she sometimes would still hide behind her blanket, as the comfort of her warm sheets reminded her of all the warm hugs she had received from her loved ones who had already left.

[back to contents](#)

the power of letters

by julia thaler

“Is everybody ready? We are leaving in five minutes,” my dad shouts into our hallway, and then he turns back to me. “Don’t worry sweetie, you don’t have to wait much longer. I just quickly go to your room and grab your things.” And just like that I am alone in the kitchen and wait until someone comes and helps me get outside. Mom comes into the kitchen, with a ton of make-up on her face and with a very elegant jump suit. “Mom, you do know that we are only going to grandma’s over the weekend, right?” I say with an ironic voice. “Yes of course, but one must always look nice because you never know whom you going to meet,” answers my mother. I expected that answer because she is always very stylish and likes to take care of her appearance. I always get the feeling that she is a little bit disappointed in me because I never care about my appearance. I think that clothes don’t have to be pretty, they must be comfortable. Of course, my mother completely disagrees with that. I even feel that she thinks I am not as attractive after the accident as before. Interrupting my thoughts, Alex comes around the corner and gives me a big smile. “Are you ready to start our weekend trip?” he asks in such an exciting way that one could mean we are going on vacation. Alex takes my wheelchair, rolls me to our car and helps me get inside.

Then he goes back to the house to grab his things. Once again, I am just waiting for my family to come. I watch my dad handling his, my mother’s, and my luggage while herself just walks past him and takes a seat in the car. My dad has just been so helpful and caring since the accident. As a teacher it was easier for him take some time off and take care of me than it was for my mom, who is a successful businesswoman in a big firm in the city. It has always been my dad who watched us. During our childhood, I always remember that dad played with us and that he was the one who watched us more often than our mom, Susan. Mom sometimes mentions that she is not a typical mother who enjoys being at home, but rather someone who is happy to work full-time and does not have to look after us. Obviously, now with Alex being 15 and me being 13, we do not need someone to stay at home and watch us after school.

However, after the accident dad started to work fewer hours because, since then, I've been in the wheelchair and for that reason he does not want me to be at home alone. What he did almost right after the accident was try to think of something that could become a new passion for me. It took me rather long to accept that I can never be a dancer, which I had always dreamt of, but my dad never gave up on me and always found new things for me to try out. One day he found the perfect new hobby, and I discovered a new-found love of letters and of the alphabet.

Finally, we are leaving our driveway behind and set off to our one-and-a-half drive to my grandparents. As we are speeding down the motorway, I watch my family members closely. Alex seems to be always happy. But as soon as he has his earphones on, he is in his own world and one can see how devastated he is when he looks at me. He tries to hide it in front of me, but when he thinks I am not looking, I can see the expression on his face. We have always been very close. As a child he was my protector and looked out for me all the time. He always stood up to me when someone said something mean. It made him furious that he could do nothing for me when we had this accident and the fact that he came out of it unscratched. He often mentioned it should have been him, the one sitting in the wheelchair, not me. However, I think it is not that bad that I am the one because Alex has a great sports career in front of him. He is the best rugby player in school, and he is planning to make a living out of it. I am also happy that mom and dad had no injuries at all because mom would be extremely devastated if she had to be in a wheelchair and if she were unable to display her flawless appearance to everyone else. And I could never ever picture dad in a wheelchair! For me he is the most important person in the world because I could never be more thankful to him for how he cared for me after the accident. His determination to find me another hobby and to make me happy again astonishes me till today.

When looking back, I can remember exactly the day I found my new hobby. After the accident, I didn't want to go outside. I just wanted to stay inside. All of my bedsheets had famous dancers on them, and I couldn't bear to sleep or even look at them. For a month I borrowed Alex's bedsheets, the rugby-themed-ones. When dad realized it, he insisted on buying new ones. The moment I entered the store, I saw white bedsheets with fancy letters of the alphabet. I liked their simplicity, and I also liked the way the letters were set on the fabric. Those were the ones I was going to take back home. After arriving home, dad and I sat in front of the computer and googled everything that had to do with letters. Letters fascinated me and day after day I was getting more into their intrigued pattern, their infinite combinations. I even registered for a spelling contest in my school and at the first attempt, I was the winner. Since then, I find pleasure and happiness in competing against others in spelling contests and my life is brighter. For me, the letters of the alphabet mark a beginning to a new, fulfilling life with a lot of challenges, but definitely not a life less livable.

[back to contents](#)

man of her dreams

by barbara wachtler

She is euphoric. Not long until she will see him again. Her love. Her life. Her everything. She did not see him last night. Why, she does not know exactly. She tidies up the bed, shaking the pillows. A quick dinner. Under the shower. Off she goes into the darkness – the pillows feel softer than usual. *What would I give to not have to wait for him. To be with him regardless the time of the day. As for now, I am just excited to see life as it was and could have been with him.* She can see his silhouette. That great figure of his standing in front of her, beside her. She would know this man from every angle, in every light, from afar, and from up close. Suddenly, she is put in the middle of a familiar scenery. Taking her hand, he leads her up the driveway. Their driveway. She remembers the driveway from the last time she saw him. Back then, there was only the driveway. A few trees on either side and an apple tree on the wide lawn. The apple tree had been their dream since they first started to plan their home. For her, it symbolized the beauty of new beginnings; for him, the apples were a symbol of seduction. What would she give to seduce him right now. But it is not up to her – he decides what is about to happen next. In front of her now, a cottage. Was it not a row house the last time she was here? Never mind. Warm light shines through the curtains onto the small path they are standing on. She loves this sight. She loves him. So much. Her hand is still entwined with his. She remembers feeling his hand in hers. His strong hand. She could stand here like that forever. Why doesn't she? She knows why but she does not allow this thought to come up entirely. It is too risky and too soon.

His hand withdraws from hers. At exactly the same spot it did the last time they met. She wants to stop it from happening but can't. She knows what comes next. He leads the way into the cottage – former row house. She follows him, excited to see their world. The last time he opened the door, she saw their old apartment in front of her. Every single picture they had framed was on the exact spot. Precisely where they had decided to place it. Pictures from a time that had long been over – not that long to be precise, but it feels like an eternity. Next to the pictured wall, their dinner table. She loved that table so much. It was the place where she

first ate something that he cooked for her. One of his many hobbies. Her favorite cook. But right now, the inside of the transformed-row-house-now-cottage offers a different view. She is taken back to the place of their first vacation together when they went to the mountains. The cozy interior of the cottage immediately feels like home. Different to their first one but still home. Where does that feeling come from? In the corner, a Christmas tree – wasn't it just August? Doesn't matter, she enjoys the scent of cinnamon and fir. No wonder he led her into this scene – he loves Christmas so much. Loved. No, he still loves it.

She comes closer to him, but something shoves itself between them. The little curly-head she had already seen during their last meeting. She didn't get a chance to inspect it any further, though, because time was up. Today, however, she is offered the chance to observe the scene in more detail. There seems to be an unspoken familiarity between curly-head and him. Without hesitation, curly-head jumps into his arms and is being lifted to his shoulders. Around the Christmas tree they go. She smiles. The scene reminds her of a former dream. A dream she had dreamt when there was no need to wait for him to appear. When he would walk through the door at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Once more, she is being surprised by him. He has always known what it is that she likes to see. He builds their world one step further every time they see each other. Each piece that he has added over time has a special place in her heart and she cherishes all of these little pieces equally.

The first time she met him like this, he was just standing in front of her. Blackness surrounded him, but he was dressed all in white. She tried to approach him but couldn't. Every time she reached out for him, he would simply distance himself. One step forward, one step back. Just the same as with Tantalus in hell. The second time they met, she managed to grab his hand. Although she couldn't see his face, his hand against hers felt more real than anything she had felt in a long time. Then, as time progressed, he added more details to their world every time they saw each other. He was able to offer all the things he wasn't able to back then. All of the things that they had been discussing for so long. Today, he even managed to create a more detailed scene for her with curly-head. He opened a door to all the feelings that she had been longing for so long. How often had they talked about curly-head? She doesn't know exactly – must have been a million times.

She joins her two loves. The one she knows so deeply and the one she doesn't know at all but would very much have liked to. Her alarm goes off. It is time to say goodbye. Make it short and painless. Eyes open. He is gone. She is euphoric, nevertheless. Excited for what he will surprise her with tonight. When she hopefully sees him again. In her dreams.

[back to contents](#)

living under Orion/we grew so cold

by isabella lonsing

“For the last time, stop following me!” Brianna says through gritted teeth as she hurries along the dimly lit street. Her fingers clench around her brand-new phone, her knuckles turning white from the force of it. Her head swivels around, her eyes dart from the bright streetlamps to the dimly lit shop windows lining either side of the otherwise dark stretches of street. She’s alone. No threat to be seen. Nothing to be heard. Just her rasping breath and her boots hitting the wet pavement.

Suddenly, a tinny voice breaks the hushed silence. Her whole body jerks and stiffens, “Brianna? Babe, what’s happening? Who are you talking to? Is someone bothering you?” Her body relaxes as she recognizes her girlfriend’s voice and she lifts the phone to answer, “There’s someone behind me. He’s been following me since I left the club. I can’t see him right now, but I know he’s still there. You know, the guy, the creep.” She thinks back to the man and the way he’d looked at her, leaning against the counter, hands crossed in front of his body. The light had shrouded him in shadows, but she had recognized the look in his eyes, the way he was fixated on her body not deterred by anything. The security guards had been useless, as usual, so he had disappeared only to reappear hours later.

“Honey, you know I always want what’s best for you and of course I believe you but... you see ghosts everywhere. I want to help you, I do, but I need you to work with me. We don’t live in some fantasy world, danger doesn’t lurk around every single corner, waiting to obliterate you!” her voice rises an octave and her words come faster and faster. “It’s okay to relax, to let your guard down to—,” Brianna interrupts angrily, her voice echoing down the street, “I don’t have time for your stupid spiel right now!” With a frustrated growl she shoves the phone into her jacket. She opens her handbag, rummages in it until she feels cold hard steel touching her skin. Its weight is still familiar and comforting, even after all these years.

