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01. Saleswoman

South of Autumn City's central park, the antiquarian book store's sole saleswoman and owner mentally prepares herself to close the shop for the night. The sun sets as romantically as possible, tempting one to ignore that its deep orange rays mainly fall on brick walls and concrete. That these surfaces reflect a bit of that interstellar warmth makes them seem a whole less sulkily mundane. Through the book store's dusty windows, the light diffuses in a way that makes the shop's interior look peculiarly dimmed by its rays. The only matter the sun's weakened beams finally get lost and settle in is the spider-web-like hair of the saleswoman, sitting behind a desk twice her age at least, reading, of all things, Jane Austen. This is her way of preparing herself to close the shop.

She is the Paper Woman. Made entirely of the same material she sells and buys all day, but strangely come to life. Her greyish, convoluted hair is a mass of dried-up split ends, dowdily framing her face that could qualify as diamond-shaped if it weren't for her broad, flat forehead and small, pointy chin. Her thin, patchy eyebrows, used to frown at haplessly written paragraphs in literature she expected more of, are made of only a few clusters of thicker, darker hair than even her lashes and grow in too irregular a manner to pluck or shape them in any conventionally personable way. Her muddy-grey eyes are set wide apart from one another, leaving enough room for her slightly hooked, sharply-cut nose to develop plenty of detail and character. Apart from her dry, light skin and the tired

eyes, her nose, while still characteristically sharp, has a strong competitor in her thin, dry, blue lips that can make any smile look condescending. Seen in profile, her nose, that for any other face would have been disastrous, is her most attractive and defining feature.

The Paper Woman turns a page as I come closer, carrying some books for cover. She doesn't pay me much attention and is used to me spending large amounts of time in her sanctuary. Nobody buys more books than I do, and nobody but her sells books as rare and obscure for such ludicrous prices.

She frowns. Her fingers twitch once. Austen made a remark she does not approve of. Through her hollow cheeks, I can see how her tongue forms a word she detains herself from vocalizing. She firmly presses her lips together, making me feel as if I could hear their skin crack from the pressure. Her lips are always cracked. That is the first thing that struck me when I started visiting her, when I had finally found this haven officiated over by an actual paper woman. I had already given up searching for any paper people; I had grown accustomed to Autumn City being a city of glass people in all their dull lucency.

I put the books I intend to buy today – Victorian romance novels nobody else would buy and I feel a certain pity for, for at least their use of language has always been superb – on her desk, and even before she can put down her book, I start talking in a way much more casual than I thought I would:

- In vain have I struggled.

I don't look much like a struggler, and therefore she side-eyes me critically. She does not yet know where this will lead.

- It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed.

Some ominous sparkle dawns in her look. I expected nothing less.

- You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.

At first, Paper Woman doesn't move. Then, she starts leafing through her book until she has reached the paragraph I just quoted so perfectly, and contemplates for a second on what to do. It was a sudden attack, so I let her take her time to recover and come up with a response. After a while, she starts reading aloud, in a voice that sounds like it comes from an old record:

- In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they might be returned.

There are very few remains of a German accent when she answers me; I always liked that about her, this ability to obscure her being German with such impeccable English, so impeccable even I, living in this concrete, bleak German city for years, had a hard time believing she was not from an entirely different country where knowing less than two or three languages at an early age was frowned upon.

Paper Woman seems to have come to a decision, closes her book and smiles at me. She is amused.

- You know that, when he utters this ridiculous confession, Darcy is rejected?

- And a true fan of Jane Austen would certainly re-enact this outcome.

- That is correct.

She smiles even brighter.

- How did you know I am not a fan of Austen? You see me reading her so regularly.

- And even more regularly, I see you frowning when you force yourself to do that. May I ask what drives you to this kind of self-flagellation?

- There are certain expectations invested in us folks who sell books. The first one being that we are old, bespectacled and British, or French at least, and the other one, that if we can't fulfil this first standard, we try to substitute our lack of otherness. I might manage to be old and bespectacled one day, and on the Britishness I'm working. I made some efforts in being French, but reading French philosophers babbling about signifier and signified all day makes everything seem very pointless and question one's position a little too much for a salesperson. Joke's on me, I wanted to be French and forgot about the ennui parts of it; so I went with embracing Regency era literature. At least, that leaves some Mary Shelley to be read, too.

We grin at one another. Her long, thin fingers, whose rosy, naturally sleek fingernails are the only part of Paper Woman's visible body that doesn't seem damaged and crumpling in any way, tap on the desk a few times, as if she tries to clock her thoughts. I assume she is a great deal younger than I am, but paper people tend to age at a rate I and anyone else couldn't possibly keep up with. She should have passed me within a few years, and therefore, I think, age shouldn't be much of an issue for her. Additionally, I am quite charming, and, while certainly arrogant, do not show any bad boy

demeanour that might lead her to the assumption I was into playing strange games with other people.

Alas, I am not entirely conventionally attractive. Being of rather small and box-shaped design, I have a bitter face, amplified by my receding hairline, the creases between my eyebrows and my wide nose with its prominent nostrils. I tend to decorate my long face with beards that take away some of the sourness, which isn't the most fashionable choice for the current decade, and the moles on both my cheeks manage to fake some youthfulness into my appearance, but generally, I am convinced that if Paper Woman decides to accept me as her suitor, she won't base her decision on my good looks.

- Care for dinner?,
she asks.

- I cannot yet confess my feelings in a way as fervently as you, however I'd have to lie if I were to tell you that I wasn't pleased to see you stopping by at least once or twice a week. And your choice of books,

she glances at my picks of the day,

- makes me curious, to say the least. Alas, that love, whose view is muffled still, should, without eyes, see pathways to his will, right?

I expected nothing less of her than a test.

- Where shall we dine?,

I answer, and she raises her brows in an appreciatory manner.

- How about you pay for these books, if you intended to buy them at all and didn't simply use them to look like the regular customer you

apparently haven't been for some weeks, and we go out and buy some groceries to cook? I'm not much one for dating and awkwardly looking at each other over a round table beneath some stained drapery in one of this part of the city's allegedly wonderful cafés or restaurants.

She rises from her seat and I notice that she is not that much of a great deal taller than me as I thought, but just about half a centimetre. The authority she possesses in this environment makes her seem unreachably high, no matter how modestly seated.

- I intended to buy them,

I assure her and wait for her to skim through the titles I have chosen.

- Fifteen,

she decides after a few seconds,

- You are the only one buying English books here anyway.

- You don't have any English customers?,

I ask while handing her over three five-mark pieces.

- I have, but they feel an obligation to buy German books. Some of them even look at me in dismay when I address them in English. I must misunderstand something abysmally important there.

She puts the money into her dusty cash register and produces a woven basket from under her desk, taking out her worn leather wallet she had put in there, takes a look inside, then opens the cash register again and smilingly takes the three coins I just gave her to put them into her wallet.

- My treat,

she says,

- and talking about misunderstandings, were you aware that Shakespeare, in all likelihood, wrote Romeo as a character for the public to dislike?

- I heard about that, and for a long time thought of it as nothing more than alternate character interpretation, which I like,

I explain while she puts her wallet back into the basket and takes her keys out of it,

- But recently I have come to the assumption it might not be so much of an alternate but a better analysis of his character.

- So we are on par with distrusting a young man thinking about not much more than how to seduce grossly underage women and, when he fails to do so, where to dine. That is good to know.

Again we grin at each other, and then we leave. My books stay on her desk, waiting for our return. It will take us longer than either of us might have guessed, because we notice how different our tastes are and end up arguing jokingly about every single detail of our meal. It is highly amusing.

02. Immigrant

Anna's arrival in Autumn City couldn't have occurred at a more inconvenient time. Not that I do not want to see her, but the thought of us falling back into our old habit of never leaving each other's side because of our similar views on all those creatures beneath us horrifies me quite a lot, especially in my current situation. Nonetheless I am here, in the waiting area of the airport far west in the city. No matter how destructive the impacts we have on one another have been in the past, meeting up with her has never been unpleasant.

Today is a rather foggy and cold day, with the people greeting each other not out of a wish to communicate with one another, but because it is customary. One might argue that there are few occasions when that is different, but having lived in Autumn City for a couple of years by now, I beg to differ. The bad mood in the air today, mixing with the odours of rust and a putrescence whose source I cannot locate, is something rare, and actually, it might end up to be of greater value for Anna to see the city at its worst on arrival, instead of leaving the plane to be greeted by a nice October breeze and chirping birds – for some reason, a lot of sparrows live in the waiting area, but they are unusually quiet today – and then, a few days later, realising that this place isn't paradise, either. It's just better than anywhere else one of us has ever been stranded.

While reading one of my Victorian romance novels, I hear the automated voice from the waiting area's speakers announce that the belated flight

from Manchester finally arrived. When Anna called me from the airport some hours ago to tell me that her flight was about an hour late, I estimated it to be about two hours late when it would finally arrive, and, knowing my estimations were always too generous, wouldn't reach at the airport before three hours after the original arrival time had passed. I got here about fifteen minutes ago and had the time to read another half of a chapter of my novel and therefore regard my arrival to be very punctual. Since an announcement is faster than an air plane, I don't rush myself to anything. I close my book after finishing the paragraph I had been reading, stuff it into my jacket's pocket, rise from the cheap blue plastic seat that doesn't match my or any living person's apparel at all, and slowly walk towards the gate she's ought to be arriving at in a few moments.

It only takes me about a minute to spot her in the crowd of busy people struggling with their luggage. Anna is absurdly beautiful, and people unconsciously treat her better than other strangers. They let her have some space even in crowded places, and therefore, the woman walking unmolested by other people's body odours and moistures towards me can be no one else but my dear Anna.

She wears sunglasses and Capri jeans, two things I never saw her wearing before; but I remember her always trying to be more mainstream and regular; these vogueish decisions might stem from that desire. Her pitch black hair is just as short as always, and her dark, smooth skin flawless and radiating except for the dimples adorning her cheeks. She is a boyish woman with a square face, strong eyebrows and a wide mouth, who at the

same time embodies a lot of flapper girl characteristics. Naturally, that might only be my perception, because I remember her so well in her jazz age phase.

I count to three for no particular reason, then walk towards her.

- Anna!

She waves and smiles, showing off her white, carnivorous teeth, dragging her luggage behind her.

- Is that everything you brought?,

I ask when I finally reach her, pointing at her one trolley case and the gym bag over her shoulder before hugging her.

- What else should I bring?,

she asks after I let go, smiling brightly. On the way to the bus station she tells me that she broke up her entire household and sold her apartment in Manchester.