She takes one final deep breath and whirls around in a burst of motion – gone is the soft woman who loves delicate things and exudes warmth and positivity. The daughter who loves spending her evenings cooking and curling up in front of the fireplace with a book, a nice blanket, and her cat Sparkles.

Brianna waits, facing the dark street, her body coiled and tense.

An eerie calm wraps around her like an expensive winter coat, shielding her from the cold. It surrounds every part of her and urges her to move, whispering in her ear, "It's been too long. I have missed you. It is time."

She waits. One breath. A second one. A third. A rat scuttles along and crosses the street as it notices her. Water drips down a drainpipe. The moon shines down on her and bathes her in its light. No stars illuminate the sky.

In the distance a figure appears around the corner, no feature other than its outline distinguishable, but she is certain: This is the man from the club, and he is coming for her. But she won't back down, not this time. No more hands down her body, no holding her down, shushing her, humiliating her, telling her that "violence is never the answer, don't you know, honey? People could get hurt, and you wouldn't want that, would you? Look at you, wrapped in your fluffy blanket, you couldn't hurt a fly!" Rage boils in her stomach, her muscles clenching, preparing for a fight.

She could still run; there's enough time and she has always been a fast runner. At home she could make herself a nice cup of tea, put on her favourite TV-series and relax.

The man advances, Brianna remains motionless.

She could feed her cat, call her therapist, maybe even chat with a friend. Or she could go to her mother's house. It's late but she could use her key and tomorrow morning she would be welcomed with a stack of warm blueberry pancakes. And together they would laugh about the "silly little scare last night". But even as she contemplates her options, she knows it's too late, the choice has been made. Her past has caught up to her. Today, violence is her answer.

She bursts into a sprint towards the man. In less than a full breath the remaining distance is covered. The man jerks back, surprised by the sudden movement, by her fighting back and standing up for herself and all the women he had harmed before her. As her first kick hits him, he spurs into motion, starts trying to punch her and intimidate her. But she won't fall for his tricks. Won't be manipulated by sweet little nothings. Something cold and wet lands on her cheek. A raindrop. Her momentary distraction allows the man to land a hit. Pain blossoms from her gut and spreads outwards as she stumbles back. She clenches her teeth, grips the knife in her left hand and storms forward. Steel meets skin. Cold meets warmth. The blade paints his face red, a stark contrast against his white skin. The threat is not yet eliminated so she advances again, and again, and again.

As she regains control of her body, she is kneeling on the ground, leaning over the man. Her hands are hot, the skin of the man is cold. Everything is wet. Wet and cold.

Brianna spreads her hands and moves her fingers one by one. They don't feel like they belong to her. Gradually she faces the man in front of her: She inspects his brown leather dress shoes, his marine suit trousers, darkened by the rain and dirt. His dress shirt is no longer white. No, wait, that's wrong, he wasn't wearing...

His chest is no longer rising.

The calm subsides, a cold horror chokes her and takes hold of her whole body. She wants to start sobbing, screaming, calling for help but all she can do is remain locked in her position and desperately clutch the man's bloody clothes with her freezing hands.

In one final act of desperation, she lifts her eyes to his face, only to confirm her suspicion: the man lying in front of her is a complete stranger.

[back to contents](#)

under compulsion

by laura stöckler

I can feel my heart rate getting up. Only a few more participants left until it is my turn. My palms are sweating, and my legs are feeling like jelly. But no time for weak nerves. I must perform. This is the most important race this season. My thoughts are running wild.

Some people follow weird rituals and routines in order to feel safe. I remember reading somewhere that this can actually be a good thing because it can provide you mental support and make you feel more secure in whatever it is that you do. It can be something very useful for athletes because it gives them an opportunity to calm their nerves and offer them something steady and consistent that they have already known from prior competitions and trainings. However, one always has to know one's metes and bounds. Which is something my uncle didn't know. He had an obsessive-compulsive disorder, which forced him into doing certain things in order to feel safe. What does it even mean to feel safe? Anyway, it got worse and worse to the point where his compulsions and restraints got out of hand. At one point he did not eat for a whole week because he thought his whole family would die otherwise. I remember a talk we had about a week before he... well, before he ended his life. I remember the exact words he used, although it has been over ten years already. I remember his pale face with its lifeless expression when the words came out of his mouth. "Sometimes I wonder what else I have to do in order to satisfy it."

At this point I hadn't understood what his mental illness exactly was. My mum kept telling me he is ill and I should not overthink the things he said, which actually resulted in the contrary - I became curious. "What do you mean?" I asked, tearing him out of his thoughts. "It always wants me to do things I don't want to," he responded. Over the years, I might now have gained some sense of understanding of what he was going through at that time. It might have been some inner voice, some kind of demon inside of him telling him what to do. Or perhaps it could have been just another form of an alter ego development that at some point got out of

hand and grew beyond him. Whether he had given it a name, I don't know. What I know, however, is that he was fully possessed by it.

At that time, I overheard a conversation between my mum and my aunt, who was weeping bitterly. She said something along the lines of him not being able to live his life anymore. He would refuse to eat, sleep or do anything fun. She couldn't recognize him anymore, asking herself who the person she once was so in love with had become. I had also realized something was a little off a long time ago. His hair had rapidly become thin and greyish. When he was younger, he had a round face with rosy cheeks that have sunken and become ashen. He looked very thin, not to say undernourished, as if he would physically break into pieces as soon as he stood up. Whenever we went to visit my aunt and uncle, he was sitting in his chair in the living room, staring at a blank wall. When he recognized us he faked a little smile and then mumbled something that nobody could ever properly make out. Sometimes it seemed to me that he was counting something or repeating some words in a certain order. After some time, he would stand up, say he would be back soon and go to his bedroom. When I was a child, I remember almost being a bit afraid of him, for he never really cared about me or my siblings. He and my aunt never had any children. The only connection between us was our shared love for snowboarding. I only have washed-out memories from our days on the slopes together when he taught me how to make turns and encouraged me to never quit. This, however, is exactly what he did. I remember the winter he suddenly didn't turn up anymore, passing all responsibility to my father to teach me the correct technique. However, it wasn't the same.

When I grew older, I tried my best talking to him from time to time, trying to get through to him. And there were moments when I managed to do so. I saw it in his eyes. I saw a slight flickering in his eyes when I told him some stories from school, from snowboard competitions or about boys. He barely ever talked, but I knew, I could just feel that he was listening closely to my stories. This is why I was quite surprised at first when he sought conversation with me the week before he left us. I knew it was my turn to listen for I felt like he wanted to get something off his chest. He then seemed very clear in his choice of words. "Should it ever visit you, get help," he said with his eyes wide open. When I asked him what he meant by *it* and whom I should contact he just whispered: "don't keep it to yourself. Don't keep it private."

Suddenly my pulse is getting down again. Out of nowhere I can feel a stream of confidence flowing through my body, almost like somebody is giving me a pat on the back saying 'you got this.' Somehow, I feel my uncle's presence as if he was standing right next to me, giving me that warm feeling of safety. Safety. There it is again. I know I'll be safe because I have been warned by him. I will not end up like him. I will not let something bad take control of myself because I will not keep all my problems to myself like he had done. I will be able to fight any challenge coming up my way, and in this very moment, the challenge right in front of me: the slope, threateningly, but at the same time breathtakingly steep. I can hear the starting signal. Beep. Breathe in. Beep. Breathe out. Beep. My thoughts are as calm as they have ever been.

[back to contents](#)

unbroken

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by veronika breski

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

I know I must go. While it seems that I make her happy, I know that I am the person bringing out the worst in her. I know I am the one at fault for her to be in this overall unhappy state, unable to move on and become happy again. I know that she loves me. But I know that she hates me as well. She does not know why. Maybe she feels that something is off about me. Still, we hang out and spent most of our days together.

Anna is my world. When I told her that, she laughed it off and told me to stop joking around or she might actually believe it. Little did she know the truth uttered with these words. I wish she would never know just how much truth lies in these words. When she cries tears of sorrow, I perceive her feelings as if they were my own. When she laughs in a manner that made her voice sound like the bells of a small chapel, my heart feels like it could burst from happiness at any moment. She is my world; whatever she feels, I feel.

My Anna never fails to mention how handsome I am whenever we meet. Apparently, and of this she will assure me very frequently, I look like a model or some kind of God. That is also the reason why I cannot meet her friends. She is afraid that meeting me would make them jealous of her and that they would stop spending time with her. I do not care about making other friends besides her. She is everything I need.

Also, she does not want me to accompany her to her therapist. She said that for some reason neither her therapist nor her parents like it when she starts talking about me. They would tell her to stop meeting me, but she would always fight for me and tell them that I was the best thing that ever happened to her. I tell her then that I would be okay with it, if she decided to put herself first. And she assures me that she would never do that, because she holds me dear.

Longingly I stare outside the window. Despite her always reassuring me that we would be friends for as long as we are alive, I cannot help but notice that today is an extraordinarily rainy day, even though the sun is shining from time to time. The last time it was raining so heavily, was when we first met at a bus stop somewhere in London. I cannot remember what I have been doing before, but I remember the first time I saw her.

It was late at night and we were all alone. “Stupid weather,” she cursed under her breath and I agreed saying: “Well, at least the weather will keep the bad people inside their homes as well.” She then looked up and over at me, her eyes wide in surprise. Even though she must have seen me before, this was the first time she had actually taken notice of me.

Each time she came to the bus stop we would talk to each other until, finally, we agreed to hang out together. Sometimes she would mention how I reminded her of someone she had recently stopped talking to. Even though she never told me who it was, I felt that the person was very important to her.

Waking up today I felt that something was off. It was not just the weather. The air was honey in my lungs. I could hardly breathe. Instead of going to the doctor, I went to our café. It felt natural for me to do so. After all, today is her last therapy session and we always meet there – in a small room reserved only for the two of us – afterwards. Her therapist said something about her being ready to accept something. I have a feeling that this is about what happened almost three years ago. The person she does not want to talk about.

“At least,” I comfort myself, “she would finally be able to let those painful memories rest.” Still. Something tells me that it is not only about this person, but also about me. Because lately Anna is behaving oddly. She would start talking about us and then randomly mention this other person.