- I thought about subletting it first, but then I thought, whatever, I'm moving to Autumn Town to stay. Won't ever get Emma to come with me to Manchester anyway, and the job offer I got here is quite good. Did I tell you what it is?

I negate that question while buying two tickets from a ticket machine that luckily isn't out of order today. There must be some compensatory powers of the universe at work, with the energy of a belated flight and some bad weather powering a ticket machine that, as far as I remember, never worked when the sun was shining.

- Well, it's in that advertising agency, *Rouault Medienservice*, where Emma's

cousin is the account executive. They were in search of a new lead designer.

- What experience do you have with advertisements?

- As much as I claimed to have in my resume.

We look into each other's eyes for a second, both trying not to burst out into laughter.

- Granted, that counts as advertising,

I finally mutter before I manage to point in the direction of the bus stop our means of transportation is ought to start from in a few minutes. It hasn't arrived yet, so we take a seat on one of the dented metal benches nearby.

- Will we have to change?,

Anna asks. I nod.

- The apartment you have rented is in the far east of the city. We'll take the bus until we reach the park and then switch to the metro.

- There is a metro in this town?

- As long as you're with me, there is.

Anna understands and nods in response. She takes a look around.

- You know, I mainly remember Germany as the place where everybody asked me to speak proper German until they found out I'm British.

- Hasn't changed much. Simply always approach people using some high-class English they don't understand. They like that feeling of internationality; they approve it more than being addressed by someone who doesn't know all the grammatical specifics of a language they themselves are hardly capable of.

- You've had some experience.

- Plenty. In what language are you talking with Emma?

- English, of course. She doesn't like my awkwardness and civility I apparently adopt in German.

- Sounds like a dream woman.

- She has a point, though.

There is a short silence.

- And I like the awkwardness and civility she adopts when talking English a lot.

We both laugh.

- You are jolly insecure about this, right?,

I ask her. She nods fervently.

- Of course. I never moved countries for a girlfriend. Anyway, I'm glad to be out of Manchester. I feel like I lived there forever.

- Feels like that to me, too. How long has it been? Five years or so?

- A hundred on my watch.

The bus arrives, and after a few seconds of eyeing the world outside of her realm with suspicion, the bus driver, a middle-aged woman of noteworthy world-weariness, opens the door. I show her our tickets and we respectfully enter in silence. Anna follows me to a four seater and we sit down again. I recall that I failed to ask Anna whether I should carry some of her luggage, however I don't feel like apologizing for it now. For a second, I think about mentioning the bad weather, before remembering that the relationship I have with Anna is a real and deep one that I don't

want to spoil merely because I fear some moments of silence. These fears turn out to be unsubstantiated anyway, since Anna has more than enough topics to bring up:

- Coming back to what you said earlier, yes, she is quite the dream woman. I know you wouldn't deign to look at her for more than a second, with all your requirements for people to be remarkable or even noteworthy, but you wouldn't believe how happy I am to have her.

She finally decides to take off her sunglasses and grants me the view into her large dark eyes that immediately survey all the little goings-on on the road as the bus takes off. We and a glass couple that will most likely get a divorce within the next few months in another four seater are the only passengers.

- Besides, she's the best fuck I've had in years.

I chuckle. Anna normally doesn't use any vulgar terms, yet, being amused by my refusal of everything ordinary and trivial, vulgarities first, tends to change her vocabulary when she is around me.

- How about you?,

she then asks,

- Can't put a date on it, but if I had to describe it in biblical terms, you've been single since the flood. Has that state of affairs seen an appreciable change in the last couple of years or are you still roaming dusty bars in search for people you deem out of the ordinary?

- Have switched over to book stores and found someone,

I answer smilingly. Anna raises an eyebrow and a mouth corner;

implications for honest astonishment.

- You? Finally? Who did you find to not bore you to death, and all the better, put up with your crap?

- A Paper Woman.

Anna rolls her eyes.

- God, not that shit again. Seriously?

I nod.

- You fetishise 'em, just so you know. How's she?

- Perfect.

- Yeah I know, apart from that.

- She owns an antiquarian book store south of the central park and lives in one of the apartments above. It has a really nice view, by the way.

- So she grants you unrestricted access to old books and nice views of trees. That actually sounds like something that might be for you.

- We've been together for one and a half years.

- Wow. No, really, wow. And you didn't tell me until now?

- Well, I know your opinion of paper people.

- No, you know my opinion on your behaviour towards paper, and your opinion of glass people.

- There's plenty of them, by the way. No shortage of crystalline bores in this city.

- Knowing you, that sounds like a disadvantage, but the shortage must make the paper people even more valuable in your eyes.

- You know me indeed.

- There is some kind of masochism in your biases.

Anna manages to crack a smile, but there is some – it's not even disdain anymore – abhorrent disgust mixed with the boredom of repetition in the way she rolls her eyes at the same time. I had my reasons to not tell her anything about my relationship. Her prejudices still are far more pronounced, and worse, subconscious than mine.

- Anyway,

she attempts to revive the conversation after a while of sitting in ominous silence,

- Anyway, I want you to show me the city, old bad habits sticking with either one of us or not. None of us has ever been a saint in relationship matters. And while you dehumanise and overvalue your significant others, it's their humanity that makes me undervalue mine.

- Well, that is true,

I laughingly proclaim, remembering some of our shared misadventures. Anna has a way of detecting every single one of her, and other people's, weak points and imperfections, while being so much of a critic of self-optimisation that she never even thought of adjusting her attitude towards some healthier behaviour.

- I think we can both agree that we don't have to visit any theatres or music halls anytime soon. They have become rubbish, since, you know. In my opinion. And while Autumn City has a plethora of cinemas,

I keep on vilifying the place I love,

- neither one of us trusts movie arts as a lasting means yet, I suppose.

- That is correct,

Anna nods,

- I wouldn't mind to visit a theatre, but I get your drift. Any libraries you would recommend?

- Go for the book stores, the antiquarian ones especially.

I smirk, and her expression, which was stern for just a second, becomes sanguine as well.

- Certainly you need to equip yourself with some furniture and appliances first. You told me your new abode has been advertised as 'partially furnished', and from my experience, that could mean anything from 'the last tenant left their entire interior decoration up to the towels in the guest bathroom, yet they took their crockery with them' to 'the last tenant took everything including one or two windows, but left their broken crockery'.

- That matches my experience. Well, the landlords told me that the kitchen is fully equipped, even with a nice little dining area, as far as I can judge from some blurry photographs, but the bedroom is empty. Some help in that area would be greatly appreciated. Do you have a car?

I shake my head.

- No, but I know one furniture store not too far from your part of the city; transport will be cheap from there.

- Can I go there alone?

- I fear not. I am not quite sure, to be honest, what the store might be for you when I'm not there.

- Oh, remember, in Manchester, I recommended you this restaurant, and when you went there with a date, it was a pet store?

- A classic! The restaurant wouldn't open for another ten years.

The sun breaks through the clouds, and the sudden warmth on our faces makes us forget most of the animosity that was still lingering in the air.

- The light is beautiful here,

Anna notes,

- I can understand why you moved. You say it's always autumn here?

- Always.

- Let's see if that applies for me, too. Give me your mobile number, so I can send you a picture of the first snowflake or anything wintry I see.

I don't quite understand.

- My what?

- Your mob-,

Anna starts, then interrupts herself:

- Ah, I see.

03. Girlfriend

- Can you reach there?,

Emma asks me, and I marvel at her sheer lack of every basic survival skill. She must come from a family where such behaviour is tolerated, if not encouraged. I do not refer to her asking me for help repeatedly where she shouldn't need any, because learned helplessness is a state of being I have full understanding for, but rather the fact that she is so unaware of her proportions in relation to mine that she asks a man smaller than her three or four times in a row to reach places she could easily get at if she tiptoed for a mere second. But she doesn't, hopefully not only because she is dense, but because she is keen on connecting with me.

Emma lives downstairs in a three-room-apartment, alone, therefore wasting large amounts of precious space on this planet for her desire of large-scale solitude, despite her dog. Glass people have an affinity for dogs, maybe because they are so homely and unimaginative. Her dog, given that one day some cosmological uncertainty would transform him into a human, might have the potential to be a paper person. He seems depressed and vastly more sophisticated than his owner – I hesitate to even call her his owner – and also slightly aggressive, as if he'd attack me in the moment I'd pay him enough attention to signal him I might be upset about his disaffirmation. And while dogs usually do not approve of either me or Anna, this one is immensely fond of her. He must have a gut feeling, or whatever unerring feelings dogs possess, about her being not the usual

new temporary horde member – or he is just thankful that Emma now finally needs to divide her free time between him and her girlfriend. Anyway, like every pet, this dog also is a useless piece of movable furniture that doesn't really like to move. He's just lying there, next to the half-built shelf whose top Emma and I can't reach, waiting for his meaningless life to end – I might be projecting here, but projection without some surface to reflect from is impossible – and, for his amusement, lies so close to us that he forces Emma to stand really close to me, which led to her observing me critically. She carefully keeps tab on my facial features, use of language, body shape, not out of genuine interest in me as a person and, presumably, the wish to get in contact with the friends of her beloved, but because she wants to check whether I fit into the usual criteria that cause insecurity in a mediocreatively attractive person like her: She wants to know whether I am the heterosexual predatory best friend waiting to turn over her new possession, an equally predatory heterosexual ex-boyfriend who is waiting for Anna to change her mind again, an innocent guy with some kind of universal innate attractiveness who might turn Anna without really intending to do so, or just some regular sod Anna knew for a couple of years who didn't disappear in the sea of forgotten acquaintances. I'd like to tell her that Anna's and my friendship is a very practical one – our kin tends to see the world quite differently from any other person and our perceptions at least partially overlap, making it easier to have some lasting, coherent shared narrative – and therefore, even if we didn't like one another as much as we actually do – and yes, in my sexually most

frustrated period, when we first met, I was that first of the four dude friend options, without anything happening, ever – we are heavily dependent on staying in contact, or at least writing a postcard to one another once in a while to remind us that in the worst case scenario, there is someone to whom we could confess the mess we caused or are stuck in without being looked at incredulously. In our quite special case, which I might explain at one time or another, that is an invaluable asset. To finally ease this woman's mind, I tell her about my girlfriend, and keep track of how many times I describe my girlfriend's unblemished absolute beauty – which, superficially, is a lie, because ten out of ten people would value Anna's beauty far over Paper Woman's, and I too think Anna's physical appearance outshines that of most people – just to show her how busy I am adoring another woman.