Knowing her for so long, I know I should never press her to say anything she is not ready to say. At some point she will tell me and until then I wait. I feel that she is hurt and normally I help her feel better, but for some reason I cannot bring myself to ask her what is wrong. I often hold her in my arms, just to show her that I am here for her.

Early. She is early today. Her therapy usually lasts until 3 p.m. and she would need half an hour to come to our café. Right now, it is just a few minutes after 3 p.m., so I know something is wrong. The feeling gets stronger when she approaches me. Her eyes are filled with tears, but she is not crying.

“Uhm... I – I have something to say, Cory,” she begins. Then she clears her throat and starts speaking. “I – I know you are the best friend I could ever wish for, but – ,” she hesitates to continue. “But I know our friendship is not real. I pressured you into becoming my friend, because – ,” her voice trails off and she lets out a single sob. “Because when my brother died, I needed a friend. But I think I always knew. I always knew you were only real for me, but for no one else.”

PENG. It feels as if I were shot. I am happy. Finally, she would be able to live her life to the fullest. I know I must go. I know it because I know her. She spent all her time putting effort into our friendship, when all she did was lie to herself. My consciousness fails me, as I switch seats, suddenly seeing the world the way her eyes can see it.

Anna sits in the café alone. She has been talking to the empty seat in front of her.

No one has been sitting there.

No one has ever been. Cory was just a hallucination she had come up with.

Anna knows that it was all just her imagination.

Still – she feels guilty for killing her only and truest friend.

[back to contents](#)

the missing piece

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by elisa eisendle

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

The apartment door opens slowly. The lights are switched on. Rustling and falling keys. Shoes are thrown into the wardrobe. Her workday is over.

Finally. I am finally home. I really don't know what is going on, but I can't cope with life. I feel lost. I feel lonely. Work robs all my energy. I thought moving to the big city would change my life. Indeed. It has changed my life. But is it better now? I don't know. Sadly, I cannot leave work for another six months, but that's life.

My grandmother always said: "Kid, you must stick to your commitments. Even if you don't like or love them. Some day they will turn into a habit. And once one thing is a habit, we don't change it."

I loved my grandmother, but to be honest, I hate her for this statement. Living an unhappy life in loneliness is not what I wanted. That's why I fled from the remote place I called home. To the big city. I just didn't want to feel lonely.

Samantha is once again caught in her thoughts. She blindly walks through her apartment. Puts the groceries into the fridge. Walks towards the phone and listens to the audio messages of the day. One from her mother. One from her brother. One from her colleague, asking if she would be going to the bar later.

If there is something that I really do not want to do is go to that bar with you," Samantha mumbles, "but since you have already asked me three times this month, I guess I have to. I hate it.

Samantha walks towards her armchair and sits down. Her thoughts make her unhappy and demand all her energy. Sitting, taking a deep breath. One more. She stands up again, goes into the kitchen and grabs a bottle of wine. She is not a drinker, but she enjoys a good drink after work. She takes her glass of white wine and sits down in her armchair once again. She grabs the book that lies open on the coffee table next to her. Opens it and starts reading. She reads three lines by Louise Burgeois:

“I am a searcher ...
I always was... and I still am...
Searching for the missing piece.”

She reads them again. And again. Her thoughts begin to wander, over and over...

I know I was a searcher. I have always searched for the missing piece. But am I still a searcher? Am I? I have not found my missing piece. I thought I would find it here in the big city. Yet, here I am. I gave up the search for my missing piece, my safe haven, and my happiness.

Later that evening, the young woman finds herself sitting in a bar with her friends. She would call them acquaintances rather than friends. In her eyes, she has no friends. And she has no interest in having any. Her past makes it difficult for her to trust others. She had been betrayed by her late boyfriend and her friends from college had deceived her. What she has is only acquaintances, no friends.

The group is talking about their lives so far. Everyone seems happy and settled down. Everyone except herself. Samantha is immersed in her thoughts once again...

Why does everyone seem to have found their missing piece, but I don't? I bet all of them haven't even been searching for it. I have. I still am. And I still haven't found it.

“So, Sam, how is life recently? We haven't seen you in a while, what's new?” asked one of her friends.

“I am fine. I just needed a little time for myself, that's why I didn't come the last few times you guys met.”

“To be honest... you actually don't seem to be well. What is going on? You can tell us. We're here for you. We're your friends, you can tell us,” another one repeated.

“As I said, I'm fine. I am fine.” Samantha wanted to answer in a normal tone. But she almost screamed and shouted. “I AM FINE!” She grabs her purse, throws out some coins to pay for her wine and storms out of the bar. BOOM. She slams the door, and she's gone.

Walking. Running. Crying. She suddenly finds herself in the middle of a square. She has never been here before, even though she has been living in the city for three years now. She starts looking around. Staring at other people. People she doesn't even know. Overpowered by her emotions Samantha sits down in the middle of the square. The ground is wet. But she doesn't care. She sits down and starts crying and sobbing like a little child. A little child that cannot find their Lego bricks, a little child that cannot complete the puzzle.

“...here, you seem to need these,” a woman says and offers her some tissues. Then she goes her way.

After a while Samantha feels at peace. She has calmed down. She again takes in all the people that walk past her. Everyone seems happy. Everyone here seems to have their lives under control. Just as her friends.

Apparently I am the only person in this whole city who is unhappy, lonely, overstrained.

She stands up and turns around. She collects her thoughts and starts walking. Where to? She doesn't know. The only thing she knows for sure is her need to find her missing piece. She doesn't know what it is, where it is or who it is. She only knows that she needs to find it.

“I am a searcher ...
I always was... and I still am...
Searching for the missing piece,” she softly whispers
to herself.

the next moment

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by anja kluckner

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

Are you familiar with that pain when you accidentally step on a piece of Lego, and it feels like you are leaving your own body for a few seconds because it hurts so much? This often happens to me at night when, despite repeated requests from my mother, I don't want to put my toys away because I might still need them the next day and I want to keep playing with them. It is hard to believe that something that should make you happy can hurt you so much. Sometimes I wonder why something so nice can be so painful in the next moment.

On that day, like almost every day, I came home from school at noon, and I was looking forward to finally play with my Lego again. It was a Wednesday. Wednesday is a special day because on Wednesdays my dad always gets home from work earlier than usual. As soon as I enter our house, he has usually already finished cooking. To be honest, he almost never really cooks but gets us something from an Italian or a Chinese restaurant around the corner, but I am not allowed to tell this to mom. There was a smell of delicious food throughout the whole house. When he opens the big front door for me, I can usually already tell what we're about to eat. On that day, it smelled very intensely of soy sauce and freshly roasted vegetables, and I know we were going to eat stir-fried noodles with chicken. I was so hungry and devoured the portion at a record pace. Crunchy carrots, tender roasted chicken and spices that made your head spin because they were so incredibly good. "How was school?" That would be my father's first question. My answer to this question is always the same: "Good." Then I try to talk about something else as quickly as possible. When we finished eating on that Wednesday, we put everything away to have more space on our huge solid wooden table. Dad always says, "Work first, pleasure next." By that he means that before I can finally have some fun after six hours of school, I still have to do my homework. Doing my homework with him is never much fun for me.

Dad is smart, which is basically a good thing. Unfortunately, he truly thinks that I must be as smart as he is, and when I don't know the answer, he gets angry. On that day we were studying English. I had to learn these irregular verbs and when I misspelled '*thought*' for the second time, he got upset. And I know, mom always says that dad is the boss. She says that it is our own fault if we make mistakes. Dad only does what he has to do so that we learn from it. She says that we improve through his lessons and that he only helps us not to make the same mistakes in the future. Mom thinks that dad is the head of the family and always wants to protect us. I must have respect for him and always do what he says. After all, I want to be as big and strong as him one day. Dad is very strong and when he is angry, everyone is afraid of him. I can tell you exactly when it happens. I often ask myself how I could have prevented it. That day, all I had to do was spell that stupid word correctly and it wouldn't have happened. And then I always get terribly annoyed about how stupid I actually am. But by then it was too late. I had made the mistake a second time, although he had already pointed out the correct spelling to me once. How stupid of me. You could see it in his eyes. He narrowed them and the wrinkles that formed on his forehead did not bode well. I could see it in every fiber of his angry face. I prepared myself by taking a deep breath and trying to think of something nice. I closed my eyes, and he did what he always did before he lectured us.

This time it didn't take as long as the last one. But then I had made a much worse mistake. I remember exactly that I hadn't been careful enough when I was helping unload the dishwasher and dad's favorite cup slipped out of my fingers. The moment the cup hit the floor and the shards spread around the kitchen, my whole body froze. The sound of porcelain on the expensive laminate floor echoed throughout the house and made me feel that I had destroyed something very important. I turned to him very slowly, knowing very well that this had been a terrible mistake for which he had to discipline me. Mom always says that in the moments he does this to us, he is just trying to teach us something and without him and his lessons, we could never improve.

On that Wednesday, while revising the rest of the verbs I was very concentrated. I was doing really well, but my arm hurt so badly that I had to keep pausing briefly while writing. Dad noticed that and pointed out to me that I am already a young man who shouldn't be so sniveling. I took that to heart and tried. After finishing my homework, I was allowed to go to my Lego. There I sat. Dad didn't have time to play with me today, because he had already been annoyed enough with me and he had to take a break first. When my castle was almost finished, I unfortunately stepped on a Lego brick while standing up and the idea went through my head once again. How can something so nice be so painful in the next moment? And then I thought – yes, that is the correct wording – how can someone who loves me so much hurt me so much?

[back to contents](#)

a brief history of time

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by nargiz nurayeva

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

I visited our old house in the village I grew up in. The village we left 20 years ago. I felt a wistful longing for the old days. When I walked into the house, the sunlight shone through the painted old windows, the corridor was full of old textbooks. I headed to the room which belonged to me and my siblings. When I entered the room, my entire childhood came to life before my eyes. Remembering our smiles, battles, and the greatest present of our childhood, the Lego blocks, my eyes filled, and I felt as if I had gone back to that day. I grabbed one of them. We were very poor; our mom bought us those Legos because they were long lasting and safe, as well. I had three siblings with whom I used to play a lot. My siblings and I, unaware of world problems, had begun to enjoy the endless combinations we could create. The Legos were inspiring us to create buildings, vehicles, animals and whatever we could imagine. Every single one was full of memories and brought those moments back to today.