Emma, a bitter-faced, pale woman – the embodiment of a mealy-mouthed wallflower – with freckles, a hawk nose, a round, fleeing chin, thin lips and squinted eyes, but with an impressively trim figure and well-kept, chin-length light brown hair, happily listens to me enumerating the ways in which this is the best relationship I ever had while I think about why a woman who obviously visits a fitness studio at least twice a week is so incapable of just jumping over her damn dog, getting a chair from the dining area we just furnished, lifting it over that damn dog, jumping over her damn dog again, and then climbing onto that chair to reach for whatever she is searching for on this unfinished shelf herself. But then, glass people.

- What's her name?,

she asks, and when she notices my perplexed look, she adds:

- Your girlfriend's.

What a mundane person.

I have to think for a moment.

- Paula.

That is the most generic German name my vocabulary allows me to use, faced with such a funny question.

- Oh, how nice,

Emma answers smilingly. The girlfriend tag has a name and therefore is not a figment of my imagination. She allows herself to tag me as safe.

The dog, as if he had been told to do so, gets up and takes his leave of us. Anna joins us, and her presence, in this peculiar situation, is redeeming in itself.

- How you guys doin'?,

she says in an attempt of slang I identify as fake. That means she's been eavesdropping. I like her for that, because that means, in retrospective, I haven't been alone in this ungodly situation. So I forgive her the bad vernacular.

- Doin' fine.

She glances at me. I glance back. Emma doesn't get it.

- Can you reach up there, Anna?

Of the three of us, Anna is the smallest.

Anna's apartment on the fourth floor is just as spacious as Emma's. If there are any redeeming qualities about that woman, it's probably that she didn't insist on moving in with Anna immediately. Of course that means that now two women basically share six rooms since they live in the same building. And while Emma is just enough of a compulsive hoarder to make her abode seem furnished, Anna is a huge minimalist. When we went shopping ages ago, she wasn't interested in anything unnecessary. A bed and wardrobe had already been in the designated bedroom, while each the kitchen and another room were already adorned by a simple wooden table. It took me some time to convince her to buy more than three chairs in total – one for the table in what she planned to make her studio, two for the one she had settled on becoming the dining table – and to convince her of a sofa and coffee table for her third room, it took me literally hours. A matching ottoman and armchair were impossible objectives. Emma jokingly said that she was glad the apartment already had wallpaper, because otherwise Anna would just leave the walls naked. If Emma hadn't mentioned this, Anna, in all probability, would have ripped the wallpaper off.

The machine Anna put on her table is something I have never seen before. I do my best to not betray my ignorance in front of Emma, but when we were alone, Anna patiently explained to me that this thing is what she works with. There are some other machines and appliances she owns I don't yet understand, but I'm fine with her being a few years ahead of me. It has been the same in Manchester, but I feel like in Autumn City,

I'm accelerating. At some point, we might actually meet on eye level.

The apartments of Emma and Anna are, and on that topic, Anna and I agree, in a completely wonderful Brutalist building. Brutalist architecture, bare concrete, is one of the most hopeful materials I know of. I hope that at some point in spacetime, concrete people will be introduced as a new addition to the species.

04. Parent

- My parents have inquired after you,

Paper Woman tells me while we devour our meals. We have made a habit out of staying in bed until late in the afternoon on the weekends, occasionally being taken over by some incredibly strong hunger, and after appeasing it, finally getting out of the dirty sheets and cooking something.

I simply nod. This is nothing even remotely surprising: After three and a half years, parents might have worked up the courage to voice their desire to meet their daughter's boyfriend.

- I'm fine with that,

I answer,

- I'm curious, too. I'd like to know how they are.

We are sitting in her kitchen, half naked. She wears a shirt while I wear trousers, which means that we share one full outfit. She pours some tea for both of us.

- Regular old people. I don't think you'll be impressed.

- Me neither. How come they suddenly want to see me?

- They have a daughter nearing her thirties, unmarried, in a relationship with a foreign man they don't know. They are a little bit old-fashioned. They wanted to meet you for a while now, but I wasn't much into that idea.

She takes a bite from her breaded trout fillet.

- My mother isn't a great cook, by the way,
she notes in a confessional tone,

- I wouldn't expect too much from her.

It's heart-warming that she warns me beforehand. My snobbery concerning foodstuffs is one of my most peculiar qualities, and one we both equally like. I take the lead in cooking almost all of our meals.

- Oh, I could cook,

I answer after a while,

- or bring some pre-cooked meals. It will be a nice gesture and I won't have to leave my plate half-eaten or even untouched. It will be troubling enough to convince your folks that I possess any qualities apart from that.

Paper Woman nods. I take a bite, too, and urge her to tell me more about her family.

- My mother is a homemaker,

she starts,

- but she does her best to seem like a professor of literature who, at some point in their life, got very sick and then had to stay home. She will talk about her ill health continuously, just to not seem like an ordinary homemaker. As far as I'm concerned, she doesn't have a degree in anything and was a secretary before she married.

I drink some tea while memorising the information. So far, she said nothing unusual. Paper woman continues:

- I know it is tempting, but I wouldn't mock her. She gets bad tempered whenever someone calls her out.

- Fair enough. It is some work to emulate a professor of literature.

- Oh, she has a model for it. My father is an actual professor of

anthropology. To this day, he grew accustomed to people confusing it with ethnology, hence the collection of pseudo-African miniatures in my parents' living room's shelves, and the orientalist carpets of course. He likes to make people feel comfortable in their beliefs, but don't hesitate to treat him like a proper anthropologist instead of a collector of everything ethnic. He likes being taken seriously outside of his faculty from time to time, too.

- Are your parents a happy couple?

- I never thought about it. There are a lot interdependencies going on, therefore even if they loved each other, they would barely have any time or opportunity to notice.

- Are you an only child?

Paper Woman nods.

- That is why they are so keen on having me married as fast as possible. All their friends' children are married already; however, like any ageing couple, they don't have a whole lot of friends.

- Would you like to marry me?

- No.

- So when,

I say 'when' because I don't doubt that it will happen,

- when they ask me if I intend to marry you, what should I answer?

- The truth, probably.

We smile. Later on, when we turn on the radio, we find out that two days ago, Joseph Beuys has died.

- Of course,

I reply to the old man who looks like an altarpiece. Paper Woman looks at me with a mixture of astonishment and anger, trying her best not to drop her cutlery.

- Oh, goot,

her father contentedly responds, trying his best to maintain a horrible German accent so his wife doesn't feel left out of the conversation while still mocking her this way.

- Wenn du iu intent tu mährrie?,

the mother asks, and the pseudo-British accent she just put on to sugar-coat her German disguised as English implies her delight that the daughter she never seemed to have much hope for finally found a man. I put on a light suit that gives me the appearance of being well-fed instead of plain chubby, combed my hair in a way that makes me seem less balding and the hair less long and even told them I had a name (Paul) and a job (banker) and therefore look kind of trustworthy and respectable. Paper Woman is very good at containing herself and didn't even crack a smile when I lied so blatantly about the existence of my tenement, which is the reason why I assumed she might be able to maintain a straight face even when her father asked me the inevitable question.

Putting all my charms into a single turn of the head, I smile at Paper Woman's mother, sitting to my left in front of a wooden souvenir mounted on the wall that is supposed to look like a Punu mask, and answer, with an

even posher British accent than hers, as if to approve of her efforts:

- Well, we have been seeing each other for quite a long time already, thus I don't think we are in much of a hurry. I see no difference between the marriage taking place tomorrow or in two years.

- Ent tschildren?,

the mother, losing more and more discretion by the minute, keeps on asking. My guess is that because of her knowledge about her linguistic limitations, she has no reservations whatsoever about asking what she is interested in and might even use her respective situation to not have to fear any repercussions for her demeanour.

I take a look at Paper Woman, who seems to have disappeared in her parents' minds, looking back at me, terrified.

I wink at the mother.

- Are you asking me whether there are plans on any, or on how many?

The mother smiles. She is satisfied, and so is the father.

To the cursory spectator, the father, if one was forced to choose between the two, would be the more reasonable choice to strike up a conversation with, but even though his English is quite advanced, the fact he is able to communicate with me with much more ease can't conceal his simplicity. The mother's options of communication are very limited, but from what I experienced so far, she is the more intelligent of the two. This gut feeling is amplified by the father's constant attempts to make his wife seem unsophisticated, even stupid, because he knows that this is the only way to keep her silent and give himself the appearance of a savant. Whenever she

starts to recite poems and quotes, he interrupts her to correct a mistake that actually isn't one, and with guests less educated, this game must certainly work well.

Apart from these little atrocities, both of them seem like friendly, simple-minded people. Friendly, because they mean no harm to anyone except each other, and simple-minded, because as glass people, they cannot process the fact that they have been incredibly lucky to have been blessed with a paper daughter. They don't see anything special in their child at all. It's not that they appear disappointed or underwhelmed; they are just completely incapable of understanding what is going on. For them, a daughter in her late twenties, unmarried, owning an antiquarian book store and renting an apartment instead of being married, pregnant, co-owning a house and working at someone else's book store two or three times a week is just someone struggling to one day lead a normal life.

The father, after a long while, turns to his daughter and, having dropped his fake mispronunciation, scoffs:

- And you didn't want to introduce us to a man who finally makes some sense. I am surprised, positively, I mean.

- Me too,

are the first two words she manages to get out of her system,

- surprised, that is.

- Ent hie kenn koock!,

the mother adds before embarking on telling me stories of the ungodly meals she was served back in the hospital when she had to have this

surgery of an organ that might have been her liver, or her gallbladder, or her left or right kidney, who knows.

Before we take our leave, she will quote William Butler Yeats, this time uninterrupted by her husband, likely enough to remind us that marrying too late might lead to unwanted side effects. As I have some respect for Yeats, I will quote her as if she was capable of successfully mimicking the posh British accent she strives for the whole afternoon:

- *O who could have foretold / That the heart grows old?*

- Are you insane?,

Paper Woman asks me the very moment her mother has closed the door behind us. Her parents live far up north, in the least Brutalist and most lower class part of the city. I assume they started out pretty low, and when they finally had reached middle class, they didn't feel like moving on. They own a house after all, and being the richest among the poor certainly for some is a more rewarding feeling than being just as middle class as the person next door.

- Why would you think that?,

I reply, a little bit absent-mindedly.

- You told them we were planning to marry. How am I going to explain to them that that isn't going to happen?

The wind blows through her brittle hair and worn cloak. We step through some puddles as we go, and my suit's trousers are soaked and dirty within seconds.

- What's the deal with you? I'm fine with most of your behaviour. I never asked for your name or where you live or anything because I honestly don't care. I accept your ludicrous fake British accent, even. I care for you, not these trifles. I have my assumptions why you aren't telling me anything, anyway.

The way she glances at me makes me insecure for a second. I assume she is referring to something I don't know, because her actually apprehending the truth would be a most inconvenient outcome. She is intelligent, and also, she is upset. So I don't comment on what she just said and let her vent.