I was living with my son far from my hometown in a crowded city. I lost my husband five years ago from a heart attack. Being a doctor myself, I was feeling awful, as I could do nothing. The hustle and bustle of the city had also affected my life. I spent almost no time with my son because of my work, and in my spare time, my son was busy playing video games. When I got back home, I grabbed my coffee and sat in a quiet corner. I was under the influence of the emotions I went through yesterday. I was happier yesterday, but sadder now. Why does everything look so different? Or have we somehow changed ourselves?

I have been watching my son playing computer games again since early in the morning. I did not play video games growing up but read a lot. When we would try to watch TV during the day, our mother used to turn it off and send us to play outside. We only watched cartoons before going to bed.

Now, the rapid development of electronics in the modern age has dominated every corner of our lives. My first phone was purchased in the second year of my graduate education. This has brought implications for face-to-face interactions. Before this development, we used to get together and spend more time with our family and friends.

“Oh, my childhood. How active we were,” I whispered quietly. “We had such a busy life. We invented different types of games ourselves. So much excitement, happiness, laughter, activity. Our childhood was joyful, healthy, and carefree.”

And so, our food has also changed; unrecognizable blends and numerous varieties, and as a result, a completely altered, different menu came to us. Therefore, we have become more vulnerable to a range of health problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle, including obesity, weaker bones and muscles, and poor blood pressure.

Dairy products like yoghurt and cheese that my mom made for us with her own hands, and fruits and vegetables that were grown and harvested in our own garden. As we move from living naturally and simply to developing, we lose a lot, especially our health and activity. When we go to museums to reminisce about ancient historical lives, what we see is our lost health.

I walked towards the window; “Such a lovely day,” I thought.

The sun was shining, colours everywhere. Colours were attracting attention and blended perfectly with the background to create an extraordinary display. Spring was at the door. I had not seen the nature like this before in a long time. It was as if the beauty of nature urged me to improve my low mood by making small changes in my life.

“Alex, let's go for a walk around the park,” I suggested to my son.

He looked at me, turning his head off his computer, surprised. His eyes were full of questions. He was so excited about what I said. I had not made that kind of offer to my son in a long time. This means it is my fault, I confess. We cannot blame anyone, nor can we blame time. We must change ourselves.

Walking in the beautiful summer park with my son made me realize how beautiful nature and life were. I could only think about the past. But if our goal is to make our future great, we should value the moment. We had a lot of fun and laughed together; we played interesting and exciting games and took many photos together. I also encouraged my son to create his own games as I had done with my siblings in the past and I promised to buy him a box of Legos.

“Thanks for spending time with me, Mom. You're a world to me. I love you with my whole heart!” he said.

I patted my son on the head and hugged him tightly: “I will love you forever, and you mean a lot to me, too. I'm so happy you're in my life!”

There's nothing more satisfying than watching your kid happy and smiling. Their smile is worth more than all the money in the world. The modern way of life has left many of us anxious and exhausted. However, we need to see several benefits that we have today. Our lives are more flexible, we have more freedom, we can save the lives of hundreds of people with the help of new developments in medicine and vaccines. Technology also makes everything more accessible: connection, knowledge, communication, learning, travel, and so on.

When my son and I were at the park for a few hours, we decided to spend more time together; walks, picnics, board games, swimming, homework, and travelling together. In this

way, I believe that my child will realize that his interests are taken into consideration, and he is also important.

It was an early amazing Saturday morning. The weather was brilliant, and the sun was shining brightly. White clouds dotted the sky. They strolled beneath clear blue skies. The two of us woke up early. We had planned to discover the history, the myth, the magic of the most marvellous castle. The luggage has been ready since yesterday. It was our plan to travel together. Alex was very excited. The cab we booked yesterday arrived just in time to take us to the airport.

Spending time with my son and seeing the joy in his eyes, I realized that happiness, health and activity are at our fingertips at any time, regardless of time and place. Seeing happiness in my son's eyes now teaches me that there are so many things that money cannot ever buy. Making our lives interesting, healthy, loving and exciting depends on what we decide. It is more important to be in each other's lives and spend time together.

“Give me, the red, give me the red one, Mama!” said Alex, happily.

We built a red-roofed house out of colourful LEGOs...

[back to contents](#)

forgotten pieces

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by christina kiesenhofer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

As so often, she is cleaning the house. It is a monotonous work, but she has always liked it. She likes the hard work for her whole body as much as she likes the clear mind afterwards. Most of the people in her circle would not dream of cleaning their houses themselves, but for her cleaning has something liberating and to her it is something private. Never could she let a stranger in her house and let them touch her possessions, yet alone her clothes.

The only thing she does not like about tidying and scrubbing the whole house from head to toe is cleaning and entering one certain room. In the past, she would have loved entering and being in that room. A warm feeling would spread out in her every time she entered. It was a small and cosy space with a tiny bed in the left corner and a cuddly carpet that filled out most of the floor. In the right corner small shelves stood there filled with books and toys. Every day she would go into this room with a joyful feeling in her heart. Every day until the incident.

As she stands in front of the door to the abandoned room, she knows that there is no use putting it off. While her heart is beating faster and faster, she musters her courage and touches the door handle. Like being electrified she recoils and takes a step back. Should she really do it today? There is no use in it, it has to be done at some point. So, she tries again, this time even braver than before. The wooden door squeaks as it is slowly opens. The sun illuminates the room so brightly that she has to cover her eyes for a moment. As her eyes get used to the radiant room, she slowly looks across the sunlit space. The small bed is still there as well as the carpet and the shelves, but a thick layer of dust covers it all. Attracted by the sunlight, she steps into the room, slowly plugs in the vacuum cleaner, and starts cleaning all the surfaces. As she reaches the bed, she steps on something hard. She switches the device off, bends down and picks the piece up. As soon as she sees which thing lies on her palm, she sinks onto the floor next to the bed and buries her head in her hands. So much time had passed, how could she have forgotten this? She puts her left arm out and picks some more of the pieces up. They feel

smooth but slippery on the one side, but on the other side she always feels two cylinders in a row, eight in total. As she picks up another piece, she realises that it has only four of the circular solids. Just as the outcome of the story of this room and her life, every piece is different and yet there are some which are the same.

How could she have forgotten about this favourite toy? There were times when they would be hours together in this room, placing piece after piece together to create buildings and devices. Yellow ones, blue ones, red ones. Only the green ones they would never use because they had to be saved for harder times they said. She would spend hours reading the beginning of books aloud and making up different endings so they could always dream about a better world as they fell asleep. No matter how young, they would always turn up the music and dance while cleaning the house. It never felt like a chore or something cumbrous to do because of the amount of fun they had.

Suddenly she shivers and as she looks up, she sees that clouds build up in front of the sun. She gets up quickly and hastes to the door. The memories are just too intense to stay any longer in this room. As she whizzes out of the area, she feels a beam of sunlight in her back. She slowly stops, turns around and re-enters. Tentatively she takes a green piece and puts it in her hand. Maybe she can take one day by day as she tidies the rooms until she can build something new on her own with all the green pieces.

[back to contents](#)

memories last forever

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by julia rier

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

Amy was the happiest girl on earth. She was lively, cheerful, fortunate, and full of joy. She was everything for her parents and her parents were everything for her.

Amy's family never had a lot of money. But they did everything to make her childhood a great one. Most unforgettable were the special days. Amy could make her own decisions about everything.

These wonderful days started with Amy deciding what to eat for breakfast – she *always* chose pancakes with bananas and maple syrup. She would also decide to drink a huge mug of hot chocolate with a lot of whipped cream and thousands of white, pink, and blue marshmallows – the blue ones were her absolute favorite. She would spend hours picking out the blue marshmallows and putting them one after the other on top of the steaming drink. She normally wasn't allowed to start her day that sweet. So, breakfast alone made these days amazing. After breakfast, she could decide whether she and her parents would go outside for a walk or to a playground, have lunch near the beautiful lake that is in their town or to stay in and watch a movie and eat homemade cookies with massive chunks of chocolate.

Amy always had troubles deciding what she wanted to do but most of the time she chose spending time outside. Then, they often went to a toy store, where Amy would choose a small present.

Once, she found Diego, her all-time favorite stuffed animal. It was a dog, and she would carry it with her all the time. The cute stuffed animal with its beady hazel eyes and its soft fur always brought back the incredible memories of a special day. She would always say that Diego is her lifeguard, and nobody knew that he would indeed be one day.

Those special days were just amazing and left her full of enthusiasm for a long time. Her parents were also really joyful because they were able to provide their daughter with such incredible days. In a way, they were special for them, too. But occasionally, the special days would be postponed.

When Amy's mother got ill, she often was too tired and weak to participate. In the beginning, Amy and her dad continued spending the special days on their own, but it wasn't the same without mom. They missed her laugh, her jokes and her perfume. So, they decided to stay at home with her and enjoy time together. Amy and her mom would play together and build their own happy world without worries or illness. Even though she was very exhausted, she enjoyed spending time with her family and was very happy when they were near her.

At least at the beginning. Then her illness got worse and her mood the worst. She was in so much pain that she didn't smile for weeks, and she started to get very angry. Even towards Amy, her angel who she loved so much. Amy knew that this wasn't really her mom. She knew that it was the illness. But it was hard. It was hard seeing her mother like that. It was hard seeing her suffer. It was hard seeing her getting weaker and weaker. It was hard seeing her lose her will to live. Amy was twelve years old. One is not ready to lose their mother at twelve. But Amy knew she couldn't be selfish. She had to let mom go. Mom was too weak.

Then the day came. November 22nd, 2018. The kindhearted girl will never forget that day. Suddenly, she felt all alone. She knew her dad was still here, and she knew she wasn't alone, but still she felt the loneliness. But Diego was by her side and from then on, indeed, he became her lifeguard. When talking to the stuffed animal, Amy felt like she could connect to her mom. She always felt weird, but somehow this helped her.

November 22nd was the hardest day of her life. However, she cannot remember much about that day. That day felt unreal. She only recalls that it was raining heavily, and it was very cold. One could say it was a classic gloomy autumn day. But the weather perfectly suited her mood. It was also very stormy. But Amy felt like her mom was speaking to her through this chilly autumn breeze.

The hardest part actually came after the funeral. The confrontation. It became real. Mom was not there anymore. Amy and her dad spent days sorting out her mom's belongings. Weeks probably, because it was just too hard to get rid of all the things she had left behind. The clothes smelled so good. They smelled lovely and sweet, just like mom always did. They almost smelled as if she would walk into the door again saying it had all been just a dream. The books reminded Amy of all the stories her mom had told her right before going to bed. The books felt like she would be still there, reading her daughter's favorite stories. She had wanted to keep everything but, sadly, she knew this was not possible. It was hard but they made it.

It took her a while but, in the end, Amy realized that the memories she has of her mom are in her heart and not in books. Not in clothes. Not in places. They would always remain inside her. In the most private place – her own heart. Nobody can take that away from her and no one can ever destroy these memories. They will forever be hers and even if she might not actually be anymore, in her heart Amy would still be the happiest girl on earth.

[back to contents](#)

I hope you step on a lego

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by greta tröber

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

How could it have come to this? I can hardly breathe as I stand in the doorway. A panic attack. I am having a panic attack. I turn around and flee. Someone calls my name. I ignore the call. Where should I go? To the kitchen? No, he will definitely follow me there. To the street? I hesitate for a moment, but then I open the front door and run. All I can think of: Had it not begun as the adventure of a lifetime?

I've always had a plan. When I was five and still playing with my Legos, I knew right from the start what I wanted to build. It didn't come to me as I was building, as some children always say; I knew what I wanted and I worked hard for it. Same thing regarding my professional and my private life. But then, six months ago, the Lego house I had built for my life collapsed.

I was training to become a marketing assistant. I had everything that I ever wanted, I knew exactly what the next Lego brick was going to be: a fulfilling job and an imminent engagement. But then, my boss got pregnant. She was supposed to oversee the merger of our company with a French company. In Paris. And next in line was, you can guess, of course, me. They wanted me to go to Paris. That was not part of my plan. What I wanted was to climb the career- ladder here in the US. There was no Lego brick in my life with "moving to Paris" on it – but I had to learn the hard way that nothing ever grows if I stay in my comfort zone. I had to try and see this as a great opportunity to live abroad for a while before settling in.

Et voilà, two weeks later, I called Paris my new home. My boyfriend was so upset with me, but I convinced him that it would be only for a few months and to stay in contact with him, I agreed to create an Instagram account. I had always hated social media until this point, because I felt that it would only psychologically incriminate me or so I had heard and seen in documentaries. But I was willing to make this relationship work. Besides, in marketing one really can't do without social media.

Finalemment, it took only a few weeks to make the city of love a part of my Lego house. Work was going well and I was starting to fit in. We were able to build our clients a solid follower

community on Instagram and market the products. But I was also deeply invested into social media for other reasons. I learned first-hand what it meant to me that strangers were actually interested in me. Every post of a glittering Eiffel tower and my followers *spoiled* me with likes and comments. I went to restaurants and photographed the food first and foremost and posted it before I ate it. My followers soaked up my every post like a sponge. I went to parties and posted photos of me having the best time with my French *copains*. It was as if opening a portal the moment I accessed Instagram. It felt like a second world to me. Only in this world, people were so perfect, so good-looking – I just didn't realise that it was all make-believe.

Zut alors, I was caught off guard and I soon found myself in a downward spiral. I was constantly comparing myself to other women, almost stalking other women. And always this damn feeling of jealousy: Why don't I look like this? Why don't I have as many friends? Why don't I do cool things all the time that I can post photos of? These thoughts have given me many sleepless nights. Out of my subscribed accounts, I analysed this one French model very closely. Every ten minutes I looked at her profile. I carefully analysed who she tagged in her photos and who commented under her pictures. I commented under her photos, hoping that she would comment under my photos too. I was desperate to be part of it. I tried to find out where she spends her time in Paris and tried to meet her 'by chance'.

Pour moi, Instagram developed into a curse. Constant self-doubt, envy. But I couldn't stop. Nowhere was my mobile phone not with me. I woke up at night to check if the French model had posted another perfect picture. At some point, my French friends told me to leave the phone at home when we went out. Resulting in me choosing to stay at home to check my Instagram. All this just so I could show strangers that I didn't have a boring life. I argued constantly with my boyfriend, who didn't understand what had gotten into me since Paris. He assured me often enough that I had no need for self-doubt, but I didn't believe him. My work also suffered - I found it difficult to concentrate for any length of time. Since I needed my smartphone for work, there was no waking moment without it and I would constantly check who I could follow. This went on for a few months.

Until my boyfriend stopped contacting me. At the beginning, I didn't even notice that we hadn't written for a fortnight. The first thought was to fly back to the States for a few days. Which brings me to the present moment. I am running down the street. The trees are flying by, but I hardly notice them due to the many tears gathering in my eyes. The leaves are crunching under my feet. I can't forget the images of my boyfriend and another woman in our bed. I stop. My mobile vibrates. The French model has posted a new photo. I tighten my grip around the phone, then bend over the railing and let it slip through my fingers. It lands in the water and it is nowhere to be seen. I close my eyes and I feel ten pounds lighter. The water is washing away my sorrow and I let it soothe me. Then I can finally think clearly again: it's not too late to re-set a few Lego bricks in the house of my life. And it is definitely not too late to throw some Lego bricks that have "impending engagement" in the path of others.

[back to contents](#)

private chaos

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

by katharina turri

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022/23

Rose hears the familiar sound of a key turning inside a lock to open the front door. She knows exactly what is going to happen.

Finally! She's here. I missed her so much today.

Her mother returns home from wherever she had been. Filled with joy she drops the Lego bricks from her hand and runs into her arms. She did not even notice her leaving this morning. After greeting her father, mother and daughter disappear in her room. Rose wants to show her all the great things she achieved today.

I bet she has never ever seen such a high tower of Lego bricks. It is almost as high as I am.

“Did you have fun today with David?” asks her mother. As if. David shattered her nerve, and she was the one who got problems.

I hope that I won't see him again, after he faked having been hurt by me.

“Rose bit David in his forearm, can you imagine that?” asks her father with a reproachful tone in his voice from the kitchen.

“You must be joking! Is this the truth, Rose?” her mother turns her head in Rose's direction with a disbelieving expression on her face. If she could speak more than three words in a row, she would have explained to her what really happened.

David always knocked over the tower I built under great effort and laughed.

This happened at least five times! This boy did not listen to her although she explained him precisely how difficult it is to build such a high tower. When he wanted to touch it a sixth time, she improvised and pushed his hand away. And again. And again. And again. Until his face went red. Really red. As red as a tomato. He put his hand into his mouth and closed it. Suddenly he screamed.

His screams remind me of the time I trapped my fingers in the door of the living room.

When their parents quickly arrived in her room, he would continue screaming. Why did her father have this look on his face? She had to go and leave David with her tower. She also didn't get a snack afterwards.

"You have to share your toys, Rose!" her father tells her later. This is something she doesn't understand.

Why do I have to share MY things with someone who does not appreciate them? And further, in MY room?

"And you must not bite and hurt other children!" her father adds. Why does he say such things? She doesn't bite and hurt other children. How does he come up with this idea?

"And better clean up your room now, Rose! It's close to bedtime."

Rose looks at the mass of Lego bricks on her carpet and sighs. She notices that David had placed not only the bricks everywhere in her room, but also her small books and her stuffed animals. Under the bed is something that looks like a small, shaggy hill. Oh wait, that's Benno, her stuffed dog.

I hope he wasn't scared in this dark, hidden place.

Rose goes down on her belly and tries to reach Benno. With the tip of her right index finger, she can feel his soft fur. She tries again to reach it by stretching her arm for some millimeters. Almost. Finally, after her third attempt, she manages to grab some of his fur between her index finger and her thumb and pulls him from underneath her bed. She hugs Benno to apologize for not noticing him lying there in the dark alone.

Oh, my poor Benno, and stupid, stupid David. How could he push MY dog down there?

Oh, there is the red brick she had been searching for the last hour. Great! Maybe there is still some time left to build a new one, even higher as the previous one. Her mother will be surprised how high it will be! Maybe the bottom part can be made of blue bricks, the middle part alternated red and green, and on top, there will be yellow bricks. Her mother will have eyes bigger than saucers!

Rose is smiling when she puts one brick on the other. Her mother observes her, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"I know that David can be a little mean sometimes, Rose. Did he annoy you today?" her mother asks carefully, lowering her voice to a whisper so that her father can't hear it in the kitchen. She explains to her how frustrated she felt earlier accompanied by the nodding of her mother, although she probably doesn't understand a single word.

Uff, if she could understand only half of the things I say.

Suddenly her father interrupts their conversation by entering her room.

"Look at this chaos in here, Rose!" he claims with a strict voice. "Didn't I tell you to tidy up your room? All the Lego bricks are still lying around. You better hurry up!"

"Honey, you know that creativity needs chaos and vice versa. But I'll help you, Rose, my darling," says her mother quietly and begins to collect the bricks in front of her bed. Slowly but constantly, she put all of them in the big box that looks like a cat and contains all her toys. "Rose, honey, do you understand why your father insists on sharing your toys?" her mother asks as if she would know that Rose doesn't understand.

No, I do not. They are mine and in my room. Why do I have to share my Lego bricks and stuffed animals with someone else who has toys of one's own?

“Imagine that you are at someone else's house and there are a lot of beautiful playthings and dolls. And now imagine that the person wouldn't let you touch them or play with them. You might feel sad and wouldn't understand why you're not allowed to, right?” her mother asks. Rose nods.

Yes, that makes sense. But still. This David should be nicer to me if he wants to play with my toys ever again.

“Well done, Rose. Let's have dinner together after all this chaos today!” says her father coming back into her room and seeing how neat and tidy is now.