- I'm fine with you inventing your story in front of my parents because it makes them feel better, and I like them feeling good. But that? You gave them a promise we couldn't possibly keep.

- We couldn't?

- Of course not.

Suddenly, she stops, and looks at me with a confusion that within seconds becomes the barren facial expression of someone who just came to a horrifying conclusion.

- Wait, on Saturday, on Saturday, when you asked me if I intended to marry you – you were serious then?

I gladly smile at her. She distorts her mouth in ways I haven't encountered until now, before menacingly uttering:

- Learn to take 'No' for an answer.

For a minute, she is silent, trying to calm down and ignoring the

moisture oozing through her boots. Some brown leaves swimming on the puddles' surface she stands in catch her attention, and, strangely, I hear her whisper:

- I wonder how the trees never run out of leaves.

That is something I have never heard before from any denizen of Autumn City. It's a thought they usually do not have. I know that she is a special case, but this body of thought is so uncommon I start to feel some solicitude concerning her health.

- Are you feeling unwell?,

I ask, and as she lifts her head, I see an alarming expression in her face:

- Hasn't there been a winter once? A season following autumn? And another one preceding it?

She looks around, with wide eyes and an open mouth, her hands shaking. Some birds in the sky are flying in formation, leaving for the south, looking beautiful against the setting sun they cross while we talk. They are always leaving, yet never coming back. It's been like this forever in Autumn City, or at least it has been like this since I am here.

- Is the world supposed to look like this in January?

That is the last straw. I grab her hand and pull her out of the puddle, then take her disconcertingly hot face in my hands and kiss her.

- It's going to be okay,

I calm her down while taking her into my arms,

- It's going to be normal again.

- Am I right,

she asks with a panicky voice,

- about you?

- If you were, mentioning it would put me in great danger,

I say in the least elucidating tone possible,

- and if you just let me bring you home now, you'll soon forget about it, and everything will be going back to normal, and I'll learn to take 'No' for an answer, and we can chuckle on the blasphemy your mother committed on Yeats and how your father's eye-rolling didn't make the situation any less painful, and tomorrow you will not question the trees anymore. I love you. Please remember I love you.

She succumbs to that offer, and we go home holding hands.

Later on, when we turn on the radio, we find out that the Challenger space shuttle has disintegrated after launch, killing all seven astronauts on board.

I believe this is the first night she tells me that she loves me too.

05. Landscaper

The only part of Autumn City that is even more run down than the north trying to be the suburbs of the poor is the northwest close to the airport. The law-abiding middle class citizens usually don't come here. The people who live here are an agreeable mixture of students with no money for better accommodation, factory workers, people whose job it is to assemble cars or use cattle guns or clean office buildings, artists who think it's avant-garde to pay their rent in cash and socialise with the jobless, homeless and alcoholics, newcomers and immigrants hoping to work their way up, indebted snack bar owners and impoverished senior citizens taking care of the pigeons and stray cats which live in the abandoned parks and ruin-like edifices that in no other part of the city would pass as habitable.

In the midst of this depressing detail of urban variety, the city's best pub is situated. Owned by two elderly paper men unaware of their condition and one glass woman, the place has been in existence for about twenty years already. Naturally, it is one of the first locations I show to Anna once she has accommodated herself a bit in her new surroundings.

- I just learned that Wubbo Ockels has died,

she tells me while we wait for our drinks.

- I've heard that name before,

is all I can answer,

- but I don't know in which context.

The name sounds like its bearer might be someone out of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, or rather the estranged cousin of the Jabberwocky from *Through the Looking Glass*, but Anna would never refer to the passing of a literary figure she hasn't met alive. And neither of us ever met one of Carroll's ghoulish creatures, as a matter of fact and principle.

- Remember when I temporarily worked in the Netherlands?

- Oh, yes, something's coming to mind,

I recall, nodding at the bartender to signal him the drinks he's been preparing for the last five minutes indeed have been ordered by us,

- That was when you still were a journalist, right? When you used that surname, what was it...?

- Shah. That's still my name.

Our drinks finally arrive, and Anna immediately orders the next one.

- Ockels was among the first people I interviewed. He was the first Dutch citizen in space.

- Ah, yes, that was ages ago,

I remember,

- You told me. You were completely excited.

- It was quite hard to communicate with you because you were busy running after the last survivors of these specific peoples in – was it France?

I nod and avoid her gaze for a moment, even though I had already been in Great Britain at that time, yet for the same purpose.

- Yes, please don't remind me of it. So, your first famous interviewee has

died?

Anna drinks half of her beverage in three large gulps and smiles nostalgically.

- Yes. It's strange because it has been such a long time already, but then it doesn't feel like it. I interviewed him about four or five years after the flight. He was a participant of the ninth mission of the Challenger, the last but one before the catastrophe.

- Oh, I remember that, it was on the news recently. Sometime last year.

Anna looks at me with some disarrangement before sipping her drink again, this time a bit more ladylike.

- Maybe the recent news isn't the best topic for us to discuss. Well, but it's nice to know in which chunk of time you're dwelling right now.

A drunk guy puts his hand on Anna's shoulder and babbles some German nonsense. Anna takes his hand into hers, lifts it from her shoulder, lets go of his hand, and politely advises the man to never talk to her again. He insists on having earned some of her time for approaching her and points to me. I guess he's asking her if I am an obstacle to be overcome. Anna tries to reject him in German for another minute, not signalling me for help, which is why I stay still. Her German is quite clumsy, and my first notion of drunk German guys has been that they consider everyone not perfectly adept in their language – whereof they think as a starting point to being able to make informed choices and show intelligent behaviour – as people not really able to make decisions for themselves. He emphatically goes to great lengths to convince Anna that her refusal of his advances is just

plain wrong, and she even displays some patience, until after several minutes she grabs him by his collar and, in a deep, evil voice, informs him with very simple English:

- Listen. Listen carefully, pal. Guy over there: Not my boyfriend. You: Ugly and uninteresting. Fuck off and don't make a fucking scene out of it because I will then fucking rip off your balls and decorate a Christmas tree with them. Feel me?

The guy's eyes widen up and suddenly become very fierce. Anna lets go of his collar and turns away from him. He starts shouting at her. Anna still doesn't make a move to ask me to step in. She just smiles at me for a second and whispers under her breath:

- More than a hundred years in Manchester and this guy thinks he could intimidate me.

She gets up from her barstool and positions herself right in front of the annoying drunkard. Of course the guy is far taller and buffer than she ever could be, but just having someone coming closer to him instead of turning away seems to be a new experience for the man. He takes a step back, still shouting at her.

The bartender glances at me and points to Anna and the drunkard with a look of inquiry. I first shrug my shoulders, then order a second drink even though I haven't even touched my first one yet. Some people need help, and some people are Anna. And I don't mean that in a good way.

Some of the guy's friends enter the scene and build up a wall of beefy bodies in front of her, quite a hyperbolical measure to counter an attack

she hasn't even started yet. I go through the options. Anna has no anger management issues, so there will be no violence included. The assumption that one of these men is so cultivated and experienced with the English language that they'd just let go of her when she explains the situation with all the civility she can force herself to typify is so radical a notion I dismiss it immediately.

I look at Anna's, by now, two glasses, one full, one almost empty, waiting for her. She hasn't broken these glasses to then go on and break some glass throats with the shards yet. Luckily, because getting a house ban from this bar would be like taking half of Autumn City from me. Finally I gulp down my alcoholic liquid and then take another look at the situation that is escalating into a very deep, severe silence. Anna just stands there, upright, tense and still, and the men in front of her keep shouting at her and discuss with one another on what to do, faced with such aggression. But the shouting fades and the discussion becomes more and more civil, and in the end, they also just stand there in awkward silence, until one after another, uttering some gendered slurs, turns their back on Anna, who finally seats herself on her barstool again. She doesn't say another word before she has downed both her glasses in one swig.

- Fucking, fucking morons.

She doesn't say it angrily, but seems rather good humoured.

- This is a great bar,
she then decides,

- The drinks are good and the supply of drunken bastards is superb. And

I like how tacky and dark everything is. How did you find this place?

- Roaming around for some years.

I reach over the counter and grab a bowl of peanuts, offering some to Anna. She takes a handful.

- It's nice to know I won't meet any of my colleagues here,

Anna adds laughingly,

- God, you should have seen these nerds.

- You've met them already?

- I started my job yesterday. The company's building is nice and the job is easy. Advertisements for poster pillars, bus stops and billboards, mostly for stuff the town wants to draw attention to, like anti-littering or conscious-drinking campaigns. Some private businesses, like cafés with open mic sessions, small art galleries with no designer or public relations executive of their own, and even a pet store are in the mix, too. No one wants anything complex, it's always just the standard 'make us look professional'-assignment. And the employees, you wouldn't believe, think this is a job which carries some responsibility. I wonder what they learned back in art school, that they have to take marketing seriously or something, I don't know. Most of them are freelancers anyway, there is no chance for them to build up a career in that system. I was very lucky getting this permanent position.

- So as usual there is no one nice around you can tattle with about the general inferiority of everyone else?

Anna smirks.

- Well, yes. I met someone.

She says this in a manner most people would introduce their new lover into a conversation, hence my astonishment. Anna leans forward and, with a bright smile, starts telling a story:

- 'k, listen: the company has an enormously oversized front yard, like, really, dramatically too large – they want to look like they have some kind of pedigree – and therefore have hired some landscapers to take care of and renew it. Most of the landscapers are pretty usual folks, dudes younger than they look in dungarees with scars all over their hands because wearing safety gloves is for sissies, you know? And when I got there yesterday, among them was this woman, this-

she pauses herself for a moment,

- *absolutely* amazingly pissed chick. It was spectacular.

With one hand, she starts playing with her hair, while the other one fidgets on the counter.

- She has hair like, I dunno, something exploded in her head, it's just a ball of reddish-chestnut-coloured curls, and this round doll face lacking visible eyebrows, and she wore the oldest and ugliest dungarees of them all, not exactly complimenting her build, and commanded the younger landscapers while getting her hands dirty digging in the narrow beds close to the entrance. The system administrator of the company's IT department knew her and, because I was in the vicinity, felt the urge to introduce us to one another when talking to her as I went by. He just went:

- Hey, Katharina, this is Anna; Anna: Katharina.

And of course he didn't get at all why both of us, me and Katharina, immediately started laughing, and to be frank, I didn't know why Katharina was laughing either. I wondered if we both were amused for the same reason, and we were: The way Rolf, that's the sysadmin's name, had pronounced our names, made it sound like 'Anna Karenina' - and, to be even more frank, I am a small-l liberal when it comes to superficiality. I took me a while to process that this landscaper got the reference, too.