[back to contents](#)

endless scrolling

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by marisa casartelli

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

Endless scrolling, endless searching, endless comparing. *She is so skinny. She can really pull those jeans off. I can only fit my forearms into this tiny piece of fabric.* “Sarah? Are you still listening?” My mom is a nervous person. Now, in the midst of whatever is happening on the world, including this pandemic, she is even more anxious. I always picture her insides as trembling parts of an engine which never find some rest. Her face looks slimmer, the bags under her eyes seem darker. I know that she does not feel well lately.

“Mom, I am sorry, Instagram sucked me in again!” She looked at me with a sense of resignation, as she cannot understand why the younger generation is so obsessed with smartphones. By now, however, she just has given up on understanding it and perhaps has already moved towards said resignation.

To be honest, I do not understand the obsession with smartphones either. It is a trend that started a couple of years ago and now it is as implemented in our societal behaviour as the smallest cell of our body is implemented in us. My phone does not seem glued to my hand, but it already feels like an extension of my arm. I could not imagine how life would be nowadays without smartphones and social media. The latter though, is the crueller and more insidious sister of the world wide web. It is more subjective, its more personal, it invades your private space. Not in a physical way, but in a psychological one. It gets into your head and hangs onto your self-esteem for dear life. You do not just google something; you search for comparison on such platforms. I myself do it all the time. It gives me a certain kick, a certain nudge towards self-destructive thinking. Oh, what would I do without thinking negatively about my appearance? I would be freaking bored all the time. And I would do my homework faster, even more efficiently maybe, and I would eat more regularly, and I would have more self-esteem. That’s the irony behind it all. These apps such as Instagram and TikTok are not only addictive, but they lie to all of us all the time. People portray themselves as something they are not. So,

you actually worship something that does not even exist. You basically compare yourself to a pink fairy flying towards Neverland. “What you do is called self-fashioning, Sarah.” My therapist explains to me every Wednesday how toxic social media is. Well, we also talk about other stuff, but it is predominantly the thought of not being as skinny or beautiful as the girls online that haunts me. My therapist calls them intrusive thoughts. Sounds fancy, I know.

If you wonder why I am consulting a therapist at my young age, I have to disappoint you. It is not a rare circumstance anymore that even the ‘younger generation’, as my mom calls us, is in need of guidance in this fast-paced, horribly competitive and extremely self-destructing society.

To put it bluntly, while using said apps, I gave up a part of me. A part of my most personal space, my inner self. Because now I have let those influencers get to me. I gave up my resistance against such toxic mindsets and beauty standards. They got into a very private space. They got into my mind. And during this present chaos it is as bad as it has ever been before. I am doing this therapy because I want my mind back. I want my life back.

“Sarah, can you please clean your desk! It looks like a hot mess.” So here I present my desk, aka a total mess. I do like it like that though. Because it perfectly represents the state of my mind right now. You might be thinking now: “Oh Sarah, don’t exaggerate. You did not lose your life to social media, do not be overly dramatic. But if I were to tell you that I look into the full-length mirror in my room and constantly hate what I see. My thighs are too wide, my breasts are too big, and my face resembles a dumpling. It has not always been like that. In the past, I used to like my body. Or at least I did not mind it. But now I loathe it. Hence, going to school is a fight with myself, a fight I have to deal with every day. Today, I am wearing the sweater my mom gifted me for Christmas. It’s of a calming blue, which reminds me of the light blue of the summer sky and the small waves by the riverside I used to spend time at. Unfortunately, the sweater does not fit right anymore it’s just too tight around my belly. *Have I put on weight again? I should stop eating carbohydrates at night.* The sweater does not look as good on me as on the other girls I know.

“Should I give you a ride to school honey?” I almost screamed because my mom rushed into my room so abruptly that I was actually startled for a second. “Oh, you are wearing the sweater I bought you, it looks great!”

Fast forward to me sitting in class, not wearing said sweater but a black, oversized hoodie in XXL. Well, the blue sweater didn’t make it to school today. It has been tied up with body dysmorphic matters. I also know this fancy term because of my psychologist. Ah, how I love lifelong learning. That evening I ended up crying in my bed. Kind of sad, kind of lonely, and for some people, slightly suicidal. Hey don’t judge me! I am a very straightforward person.

If you are not as much caught up in all this social media stuff as I am yet, you still have a chance. Okay, now I am overly dramatic. I still have a chance, too. I can still learn to accept myself and my appearance and maybe someday, I can love myself just the way I am. Maybe these endless comparisons will stop eventually and maybe, just maybe, people will still be open for change and understand how lethal social media can be.

Only then, we can stop this endless scrolling, look up from our phones, and truly start living again.

[back to contents](#)

messy desk, cluttered mind

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by julia gassl

photo: anopez szaszobonon-ara © 2023/23

I should have known, no, learned from my previous mistakes. Every semester, I tell myself the same old lie – “I will start on time with all of my assignments!” – as if! Deceived, lied to, and betrayed by my own past self, I sit here in front of a battlefield of my own making: my desk. Where do I start? What should I prioritise? Is there a God I could turn to? Of course not, there is no such being. Only time, the ticking of the clock, reminding me of all my deadly deadlines.

Face to face with all my postponed obligations, I feel my heart, my whole corporal being, sink into my trusty armchair, which bemoans its owner’s repeated mistakes with a quiet creaking noise in response. The assignments may change, but at least my chair is a constant throughout all my miseries, having my back quite literally. My weary eyes, devoid of any emotion, stare at this cluttered mess that once someone called a study desk: lose papers in God-knows-what order, several mugs with stains of green tea (a shot at getting doses of caffeine in a semi-healthy way – I’m trying, alright?), and various bodies of literature concerning various subjects from various authors who, for sure, did not think their works would become the holy Grail for a sorry excuse of a last effort attempt by an underachieving and insomniac undergrad to appear as though she had a sound understanding of the matter which was definitely not acquired a day before exam date. I sigh. I do not get paid enough for this, in fact, I do not get paid at all. Perhaps students’ motivation might increase if their efforts were paid; someone should definitely write a thesis about that (with ‘someone’ meaning someone that is most certainly not me). I digress, which is something I can do all too well. Heck, it’s the primary reason for me being in this situation.

My emotionless stare slowly turns to my laptop’s internal clock. It’s 14:19. I sat down at 14:17. It appears I have just gone through what feels like every one of the five stages of grief in three minutes – a new personal record, if I may add. Moving my hand to pick up the loose pages strewn across my desk proved in itself to be an unachievable task. When you push up your glasses which just slid down, when you reach for your glass of water in order to take a sip, or when you pick up your fork to start eating your meal – all of these actions are executed with

such mindless ease, whereas now, I had to mentally force my heavy hand to lift itself up, my frozen fingers to move and my hardened hand muscles to exert energy to hold on to the pages, lest they would slip right through my grasp.

I don't want to.

Oh, why – there it is. Everyone has this little companion with them, to some degree. The voice in my head, my weaker self, started to make itself known to me, informing me about something I had already been aware of. As the saying goes, one must overcome their weaker self, however, in my case, I consciously greet it with a thoughtful nod. Reject or deny it? Challenge or even conquer it? This is not my way, for I have fully come to embrace this part of myself. I stand by the belief that it is foolish to pretend to see one's weaker self as anything else than a manifestation of one's true self and thus, I do not fight it. Why should I struggle against a part of myself that simply appears to be vulnerable to my judgement? It would be as if laughing into a child's face being upset about not being noticed by its caretakers. And no one would have the heart to do that, now, would they?

I don't want to. I don't want to.

Yes, I know. There is nothing fulfilling about any of this. Remember the old times when we were little? Oh, how much joy we felt upon receiving our As and Bs at school, and how miserable a C or – perish the thought! – a D made us? Old friend, remember our first fail? Insufficient! Inadequate! A representation of my worth. Oh, the horror that crept into my frail little body that very moment, one that I all too well remember to this day and, upon thought, makes my stomach not just turn, but invert, dissolve and crawl up to my throat, leaving me with stingingly hot bile to swallow. Fun times, weren't they? But answer me, when did we stop caring? When did As and Bs cease to provoke an upward shift of our mouth corners? When did we become indifferent towards Cs and Ds, even fails, and scornful comments made by high school teachers returning them? Perhaps the feeling of guilt towards a failed authority figure disappeared the moment my parents stopped exhibiting proud elation regarding good grades and genuine concern about bad ones. "You don't learn for us; you learn for yourself" is what they told me that day. However, it is difficult to grasp this concept, no, give meaning to it at such a tender age, when self-love in itself was an idea yet to learn.

I don't want to, not again.

Perhaps to me, to my weaker self, self-love now is to prevent myself from getting into circumstances which may hurt me. Perhaps this is why I procrastinate. Although, by now, one could argue self-love has turned into self-sabotage.

I don't want to, but I have to.

My messy desk, a perfect representation of my mental state, has clouded my senses and judgement. Whether I should resign from some of my courses is a legitimate idea that has just come to my mind. Preparing myself mentally, steeling my heart and mustering up the courage to continue, I put on my headphones. I can do this. I've had worse. It's my own fault I'm in this situation, and I'm going to be okay. I must not aim for As or Bs, just enough for a passing grade in order to break free. All of these papers marching inevitably towards their deadlines are occupying my mind constantly. Blissful freedom, you will be mine again after these assignments. Oh, but only for a brief moment, for the next semester is looming above me like the sword of Damocles. But then, this time for real, I will start on time with my assignments. Or am I deluding myself?

[back to contents](#)

a home that will never be

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by stefan leichner

by: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

With a heavy, satisfying clunk the door fell into its hinges. In a moment the sensations of the city, so loud and overwhelming it almost hurt, were replaced by the familiar senses of home. A scent of garlic and hot olive oil hung in the air, accompanied by the silent clattering of dishes being made ready in the dining room down the hall. Somewhere in the flat the children were playing and laughing wildly at something. Finally, John had finally arrived.