Anna now decides to take one of my drinks and try it without bothering to ask me before carrying on.

- So, that was our first episode, and during lunch break, I didn't want to sit in the canteen or the variation thereof this company building has and decided to have my meal on this excuse for a picnic table set up in the front yard, to watch some of the street life and so on. Not that there's much to look at, but I prefer people walking their dogs and children to flowery wallpaper. And, you guessed it, Katharina was already sitting there, munching a sandwich that had, like, six different toppings, of which at least three of them were different kinds of meat, and there I was with my vegan couscous salad. I seated myself next to her and we started talking, introducing ourselves to one another properly over our meals. She looks like, I dunno, thirty-eight to forty or something, an older doll face, but is actually much younger, about ten years, and barely done with her master craftsman's examination in horticulture and garden landscaping. When she told me her last name, Zweig, I couldn't pronounce it properly on my first few attempts, and her best idea to help me was to say

- You know, like Stefan Zweig,

and I was pretty amazed by that, because even though I had read his name before, he was just a footnote in most of the literary canon I knew, and I had never heard someone enunciate his name before. And you know my propensity to keep discretion at bay whenever I get excited, so I immediately asked her if she was Jewish. Luckily she doesn't know much restraint either, but immediately answered in the affirmative and also asked me if I was Indian, because she had heard others using my last name. And then I had to confess that in principle, that was the case, but that I never even had set foot in India, and she then said that she never even set foot in Israel, and then we discussed how interesting it was to meet someone with this same dilemma, to, on the outside, belong to a group you lack any real meaningful connection to except for a last name. She even told me, because she grew up in the northern part of town, where there's some right-wing shit going on, that as a teenager she sometimes was afraid of leaving the house on her own.

Anna's grin is remarkably bright.

- It felt nice to meet someone who, how can I say that, who is also used to not really fit into any group one-hundred percent by default. We chatted away the whole break, and when she went back to hoe up the weeds and I had to go back up to start working on a poster campaign for the annual town cleaning, we made an appointment to meet up after work. But you wouldn't believe it, she didn't take me to any pub or night club or anything, nah, she took me to an antiquarian book store south of the town's park-

I interrupt her:

- That's my girlfriend's store!

- Oh, really? Oh well, the saleswoman was gorgeous, I have to tell you. If that was her, you are one lucky man. I mean, she wasn't, like, super model-like attractive, but my God, did she have charm. I like these stubborn women on the shady side of fifty. She and Katharina talked to each other a lot, and they did it in English to not leave me out of the conversation. It didn't feel token, but really inclusive and warm. The saleswoman brewed some green tea while we were rummaging through all of these old, dusty books, and when we asked her for help, she'd hand us the collected works of Stefan Zweig immediately for, like, a buck or so. I have them at home and am psyched to read them as soon as I find some time – Katharina wants to discuss it with me when I'm through some of the stories, and I feel like it could really help me with my German, too, finding a writer I might be passionate about. And I believe I will be, because what Katharina told me sounds really, really exciting. You know his work?

I have to shrug my shoulders.

- Nothing more than hearsay. I'm still in my Victorian period.

- So you'll never stop being in love with the Brontë sisters.

- Of course not! A glass, a paper, and a-

I fall silent. Anna raises an eyebrow.

- C'mon, say it.

I avert my gaze.

- No, never mind.

- You wanted to say 'brocade woman', right?

I pleadingly glance at her.

- Ah, you're still not over it. It's fine. I didn't expect you to grow up too rapidly.

Forcing my lips to separate, I ask Anna to forget about this little slip of the tongue. She makes some light-hearted comments about what she calls a recurring Freudian slip of mine and moves on telling me about her fateful encounter with Katharina, furthermore wilfully ignoring that she doesn't sound like she found a friend, but a lover.

06. Driver

I don't know how many people would consider visiting East Germany as going on vacation, but people like me and Paper Woman do. The Berlin wall fell less than a year ago, and finally Paper Woman could take some time off, the first time in a very long while, to go eastwards with me. We rented a car and after having been in Dresden for some days, we are now on our way to Saxon Switzerland, in which not long ago, even preceding the also very recent German reunification, a national park has been opened. A lot of people from the west are travelling eastward and vice versa. We have seen a lot of tourists in Leipzig, and also on the road of this rather rural area we are currently in, many cars are definitely not from the eastern side of the border.

- Have you ever been here before?,

I ask Paper Woman, who concentrates on the road. She shakes her head. Neither of us is an experienced driver, but while I outshine her driving abilities in dense urban areas, as soon as we are on country roads and highways, she, who has less trouble staying alert when confronted with imagery as mundane as a straight road leading through the German countryside, takes the lead. Right now, it's autumn everywhere in Germany, not only Autumn City, but only in Autumn City that season is charged with some dignity.

It's getting cold, so I turn on the heating. It's around five o'clock, and the sun is setting. Sorting my thoughts, I remember a story Anna told me some

years ago, and ask Paper Woman:

- Say, do you know some woman named Katharina?

First, she shakes her head again, then starts to ponder.

- Do you mean a grown-up one?

- Not necessarily.

- Then I do know a girl named Katharina. She is around five or six.

- That might be the one I'm talking about.

She side-eyes me.

- But you aren't sure?

- Who is she exactly?

- Well,

she passes a BMW which is already exceeding the speed limit around fifteen kilometres per hour,

- I don't know whether six year olds can already be described as recognizable characters. Sure, there are differences in behaviour and speech and thinking, but I remember myself feeling rather unfinished at that age. She isn't too noticeable yet, neither shy nor extroverted.

She takes a second to look at some approaching thunderclouds.

- Her mother is a pretty frequent customer of mine, but I guess you don't know her. Mrs. Zweig visits me almost every Friday, buying up my stock of literature written or set around the two world wars. She hasn't experienced any of them. I guess she's just into the smell of danger lingering in the air. She never buys actual books about war or war history or the Holocaust whatsoever. Just highly romanticised fiction around that era.

- And she is always with her daughter?

- Oftentimes she is. Katharina, as I said, is a rather nondescript girl, but I do sense some potential in her. She can already read a little and prefers to decipher the few words she can understand from books for adults to comfortably reading some children's novels. I like overachievers.

- That is the girl.

- Why are you asking?,

Paper Woman asks.

- A friend of mine just moved here and made friends with her. She said she knew that the girl sometimes visits your store.

- Oh,

Paper Woman looks genuinely interested,

- A friend of yours?

- Yes.

- Forgive me, but you piqued my curiosity – you never mentioned a friend until now. Where does she come from?

- Manchester.

- Have you met there?

- No, we roamed the streets of half of Europe before. Now that the borders are opening one after another, at some point we might take on the other half.

Paper Woman smirks.

- As if you'd ever leave your city for good.

- You're right,

I find myself replying,

- It's a captivating place if you allow it to be.

There is a short silence in which Paper Woman creases her forehead while regarding the clouds.

- So you've known each other for a while, and then lost contact?

- Sort of. We never really stopped communicating, the periods of time between exchanges just grew longer, in a way. However, now she's here.

- You can introduce us any time,

Paper Woman answers,

- But knowing you, that'll never happen.

It's dark already when we arrive in Saxon Switzerland, and instead of driving around in search of a hotel, we decide to simply sleep in the car. Leaning back our seats, we cover ourselves in our jackets, share a meal I prepared back in the hotel in Dresden, and cuddle and stargaze until the windows are fogged-up.

- You've been reading your Victorians for most of the ride,

Paper Woman mentions in a low voice, disappointed that no thunderstorm interrupted our trip.

- Maybe that's the book seller in me speaking, but you might be interested in some of the Sturm und Drang literature I have flying around. Mind you, Sturm und Drang sells fairly well, thus you needn't worry whether I will dispose of the books without your avail.

- Tell me your favourite from that era and I might try it.

- As a true admirer of strong meat instead of all the escapist literature, one would expect me to recommend Goethe to you – but I don't have any strong feelings about his earlier writings. If you want to read a book I cried about while reading aloud-

immediately she has my undivided attention, because I have never seen her cry,

- then your choice has to be *Intrigue and Love*. It is among the most stirring pieces I know of. I know there is this whole thing with Schiller thinking of theatre,

I cringe when she mentions that it's a play,

- as a moral institution, but without actors, with just the words on paper, the theodicy grows weaker in contrast to how one word breeds another. As a moral piece, *Intrigue and Love* fails so immensely that it is almost impossible to ignore the innate qualities it possesses instead. For once,

I see her, through the darkness, beaming with fervency,

- I don't see anything moral in a man being so obsessed with his relationship towards a woman that, when he sees that relationship fading away, his and her life become meaningless obstacles to overcome to him. Murder-suicide doesn't get more romantic just because it's fictive, but writing off the whole thing as hyperbole doesn't do it justice either.

She buries her head deeper into the makeshift pillow she made out of one of her pullovers, then continues:

- But a voice, a producer of sentences, missing its equivalent to generate the most exquisite form of dialogue, a voice alone loses its value. When

there is no discussion or argument or conversation to be had – think of a contemporary song that doesn't address some 'you' – a voice has no reason to exist further. One could argue that in the written word, the sentences know, or are written in the knowledge, that their life expectancy is the exact amount of time they are read, and one can only read so many monologues – and in the history of literature, how many happy monologues do you know? The first-person narrator is a deficient being by default. Without anyone answering, two separate voices will eventually become silent. They might as well be erased. I think all the violence in literature, this killing off of voices until the sentences come to an end altogether, is justified. Enemies erasing one another because the dialogue they have will always be destructive, lovers erasing themselves by becoming one and destroying any possibility of fruitful dialogue, or of dissent, even. It doesn't have anything to do with what they are saying, it's just a chain of letters they add and append and intermingle and cut off. That's my take on literature in general, and no book, not a single one I have read, exemplified this better than *Intrigue and Love*. What would have been an abhorrent, egomaniacal act in reality, in the world of words and letters was something wonderful and warranted.

She smiles, this woman in her early thirties, an almost girlish smile. She isn't passionate about many things, and it took her years to tell me about this one particularity that makes her enthusiastic. When I caress her cheek, it's hot, and my face feels hot, too.

- Go on,

I encourage her,

- You are not done yet.

She smiles even brighter.

- I'm not implying that the written word is actually sentient or aware, I mean, there is an awareness implanted in certain combinations thereof, but it is not tantamount to something so arbitrary as life – this artificiality and visible construction is what I like, perfected sense in a way.

She yawns.

- A book that doesn't read like a plan isn't a book, but rambling on paper. I do not dislike it, I even like how much rambling there is in a lot of Sturm und Drang literature. But in the end, I am a citizen of the same city as you, and heavily influenced by Brutalist architecture. I like how every region can be assigned with a specific practical effect in mind, and how that and its human use are visible from afar. Sure enough, unlike Le Corbusier, I don't believe in the ornamental as an end in itself. I believe that we put meaning, and therefore use, in or generate importance out every sign or symbol we put up somewhere, be it bare concrete or stucco work, or soulless natural occurrences we happen to find.

The rockfaces in front of our car are barely visible through the obfuscated windows, but they come to mind nonetheless, however they are less present than the thunderstorm that didn't happen.

- Brevity isn't an end in itself either, and a well-put redundancy can be a glorious leitmotif. And the best combinations that resulted in grand verbal architecture I have found in Schiller. Not always, not in everyone of his

books, not in all of his sentences, not even in all of *Intrigue of Love*. But some of the best combinations of sentences I have ever read are in there.

She closes her lips, and her eyes, too. Her face is glowing. In the moonlight, the Saxon Switzerland's rockfaces cast long shadows that reach into the car and transform into a second blanket laying itself down over both of us.

- I will read it,

I promise,

- I want to see the combination of letters that gets you this excited.

But I shudder thinking that I'll have to treat a play like literature.

07. Neighbour

- I don't feel good about how things are going,

Paper Woman says while putting a glass of water in front of me,

- Don't get me wrong, I love you dearly, but there are some things which bother me. And, knowing you, I fear they won't just go away, just as they didn't suddenly appear one day. They might have been always there, and for one reason or another, I ignored or put up with them.

She seems very serious, but she always seems serious. I have never seen her talking about anything in a light-hearted, carefree manner, with the notable exceptions of conversations we have either in the bed or in the shower, and even there we tend to discuss things of some gravity.

I eye the glass of water with some unsubstantiated suspicion while Paper Woman takes a seat next to me, taking my hand, putting hers into it, playing with my fingers, comparing our hand and finger sizes and skin tone, waiting for me to finally respond. Honestly, I don't know what to say. After a while, she realises that, and continues the, at this point, nonexistent discussion herself:

- This is not easy for me. You are not open, and I don't mean that you are hiding anything from me. I think you are not even telling the whole story to yourself. You try to have no psychology and no background at all, and I can understand that as an attitude, but am well aware of the fact that it can never become reality. You have your Hows and Whys and Wherefores and ignore them as well as you can.

I nod.

- I know.

- You don't want to protest?

- I wouldn't know why. You are right.

- Being matter-of-fact like this isn't helping. You know that. You try your best to be shallow. I don't want to be a part of that.

- I fail to see how my behaviour in this respect relates to you.

- You like me for reasons I do not know, and at times, I think you don't like me at all, but that I just fit into your narrative. I feel worshipped, and that is a horrible thing.

- I do not worship you,

I retort, a little surprised at the notion.

- You do! You never question me or my decisions, yet you ignore them when they don't fit the picture you seem to have of me. You decided I do not like cooking and do all of it for years now, even though I never told you so. You decided to like Schiller because I like him, even though I see the tremor in your whole being whenever you force yourself to read him. You kneaded yourself into my life as if the only way of us being together could be by being soul mates, which is a concept I refuse. And because you don't really seem to like your background, you just adopted mine, or rewrote it so you could fit your biases into it as if they were mine. My whole narrative feels like it has become a shell for both of us. I don't like that. I don't like to be a fairy, or your leader. Adoration is dehumanizing.

- Would you feel better if I treated you as an equal?

- Of course I would.

- Don't you think that some imbalances in power and sentiment are beneficial for interpersonal relationships?

- Oh, yes. In every relationship, someone feels inferior. It just so happens that this time, that someone is you, and you have chosen it to be that way to feel better about yourself. And that doesn't make me feel superior – it makes me feel even more inferior than you, because I cease to exist next to the saint you made out of me. I feel insufficient and powerless for being treated as if I was something out of this world. I feel like you pictured your perfect mate and just decided that I fit the description no matter what. You even pictured what the perfect imperfections of your ideal mate would be – what room is there left for me? I am the physical embodiment of feelings you have anyway.

She pauses, not to build up tension, but to take a sip of water out of the glass I still haven't touched yet.

- By now, you'd believe me even if I told you I was a witch without asking me to perform a single spell, however cheap and transparent. And I don't like that. I'd rather have you asking me for proof than enduring this overbearing admiration. At least you could test my clairvoyance, for example, test if I possessed any power over the fabric of reality. It would make me feel a bit less like a projection, though I'm aware that projection is the only way to connect with other people. There's a limit.

I take my time to figure out an answer that doesn't make me look foolish or angry, as if she had hurt any self-assertions, which of course she has.

- Well, if you insist, I see no point in protesting a wish so humble.

She doesn't even move one muscle, or raise an eyebrow, to take some seriousness out of the situation, or lighten up the mood with a bit of humanity showing. She simply looks at me with the same sobriety as always, constantly smiling in this way that isn't really a smile, waiting; humanity isn't exactly her most significant characteristic. My charms, of which I possess plenty, are lost on her, and if I wouldn't value her intelligence way over and even estimate it to be superior to mine, I'd dare say that they are wasted on her because she fails to understand their gravity.

- Humble,

I repeat,

- this wish. Fine, I'm fine with that. Prove your magic, which I, I suppose, have never openly assumed.

Still, she doesn't allow her body to move in ways which would remind her audience, which consists of me and, partially, her, that she is a benevolent, forgiving creature, or a creature at all.

- Fine,

she repeats my ratification of her desire without any signs of emotion, and I wait for her to tell me she has been bluffing so I'd feel especially stupid for assuming things like magic to happen, but instead starts to speak, slowly, as if she was reading from a book whose contents were unknown to her:

- My neighbour, who is also my worst customer because she keeps

assuming that us being neighbours somehow sets her apart from all the other people reading books and expects me to act especially neighbourly in business affairs, this neighbour will knock at my door – knock, because she hates doorbells – in,

Paper Woman takes a look at the clock hanging above her fridge and waits a few seconds,

- twenty-two minutes exactly, to return a book, even though it will be past ten o'clock by then, because a page has been ripped out. She ripped it out herself and used it to take notes when calling her aunt last week, but then decided that her distraction, which led to this blatant disrespect towards a book which she, and this is not my opinion, but a fact, she hadn't understood anyway, was a mistake she wouldn't have made if the book had been a different, presumably a better one, and therefore will tell me that she just read up to this chapter where a page was missing.

She decides to take another sip of water, and to drink from the glass that, even though I don't use it, is still positioned on my side of the table, she has to lean forward a little bit, and I see her hair fall in front of her ears and obscure her face for a second before she leans back in her armchair again, looks into the bottom of the glass as if to make sure it was still filled with the same liquid it was filled with several minutes ago, gulps down half of the substance she seems to have identified as harmless, leans forward again, and puts it back. All of this happens within a few seconds for any other possible observer, but the relativity of time is one of my lesser problems; therefore, I can look at every move in this moment like

the single frame of a movie, or a series of pictures that, the longer I look at them separately, stop being connected to one another. This rebellion of the senses and the world connected to them, I have been told, even though I urge them to behave in this and no other way, is an early sign of disintegration, or collapse. For the sake of beauty, I ignore the warning signs, and for the sake of consistency, I allow time to behave conventionally again.

Paper Woman examines the movements of my face to check if there is any nonplussing going on. There isn't, so she continues:

- So then, let's wait.

We wait.

I don't wonder whether her prediction will eventuate or not. I don't really care, but she does, and I accept that this is an issue of some importance for her. If I were in her situation, with someone being unconditionally, unquestioningly in love with me, and myself, on the face of it, liking them back quite a lot, I'd want to show them what kind of person or species I was, too.

Hardly surprising, at around quarter past ten – I paid little attention to the time limit she gave her neighbour, so it might have been exactly twenty-two minutes, someone knocks on the door.

- Should I let her in?

- I don't think that that is necessary. Are you going to give her the money back?

- No.

- Then I don't see a point in letting her ruin our evening.

A shrill German voice asks for Paper Woman. She does not react. The voice continues, and asserts to know that Paper Woman is home and ignoring her. We both ignore her. After a while, she gives up. I am thankful for her dislike of doorbells.

- There are several logical derivations that can be made from this situation. For once, I might have found the ripped-out page in the garbage, and, knowing this woman for a while, and her tendency to pay me a visit at quarter past ten every Wednesday to complain about something she generally is completely responsible for, could safely assume she would bring this up on her weekly disturbance of my evening. This, I dare annotating, is the most convincing option, at least for me. Of course I have to note that you did not insist on fact-checking any of this by exerting yourself to open the door. Another quite persuasive causation of this incident would be that me and my neighbour might be closer than I ever told you and like to play mind games on our respective significant others – it might surprise you, but indeed this woman has one, at least one, significant other – and therefore planned all of this, which would explain my poignancy and her baffling punctuality. Now that I tell you this version of the story, it strikes me as even more believable than the first one.

She pauses for a moment, and I don't let her notice that I am in the process of cutting time into thin and thinner pieces to watch every of her movements for longer periods of my own time as a still image. I have to stop myself when I feel my hands being all pins and needles, a sensation

not uncommon, but in this situation possibly another warning sign. I let go. Paper Woman continues:

- Certain things aside, these are the two most likely causations of the discussion I am having with you right now, if your unresponsiveness even allows me to use the term 'discussion'. Being with you can be quite a monologue sometimes, even when you answer. Anyway, of course all of this could have been caused by a plethora of other reasons, and we shouldn't let pure coincidence come short when juxtaposing and comparing. The last and without a doubt most unlikely explanation of this woman knocking on my door is of course that I am clairvoyant or magical in some other way. I hope this is not the explanation you'll settle with, because then I'd have underestimated your ability of critical thinking rather a lot.

She watches me and my calm face with something I have never seen in her set of facial expressions before. It might be a mixture of anxiety and anguish, but spare some exceptions I estimate her to be out of reach of these emotions, and soon, this impression of her is forfeited.

- But I did.

She closes her eyes very slowly while frowning,

- Am I right?

I smile at her, full of confidence and lightness.

- Of course you didn't. You are above things like miscalculation.

Her face goes neutral again. Normally, I would read this as a sign of resignation. But resignation also is a feeling too low for a character so self-

assured.

- To be honest – I care little about why you knew that this neighbour of yours would be knocking on the door. The fact alone that you knew still isn't that interesting, but more than enough for me. Be clairvoyant if you like, or don't be. None of the explanations you gave me could change my feelings for you.

- But they should.

- I don't know by which convention they should.

She frowns again.