As if in a daze, he ran through his practiced ritual of getting ready for his official arrival. The mask was placed in the right coat pocket, ready for use the next day. Wallet and keys went into their small bowl on the dresser. The shoes were slipped off, first the right one then the left, and lifted onto the drying rack to the left of the dresser. Lastly John took off his coat and hung it on the rack next by door. Before joining his family, he took one last look at himself in the mirror above the dresser, a slight frown crossed his face, as he looked at the person that stared back.

John looked tired. His salt and pepper hair had become a tangled crow's nest of black and gray strands, revealing widow's peaks he usually took great care to hide. His sky-blue shirt was creased and a ketchup stain from the burger he'd had for lunch sitting prominently above the front pocket. Most noticeable were his eyes, however. His emerald eyes, with which his wife had fallen in love almost a decade ago, were now dull and framed by deep crow's feet. "Well, time to greet the family," he told himself as he tore his eyes from the mirror and turned down the hall towards the door from which the pleasant smells originated.

As quickly and silently as he could, John entered the kitchen. Emi, his wife, was standing at the kitchen counter, seeming to prepare some sort of salad to go with whatever she had cooking in the oven. Sneaking up, he wrapped her in a bear hug from behind, greeting her with a soft kiss on the neck.

“Welcome home honey, how was work?” The voice of his wife was almost a giggle at the pleasant surprise.

“Oh, you know how it is, boring meetings as a warm-up, boring work in the middle and even more boring meetings to round out the day. Our parent company is considering switching their paper supplier. So of course, we need a special committee to decide whether the new one would be a ‘good fit’ for our company. So anyway, how was yours?”

“Poor you,” Emi began, turning around in his hug to face him, “Knowing those guys I assume they put you in charge of that committee? My day was pretty normal. Went shopping, picked up the kids from school and drove them to their after-school activities... Oh and I met Mrs. Henderson from next door. Apparently, her daughter has a new boyfriend, and she does not approve in the slightest.”

“Has Mrs. Henderson ever approved of any boyfriend her daughter had? I’m pretty sure she could turn up with a Mormon billionaire and Mrs. Henderson would still not approve because now he’s too good. Yeah, that freaking committee is the reason I’m late. I’m an admin, assessing paper quality should not be in my scope of responsibilities. By the way, where are our little goblins?”

“Oh, James’ friends showed him a new game at school, so of course he had to teach it to Mel. Something about exploding cats. Actually, could you go get them? They’ve been holed up in his room for the last four hours and dinner’s ready in five.”

“Sure hun, be right back.” Releasing her from his hug, he gave her a last gentle peck on her lips and made his way toward his older son’s room. The weariness John had felt when coming home now almost completely gone.

Later that night John was about to tuck his two kids into bed when Melanie piped up: “You know dad, we *reeeally* need to play Exploding Kittens together on game night. It’s hilarious, I blew up *sooo* many times, but sometimes I had a laser or a catnip sandwich and then James blew up. Also, James kept stealing my stuff with Catermelons or Beardcats. And also ...”

“She’s right dad”, James cut his little sister off before she listed all the cards in the deck, “we really have to play it sometime.”

“The way you guys make it sound,” John began conciliatorily, “we really have to try it during our next game night. But now you really need to go to bed. It’s way past your bedtime. Good night my little goblins.” With that he finished tucking in his kids, turned off the lights and went to join his wife in bed.

Emi was already half-asleep rousing only shortly when he climbed into bed. “Good night hun.”, was all she managed before sleep once more took her. Smiling to himself John kissed his wife goodnight, turned around and fell asleep.

##

In the stuffy darkness of a small one-bedroom flat John took off his headset. “SIMULATION COMPLETE”, flashed on the large computer screen at the foot of his bed, the bold white letters on a blue-gray background illuminating the gaunt frame of his emaciated figure lying on the bed in a custom fitted sim-suit. With a heavy sigh, John sat up, rubbed his bloodshot eyes to help them focus and wiped away the tears forming in their corners. He had always known

that it was just a simulation, but with each iteration he let himself get pulled in further into the dream he had programmed for himself.

He was only in his early thirties, but he had realized early that his dream would never become reality. That's why he built it for himself. Standing up slowly, John navigated the maze of empty take-out containers and dirty laundry that had once been his flat to sit at his equally cluttered desk. Without losing a beat, he opened his editor and began working on the next simulation.

At the bottom of his screen a message notification popped up: "We're worried about you. Please call us. Love, mom." Without losing focus on his code, he clicked it away and continued.

[back to contents](#)

thoughts of gray

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

by katharina koch

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

The moment he steps out into fresh air he exhales; his warm breath condenses in the ice-cold December breeze. Tomorrow, most people will be making new resolutions which they will then discard in February at the latest. He hasn't done that for years. Resolutions don't get him anywhere. Thanks to his ambitious powerful and disciplined personality, he knows exactly what he wants, he has always known it. He closes his eyes for a short time and sucks in the fresh air. Exhales, zips up his jacket, and gets ready to run off his day with his daily run. He briefly considers whether he might run a new lap today, but immediately discards the idea. He likes to run through the city, despite the traffic lights, despite the numerous tourists who block the way every now and then, and despite "or exactly because of" the busy streets. He thinks of his childhood; he used to be a happy child regardless of the difficult financial struggles of his family. His parents had always been loving and tried to offer him and his three siblings the best they could. He had always been aware that he had to work harder than other people to achieve something. But all the hard work has more than paid off; he lives in a 200 square meter luxury apartment, he owns two new cars, one of which has never been driven, and his company is one of the most profitable ones. What more could he crave? A haughty smile flits across his face, indicating his pride, as he crosses a narrow bridge.

He is running along the Thames and looks at the gray water, which reflects the gray of the sky and creates a bright contrast to the gray of the buildings. He likes gray, he likes London, he likes the grays of London. A traffic light awaits him at the next intersection; he has to stop. He keeps running on the spot, so he is not losing his flow. There is a coffee shop across the street from the traffic light. His eyes are drawn to the dim yellow light illuminating the street. While he is waiting, he notices two women sitting by the large window. The women are engaged in their conversation, one of them is talking and gesticulating wildly with her hands, and the other is listening intently, a laugh and an astonishing look flashing across her face.

The traffic light changes from red to green and he runs along. He passes small stores, restaurants that are already preparing for the evening, and an overcrowded food store. He can't understand the whole fuss about this one evening. It's just an evening like any other, why do people have to buy a special outfit for the occasion, why do they buy way too much food, which ends up in the garbage anyway, and why do people have to celebrate this evening like it's their last? For him, the evening will be like any other: after his shower and dinner, which will be carefully prepared to include all the essential nutrients, he sits down at his desk until it's time to go to bed and have his 8.5 hours of sleep. And the next morning will be the same as any other.

Having a fixed schedule each day gives him a sense of security, and having no surprises is what he likes. But what he likes, even more, is Tower Bridge. He is aware that he is probably one of the few Londoners who take a minute every day to soak up the sight of this exceptional construction. The bridge is one of the landmarks of his city. Despite the numerous tourists who come to the bridge on every single of the year, the place evokes in him a comforting and pleasant feeling of home. He runs across the bridge and decides to stop briefly to absorb that very moment. Maybe today is a special day after all.

He spots a couple standing at the bridge and in contrast to the other 30 couples do not hold their phones in their hands to take pictures. The couple is hugging, and the man kisses his wife affectionately on the forehead, she closes her eyes and enjoys this moment, she opens her eyes again and catches him staring at her with a smile full of love. She slightly blushes, pulls his head towards her mouth, and kisses him passionately. For a short moment, he stands on the bridge and forgets everything around him. He stops watching the couple, catches his breath, and starts running again. His thoughts wander around the couple, the loving gestures, the trustfulness, and the warmth in the eyes of the two lovers.

He continues to run, trying to focus his thoughts on running again. He stares at the gray asphalt. The watch on his wrist shows him that he has now run exactly 7.5 kilometers. He continues to run, still trying in vain to concentrate only on himself. Without further taking hints of his surroundings, he arrives at his apartment - 15 kilometers, he is done for today. He decides to go to the park across the street to stretch his muscles. In the park, two children take turns sliding down the steep slide while their parents watch them. The girl lies down on her belly and shouts to her mother "Mommy mommy, look". The parents clap with delight and pride as their little girl slides down the steep slide on her stomach.

Today he feels kind of different than on other days as he enters his large luxury apartment. Everything is quiet and dark. He turns on the light that floods the empty room. In the corner of the empty apartment, which is furnished in white and light gray tones, stands his desk. Compared to the rest of the apartment, the desk is full: documents, computers, his laptop, his cell phones.

After his usual shower and dinner, he sits down at his desk. Immersed in his work, he doesn't notice how time passes, when he is startled by a loud bang, colorful lights, and cheers of people. He looks at the clock: 00:00. He mumbles: "Happy New Year," shuts down his laptop, and goes to bed.

[back to contents](#)

the private song

by daniel netzer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022/23

Rumor has it that most people don't like Mondays. I wouldn't say Grace is much of an exception, but I'd certainly say she's not as averse to the start of the week as anyone else. As a medical student she often finds life stressful and especially the internships take up a lot of time, but already as a child she was told that with this job and these studies she will have good chances of success. Therefore, her hard work could enrich her life economically very much. This attitude towards life, regarding a good job and education, ran through Grace's entire family. Her grandparents constantly praised her for her hard work as a young doctor-to-be, and when Grace was only three years old her parents began planning that she would work in the health sector as a researcher. Let's be honest, who can blame the parents? We live in hard times and doctors will always be indispensable. You could say that the parents only meant well for Grace and essentially, we all agree that there are worse professions than being a doctor, right?

Years go by, semesters pass, exams are sat and passed. Grace's daily routine consists of laboratory work, anatomy, clinical trials, medication, first aid and internships. No wonder that Monday doesn't bother her; after all, her weekdays were always varied and full of cutting-edge research.

“Did you see the student council's message on Instagram?” asked Jess excitedly. “Which one do you mean exactly? After all, they post something at least 5 times every day?” replied Grace in a slightly sarcastic tone. Nonetheless, her best friend Jess knew very well that Grace was just pretending to be unaware. For years, Grace has been writing her own songs privately at home. Where her musical talent came from, they didn't really know. Her parents could not be responsible for her talent and even Grace, as a medical student, could not explain with the help of genetics where her passion for songwriting came from. Grace, however, was not one to post or even perform her songs in public. No, she wrote down her private thoughts and feelings at home and conjured up a musical piece on a sheet of paper - which, however, also remained private. Never had anyone heard a song by Grace in public. Jess was the only one who knew that Grace secretly hid her songs privately under her desk at home.