- I could be magical,

she rather exhales than pronounces this sentence,

- and for the sake of ignorance you'd stay oblivious to this. This is what I mean: You assigned me with magic, with a certain magic you want me to have and you therefore can admire, and to conserve that feeling of admiration, you'd even miss out on me performing something *actually* outstanding. Everything I do is normal, because I in general am just wonderful. That's how you view me.

She pauses, then asks:

- Are you really interested in me?

I smile brightly:

- Well, of course. Your *are* special.

There is a taste of wrath in the twitching of her mouth when she tries to process what I have just said. After a while, she concludes, in a grave, frustrated tone:

- And nothing else.

I don't understand what she means with that. For the first time, I am a little bit confused, and reach for the glass of water. She doesn't watch me with the same amazement I watch her when performing such little tasks, which I understand. It reassures me a bit.

Paper Woman seems to be in thought. I'd like to know about what, but I have a feeling she wouldn't let me know. I am aware that I don't think too deeply about what she's trying to communicate, and even ignore some cues and sentences that normally I wouldn't misunderstand. I have chosen to misunderstand her this time, for the sake of my stability. If she knew, I am sure she would be less disappointed.

Her kitchen lamp illuminates her destroyed hair in very ungracing ways. The split ends reflect the artificial yellow of the old light bulb in all possible directions. Even her eyelashes play into this game and seem dried up and broken. Paper Woman is, just as I thought, not ageing well. Her thin, grained skin tightens over her austere facial structures with the prominent cheekbones and sharp, slightly hooked nose, and has turned blue below her eyes, which have started withdrawing into their eye sockets. At the same time, gravity has started to pull on her mouth corners, and her neck already shows prominent nicks that will have become fully pronounced wrinkles a few years from now. It is only that, instead of becoming larger, as I would have expected, she has grown thinner over the last few years. It doesn't look very healthy, but in a way, her skinny arms and legs and fingers have something enticing – as if she were an insect

queen.

Paper Woman seems to be done thinking.

- Let's cook, shall we?,

she asks me,

- I haven't eaten anything since noon.

That night, she kisses me strangely. Forces our teeth to collide, pulls my hair, looks me straight in the eyes through the thick darkness of her bedroom. She pinches my skin almost brutally and asks me to do the same. She bites my lip until, at some point, it bleeds, and leaves my neck and chest bruised by her lips and teeth and my back's skin scratched and squished by her fingers and fingernails. I don't understand what she is doing, but it is exciting.

o8. Critic

- So, we met at her place, a meticulously decorated small apartment far up north in town, close to the border even, and not too far from the west part; I think from her apartment to the pub you showed me it's just about fifteen minutes by foot in my estimation – well, you and me, we both know how our spatial estimations rarely coincide – and her apartment consists of nothing more than a bathroom and a large room that is her kitchen, bed- and living room at the same time, and it is *gorgeous*.

Anna's dimples grow ever deeper to compensate for her outstanding smile.

We are in the city's largest art museum, west of the central park. Autumn City has quite a few galleries, but I found myself disliking most contemporary artists and works for the sole reason that they demand me to act like an intellectual in an environment I use for relaxation while still suggesting that multicoloured hairdos and a bottle of beer in at least one hand are valid fashion choices.

This art museum is a conservative one, deeply conservative. They'd in all likelihood have a few rooms reserved for Degenerate Art if the term hadn't gone out of fashion for obvious reasons. There is no disturbing manifestation of intelligence to be found, just painting after painting after painting, sometimes a small sculpture here and there, everything in chronological order, the walls of each room painted in colours just bleak enough to fit the respective epoch or trend in art, every frame that doesn't

contain an oversized historical or, adventurously, genre painting, hanging, measured from its centre to the ground, at an altitude of exactly 145 centimetres. It is the perfect place to lead bored groups of schoolchildren through to ruin their perception of and interest in art with just one visit, forever. The lighting is almost good, the air is stuffy, senior citizens walk around with portable stools and cough their way from cloak-room to bench to lavatory. It is delightful.

Even their exhibitions are as unimaginative as they had been before Yves Klein or the Fluxus people and other pestilences dared to make art spaces exciting, and all the fun parts of Dada and early expressionism, of which this museum has quite a collection, have been museificated to the point of ossification. There is nothing that spells 'Get lost' more elegantly than a glass wall in front of a reconstructed installation by some Kurt Schwitters imitator.

And I am here with Anna to see the new themed arrangement of what's been rotting in their collection anyway: An exhibition about angels in art, something to ensure a steady inflow of senior citizens, of which there are plenty around. It is not an exhibition to attract those who consider themselves intellectuals for their annual visitation of these infertile, senescent rooms.

Anna does not share my distaste for art after the nineteen-thirties. Not that she considers herself one of these pesky art connoisseurs who can explain what all this performance stuff might be about by using fancy politicised terminology. She just happens to be less narrow-minded and

negative than I am. And right now, as we slowly walk through the dim rooms in search of any angel we might like, she isn't negative at all. She has gravely fallen in love and is cheating on her girlfriend big time, even though she isn't telling it that way, and – but I have not yet decided whether this assumption is true – might be unaware of it.

- I sat down on her sofa, and while she brewed us some coffee, I pulled the Zweig book out of my handbag and confessed that I had tried to read some of his works several times, but my German wasn't good enough to comprehend even a third of what I was reading there. I felt completely rejected by this book, disliked, even ridiculed.

We finally come to a stop in front of a Titian, whom I love especially. *Archangel Raphael and Tobias* is considered to be his masterpiece by, I estimate, no one, except for me. There is not a single painting I like more than this one, and seeing it in the original after all the years of admiring photographs moves me a little more than I would have expected. It might be because of all the imperfections next to all the perfectly formulated details that are presented side by side. The angel with his brown wings and airborne, ever-ascending clothes looks beefy and effeminate at the same time; his anatomy is completely goofy, just as Tobias' and the dog's depictions are, in a way, off the mark. Several parts of the painting are simply left in the dark, and yet lie the painting's most convincing qualities in the darkness. Painting trees in front of a sunset with such an ease and so little redundancy, simply by layering dark on lighter paint, or painting a dead fish by adding nothing more than a sparsely detailed dark area to

Tobias' left hand, these are little ingenuities I find much pleasure in. I stay put in front of this neglected piece of mastery to signal Anna that this is where I want to be for a while. She takes a look, seems to understand, and stays there with me.

- Katharina was super-kind about it, even though she bought me the book – not that it had cost her much, but it was such a nice thing to do. She told me that she struggled with English writers, too, but like me didn't believe in translations. Oftentimes, she would say something in German and I would answer in English because this was just how we felt, and how we wanted to present ourselves in front of each other, at least I think so. We didn't have a solution for this problem, and at some point, my mobile, she pauses herself to, with her left index, point to the device she carries in her left trouser pocket, and I acknowledge that effort by turning my eyes away from the supreme dark horse of a painting I continue admiring within seconds,

- rang, because I programmed it to remind me when one of my subscribed podcasts had a new episode out. Katharina asked who was calling me, and I explained to her, while silencing my phone, that it was just this feature I had activated. She laughed and set herself next to me, handing me a cup of coffee so pitch-black it could have been oil. She must use coffee as a downright surrogate for drug abuse. She already told me that her job isn't an easy one, and that she's tired a lot. She doesn't lead an easy life, just lost her sister Effi to a disease, and – ah, why am I telling you all this?

- Because it's always nice to have someone to narrate the stories we discover to. Don't question yourself, go on,

I reply with an easiness only my beloved and Titian could awake in me. Anna puts on a shy smile and continues:

- Her sister, whom she lived with in Duisburg, died a while ago, and all she could think of was coming back to Autumn Town to rebuild her life, because she spent quite a lot of time taking care of her. She's thinking about rebuilding it thoroughly, maybe by going to college, studying biology or agricultural science. Ah, you see, I'm really taken in by her. There is just something enticing about the way she talks and how she moves her hands, like,

Anna makes some gestures that look arbitrary and absurd in the context of art museum contemplation, and some visitors, bedazzled by her vivacity, shake their heads in disbelief,

- and, anyway, as we were drinking this really, really strong coffee – a couple of minutes later I felt like my heartbeat had accelerated, and maybe even changed its rhythm – she told me that she yet has to jump on the podcast bandwagon and is lagging a few years behind regarding that topic, but at the same time remembers a lot of audio dramas she listened to as a child, and how at some point this intimacy of just you and some sound in the room ceased to be interesting for her. She can't even listen to audio books and now fears that the gap that opened there might become something bigger over the years, because who knows what's going to be the next big medium? And I think she's right. Sure, this is Germany, but

podcasts are gaining traction. She asked me what I was listening to mostly, and of course I could only name some English-speaking programmes, but she didn't mind. Listening is easy for her, talking, writing and reading are not, just as I can listen to most Germans with all their gawky idioms and dialects without trouble, but using the language in any other way is a horror trip into my insufficiencies. And one word led to another, and, you know?

She smiles and pauses for a second, building up tension, maybe even apprehension, to what happened next.

I am listening, and at the same time recalling the story of Raphael and Tobias, which I love. There is no story in Christian or Jewish mythology – albeit the *Book of Tobit* is regarded as deuterocanonic in Judaism, and therefore the Catholics can produce all their narrow-minded interpretations of it without anyone intervening – I appreciate more than this simple-minded fairytale about an angel descending down to earth to help a child make his father see again. Part medical folklore, part bedtime story, it is the only biblical story that ever gave me the impression of this God being a benevolent one. Upon hearing it, I was tempted to turn into a believer, not for the whole bible, but only this one story, so utterly rejecting the idea of theodicy, but rather supporting a belief based on selective benevolence because of limited power and access to the human realm. There are only so many angels to be sent to suffering pure-hearted children and their parents, and there are only so many lucky coincidences for an angel to amplify. And a single demon can be a lot of work for a

whole group of people and angels alike, just as you never see even a minor violator being handcuffed and prosecuted by just one guardian of the law.

- She ended up reading Stefan Zweig to me the whole night!,

Anna finally happily concludes, pulling me away from my fantasy world where God can take sides, where his omnipotence is so limited that it allows him to feel and empathise and sympathise with the ugly creatures he caused. Anna and I know too well that all he ever did was to play dice.

She bites her lip and lets her glowing eyes tell the rest of the story, the part she didn't quite realise yet.

I smile back at her.

- She read aloud to you?

- Yes, yes!

She is so energetic that some people nearby raise their eyebrows to signal that a young happy woman in an art space is an annoyance and a derangement flanking unacceptability, but Anna doesn't care.