“Don't play dumb now,” Jess said with a smirk on her face. She had previously discovered on Instagram that young up-and-coming singers were being sought for some festivals in their hometown. The pandemic was finally over, and everyone wanted to get back to normal. The anticipation for festivals and concerts was tremendous, especially in cities like theirs. Jess knew that Grace was not a big bragger when it came to her private music, but still, Jess knew that music was secretly Grace's greatest passion and nothing in the world, not even medicine, could take the place of music in Grace's heart.

Jess saw it in Grace's eyes. You can rarely hide your emotions well as a human being. Being human is largely about having emotions, isn't it? When it came to music, you could see the passion in Grace's eyes. The fire that shines through her iris when she talks about her self-written lines. At home, alone in private, as soon as Grace picks up a guitar and begins to sing, the whole house falls silent, and everyone listens to Grace's soft voice. But why this uncertainty? Why did Grace always stay in private with her music? That is a question that only she herself can probably answer. Not even Jess knew the exact answer. She didn't tell.

“You are going to audition for the organizers and sing your song in front of them. I'm so sure you'll be their absolute dream choice when it comes to the festival and the big final concert,” Jess enthusiastically told Grace. “I don't know...the only time I spoke in front of a lot of people was when I had given a presentation on the cardiovascular system or disease patterns in aging. Never have I sung in front of anyone. What if they laugh at me? Who knows? My musical tastes are not mainstream, and you know as a musician and artist you make yourself vulnerable,” Grace explained with a very uncertain tone in her voice. “Even if they listened to me and even if I sang in front of them...never would they choose me - a boring medical student - as the main act for a festival,” Grace murmured in an almost sad tone. “I don't want to hear that self-pity talk. You are going to audition at the village square on Friday at 1 p.m. and you'll see everyone will be thrilled,” declared Jess in a definite and almost dynamic tone.

Do you know that feeling before an important exam? If I had to describe it, I wouldn't necessarily use the words *fear* and *insecurity*, but rather this nervousness about failure. Do we think failure is a waste of time? Do we consider that if we don't pass an exam we're worth less? What exactly is it that makes us humans so vulnerable in testing situations? And why are we all so similar in these situations? That Friday was just such a test in the life of Grace. It was not about scoring a certain number of points, as she was accustomed to in medical school. Rather, it was about bringing her personal thoughts and innermost feelings to the public – in the form of music.

And then it really happened. Grace stood in front of the stage for the audition, which had only been an insignificant topic of conversation a few days before. She felt her pulse getting faster and faster. Blood pressure increased. Her hands became sweaty, and her legs were shaking. But we're not talking about fear here. We're talking about a person who, for the first time in her life, took her songs from her private room to the public. Grace first set foot on the stage steps. She went up, looked down at the people. The pulse became faster again by a few frequencies. Now her hands were shaking too. The excitement made breathing quicken. She took one last deep breath, grabbed her guitar on her left, stood directly in front of the microphone and let her voice flow out.

“You wouldn't worry so much about what others think of you if you realized how seldom they do.” -

Eleanor Roosevelt

[back to contents](#)

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by maria rudigier

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I unlock the door and enter the hallway. Finally, I can breathe. Tension and stress disappear as I take the heavy backpack off my shoulders the moment I cross the threshold. Finally, home.

It's 6 p.m. on a Tuesday in November. Total darkness is lurking behind the windows. Without bothering to switch on the lights, I put my trench coat onto a hanger and pull off my black boots. My backpack remains in the corner of the hallway. I walk into the kitchen and put the kettle on. I choose a calming herbal tea and take out a cup. Only now I switch on the lights in the kitchen, and the brightness hurts my tired eyes, exhausted from looking at the computer screen all day. For a short moment, my mind tricks me into feelings of remorse for not staying at work longer. Is there still enough time to get everything done by the end of the week? The clicking sound of the kettle brings me back into the kitchen. Absentmindedly I pour the boiling water into the cup and wait for my calming herbal tea to cool off. I drag myself into the hall to grab my laptop, sit down on my bed and I look out of the window into the black dark autumn night. I take a first sip and wait for the warm liquid to unfold its supposedly calming effects...

After some minutes of staring into the dark and sipping my sage-green tea, I open my laptop and a red square with big white letters saying 'BREAKING NEWS' pops up. I am navigated to a newspaper article. A link at the bottom of the webpage guides me to a video in which an expert and a reporter discuss their take on the event. I enter the expert's name into the Google search field and lose myself in his curriculum vitae: He did a degree in biology at the University of Vienna and then continued his studies in Berlin. In 2014, he completed his PhD in Munich, where he lives and works until today. He married at the age of 32 and has published two books at the Springer publishing house. In high school he played the piano and attended a school with a focus on scientific subjects. The reporter studied politics at the University of

Innsbruck, did several internships at the local radio station and continued working for different newspapers. However, the internet refuses to tell me which high school she attended and which extracurricular activities occupied her time as a young girl. People's biographies never fail to fascinate me.

Back on the online page of the newspaper, I skim several articles until my stomach grumbles loudly and reminds me that I am craving nutrients. After connecting my phone to the Bluetooth speaker and putting on a podcast, I prepare myself something to eat. While eating, doing the washing up and getting ready for bed, I continue to listen to the podcast. A final glimpse at the newsfeed before I set the alarm for the next day. My thoughts keep returning to the video discussing the breaking news. But my mind is used to processing breaking news, and I quickly fall asleep.

When my alarm goes off for the sixth time, after having pressed the snooze button five times, I switch on the lights and stare at the ceiling to allow my eyes to adjust to the brightness. Then I grab my phone; the brightness of the display forces me to keep my eyes half closed until I set it darker. I ignore the message notifications and consult the newsfeed of an online newspaper half-awake before I have a shower and get ready for work. On my way to work, I listen to music and buy a print edition of a newspaper. On the front page of every newspaper I spot different pictures displaying yesterday's breaking news. I buy one, the one I always buy, and flip through the paper while rushing towards the office. "Sorry," I mumble to the man I almost ran into. At the office, I greet my colleagues and sit down at my glass desk on a vintage black leather chair. My to-do list tells me I've got three zoom meetings with different authors today and need to finish translating a short story. Lunch break with Jess. Let's get started...

After two hours of work, I get myself a coffee, read the front page of the newspaper I bought and chat with my colleagues. Different colleagues stop by and comment on the article in front of me. I check the newsfeed on my phone before I get back to work: Yesterday's breaking news are still all over the newsfeed page. I power through the translation of some paragraphs of a short story and get stuck with the word *Gedankenkarussell*. No English word renders the meaning of this German noun accurately. I get lost in doing research and realise that I'm already late for lunch.

I get my purse and hurriedly head to the restaurant where I'm supposed to meet Jess. I hop on the tram and manage to get a seat. On a small screen, the release of a book is announced which I immediately add to my TBR list on the phone. I exit the tram and arrive at the restaurant with a delay of 10 minutes. Jess is already waiting for me in front of the restaurant and smiles at me as I'm approaching her.

"Sorry for being late," I greet her.

"No problem, I would've been shocked if you'd been on time."

We take a seat, order and catch up: We discuss work, news and our weekend plans. She asks me if I heard of yesterday's breaking news, and I overwhelm her with all the extra details after my lengthy research the evening before.

"Of course you've already conducted deep research," she says with a smile on her face.

Jess recommends a podcast to me which I promptly add to the TBL list on my phone. I get back to work and start listening to my November playlist. Just as I enter the office, my headphones run out of power and switch off. I work on the tasks on my to-do list and I occupy myself with the word *Gedankenkarussell* once again. I need to be content with a more or less

accurate description of the term that nevertheless does not render the meaning of *Gedankenkarussell* precisely. Two more zoom meetings. After the meetings, I take a break, grab a coffee and read another article in the newspaper. I finish the translation of the short story and start doing research for my next book translation before I call it a day.

On the way home, I realise that I have forgotten to charge my headphones. I enter the tram and inadvertently eavesdrop on conversations people are having next to me: A couple talks about an appointment at the ophthalmologist. Two girls discuss their geography homework. A man is ranting about his broken down car and screams into his phone. Until this moment, all the conversations I had today revolved around yesterday's breaking news. I hear a bubble burst in my head. The tram experience is different outside the bubble which I usually maintain with the help of my headphones.

I unlock the door and enter the hallway. Finally, I can breathe. Tension and stress disappear as I take the heavy backpack off my shoulders the moment I cross the threshold. Finally, home.

It's 6 p.m. on a Wednesday in November. Total darkness is lurking behind the windows. Without bothering to switch on the lights, I put my trench coat onto a hanger and pull off my trainers. My backpack remains in the corner of the hallway. I walk into the kitchen and put the kettle on. I choose a revitalising green tea and take out a cup. Only now I switch on the lights in the kitchen, and the brightness hurts my tired eyes, exhausted from looking at the computer screen all day. I put on the podcast my friend recommended to me and start listening to it. The podcast discusses the phenomenon 'information society'. After some minutes, I pause the podcast and enter the words 'information society definition' into the Google search field on my phone. No finds. I realise that I mistyped the word. Once again, I press the keys. `information space society space definition`. I click on the first article that appears and start reading:

*A concept that responds to the expansion and ubiquity of information. The term has been in use since the 1970s, but has gained in popularity and is now widely used in social and political policy. Sustained and accelerated growth of media, of education provision and participation, as well as computer communications technologies has led many to posit that the attendant information explosion distinguishes a new epoch. The information society is one in which information is the defining feature, unlike the industrial society where steam power and fossil fuels were distinguishing elements.**

At the bottom of the website, there are several links for further readings on the topic. Do I click on the link?

[back to contents](#)

* Excerpt from: Scott, J. & Marshall, G. (2009). *A Dictionary of Sociology*, OUP