- At some point, Katharina would grab the book and browse for a story she particularly liked, and then she read *Die Frau und die Landschaft* to me, and it was overwhelming. I confess, she is a powerful reader, and could probably suck you into any story just by using the earnest timbre she evokes in her voice when reading, but the story was really great, too. We discussed it afterwards, this time I was brewing the coffee, and Katharina told me that the canonical approach to Zweig is that he was a desolate, sad man – and an exhibitionist – with hopelessness and loneliness as his main topics, and – by the way, I think it's obvious she isn't that much from a

working class background like I first assumed – I think it's so brave of her to just sit there in her kind of tasteless kitchen-living-room-bedroom and say: I dissent. She ventured into a long monologue about how Zweig's descriptions of madness were actually so feverishly passionate that she always felt that in fear, and suffering, and even madness, he had found a way to not go numb, but rather embrace life with all its paradoxes. It was a very powerful speech she gave me, and considering her recent loss, I could never have contested. But with just one story, understandably, I wasn't convinced yet, one short story about sleepwalking and droughts that showed me everything she was talking about, but there might be stories where that wasn't the case. Katharina went on telling me that actually Zweig just told one and the same story over and over and over again in his career, madness flourishing often witnessed by a bystander or listener or spectator whose sole purpose is to listen – that wasn't the case in the story she had read to me, but by reading it, she had re-enacted the occasion she had described pretty well. We both laughed when we became aware of that. I have to mention at that point we were already high on coffee.

I keep staring at the painting, being a nuisance to the elderly people who also want to see the Titian, not because they are particularly interested in it or have any respect for the work, but because it is mentioned in their exhibition guide and they want to see everything on display, no matter whether it fits their interests or not. Without paying these people any attention, Anna and I take a step back and keep looking at the picture. There is some kind of respect building up in the stool-carriers anyway,

because who would look at and discuss a single painting for so long if not actual art critics? Anna and I are young, I look smart, she is beautiful, we both dressed rather carelessly compared to the people around us, but we do not look like art students or artists at all – therefore, we are professionals. Once this idea has settled with some, the stool-carriers stop bothering us and are content enough to be allowed by us to look at the piece that seems to be the pivotal exhibit of this show.

- You think angels are real?,

I ask Anna rather innocuously, still feeling the brown wings of the oversized angel slowly flutter in the air – I know it is the air conditioning, but I choose the sounds I hear to be those of angels who dare to have dark brown wings. I think the dark brown wings might be one of the central points this painting has. An angel dressed in white, with white wings, that is common and fine and divine, but one in dark red garments and sandals and with brown wings, brown like the wings of the most uninteresting game birds? That was radical. It suggested that maybe there was some variety in angels, that they knew of fashion, that they had genes and therefore weren't completely infertile, that they might be, or have been, mundane at some point in history, and just vanished later.

She looks at me with some astonishment, then takes another look at the painting.

- What a question,

she chuckles,

- It must have been a while. You and I have met some of their ilk.

- Yeah, I remember,

I answer slowly, detaining myself from stroking the brittle canvas,

- It is a completely underwhelming experience.

- That, or we cannot appreciate anything nice.

- You appreciate Katharina.

- She ain't no angel.

- Seems close to one.

- To what average people think angels are like, maybe. Ah, let me finish my story. So, Katharina read Zweig's most famous work to me, the *Schachnovelle*, and it took us the whole night to get through. I agree with most of what she said. There is no hopelessness in Zweig's writing. I left in the early morning for work, and of course had a little fight with Emma, who'd been sleeping in my bed waiting for my return. We hadn't made any plans, but when she woke up, she was really mad at me for not returning her calls. I hadn't got them – I had silenced my phone pretty early into the evening. But it's all fine; we reconciled. We always do.

- What does she say about that thing with Katharina?

- What should she say? Nothing as of yet; I told her most of it, and from the outside, she seems to be happy for me making a friend. Happens rarely enough, right?

Anna changes her balance point from her left to her right foot and folds her arms.

- Say, can we go on? I'm done looking at this copy.

- Copy? This is a genuine oil painting, mademoiselle.

- Don't be French to me. This is a copy of a drawing.

- No, it – ah.

Anna needs a second, then makes the same noise:

- Ah. What do you see?

- A marvellous Titian painting, Raphael and Tobias. The card says it's one of the few paintings they imported for the sake of this show.

- Yikes, Titian? Well, I don't even know that one. It's marvellous you say?

- One of his most imperfect pieces, a gift. Now, what is in front of you?

- *Angelus Novus*. The card says the original in Israel is in much too fragile a state, hence the copy. It's a good one, the copy I mean. I don't warm up to Paul Klee easily.

- Oh, we could have moved on if you had told me.

- No, it's good I'm forced to look at it for a while. I'm not as interested in the drawing itself as I am in Benjamin's interpretation of it, but I fail to see what made him write such dystopian fiction relating to this piece. This angel doesn't look like it's been blown into the future while facing a paradise lost. He just looks chill to me, and signalling that he's pretty uninterested in the viewer, like

- Get lost, I'm trying to have a look at the world outside the paper and you're blocking my view.

We laugh cordially, and the other visitors by now have accepted that we are people of some significance. We might be talking nonsense, but talking at all already distinguishes us from them.

Finally, we move on, but no other painting catches my attention, and in

Anna's realm, there don't seem many interesting pieces left either.

- Did you ever read Zweig?,

Anna asks. I shake my head.

- I've tried to get into Sturm und Drang, strictly speaking, into Schiller, but I have failed to learn to like it. Of Victorian quality it isn't.

Anna laughs, this time alone.

- Oh, you judgemental weirdo. I remember when you still condemned the Victorian era, and the Brontës weren't much else but insipid, annoying novelties to you. Your, well, impudence, this bellicose rhetoric,

her sugar-coating her inane candour with words longer than two syllables isn't what I'm used to from Anna, but otherwise this sermon would feel hackneyed, so I let her continue,

- I remember all too well – I pictured you as a candidate to write hate mail to Oscar Wilde. It's always like this. You reject anything new, but let a hundred and fifty years or so pass, and you embrace it with a vehemence that would put Benjamin to shame.

- Well, Sturm und Drang isn't particularly new, either.

- Do I remember correctly that it dealt a lot with class struggles, aristocrats versus church versus the ordinary people and the bourgeoisie in the making?

- You are not wrong.

- Well, then it's obvious why you dislike it. I mean, we both know on which side of history you set up your camp.

09. Ghost

We don't usually visit the park. We like to watch it from Paper Woman's apartment, drinking tea while sitting on her kitchen's window sill. There is a tranquillising quality in this arrangement and we made it one of our rituals years ago, to sit there in silence and watch the park, with the trees losing their leaves and the ducks of the pond in the park's centre flying south. In order to do so, they have to pass by Paper Woman's apartment, granting us a great view on their formations.

The park itself looks beautiful and natural from her window, even though the trees have been planted and the pond has been dug, the grass and flowers sown, the mounds built, and if the landscapers had been given the chance, the sky above would have been painted. The people in charge compensated for that with lots of nightly illumination that would make the lighting in a lamp shop seem natural by comparison. From a distance, all this isn't bothersome. It's a beautifully placed green spark and as romantic as a Brutalist city centre could possibly get. To keep it that way, to not deprive ourselves of the illusion of having some nice nature in the vicinity, we always kept our visits to a minimum, because once one comes closer, the park really turns out to be nothing more than a park. I'm not talking about the rotten benches and the overfilled garbage cans next to them, or the garbage no one bothered to put into one of those cans and instead just threw wherever, it's the bigger picture: Some perfectly kept billboards that advertise products whose fake English names I cannot

pronounce while the grass around them has been mowed so neatly that any thought of 'nature' would not only seem silly, but even slightly offensive. The trees are planted in a manner trying a tad too hard to look forest-like and therefore end up looking like in a film studio. The shrubs never even attempt to cross the paths on which miraculously not a single blade of grass is growing, and the randomly distributed gravel doesn't show enough random clustering to be naturally randomly distributed. That being said, the park is also in a horrible condition, and the smell of decay and decomposition is strongest close to the almost circular pond with its turbid water.

Me and Paper Woman only go here to get to some places faster, to reach bus stops and, when it's warm, spend some time watching people fishing or having a picnic. Nature is easier to endure when there are the people for whom it has been made.

Today it is rather chilly, wherefore I have trouble explaining to myself why Paper Woman wanted to meet up with me here, on one of the pathways leading from the street in front of her apartment towards the pond.

I don't feel too easy about this appointment. Maybe even a bit nauseous – she usually explains her schemes to me, instead of working me into her scheming. I go through the possibly important dates I might have missed and she might have prepared a surprise for, even though that's hardly ever something she does. Her birthday was half a year ago and our anniversary, which we only ever celebrated once because we fortuitously remembered it

and then decided to spend it in a ridiculously overpriced hotel near the North Sea, isn't close either. We're almost at our ten year mark. She has spent ten years with me already, I catch myself thinking, and outstripped me in terms of age a long time ago. Her parents have stopped asking us whether we ever will marry, and the times have changed anyway. They have grown more relaxed regarding their unmarried childless daughter with the book store, which she by now has expanded into a copy shop and, for an antiquarian book seller strangely ahead of her time, an internet café, something she picked up when we briefly visited New York last year. It's nothing the Autumn City denizens are highly interested in, but she spends a lot of her free time on BBSs and IRCs searching for obscure books and literature even I never heard of before. I stopped making fun of it when she got me a Victorian book I quite liked, *A road-book to old Chelsea*, by typing messages into that monstrous machine she set up in her store in order to find out about the gaps she might have in her collection. I understand her quite well; even though she sells almost all the books she buys immediately, or at least puts them on sale, the thought of once having owned them makes the collection in her head quite a complete one. And not only is she an avid buyer of books all over the globe, her speciality, the Sturm und Drang era, made her an important source for some people sitting in front of their monitors in libraries and book stores elsewhere, too. Because of her antagonism to the idea of the genius and therefore, compared to other net specialists, shifted point of view on the matter, there have been some fights. At least I have seen her typing quite angrily a

few times, and on one occasion, only minutes later packing some Leisewitz first editions to go somewhere in Southeast Asia. I don't know if she even made any money from that deal or if this was just to prove a point. Weeks later, she received a long letter in return, but wouldn't tell me what exactly it was about. I have disqualified myself as a counterpart in discussions about Sturm und Drang years ago, when I failed with Schiller, Bürger and Klinger in quick succession.

It's getting late and I don't know how to deal with that. Paper Woman usually is not late. I won't say that she is profusely punctual; there is the usual arbitrariness of all human beings inscribed into her innate time schedule, but nothing out of the ordinary. It has never been more than fifteen minutes plus or minus, and now I find myself waiting for nineteen minutes already.

I remember having seen something like her computer some years ago, only smaller and much less magical, very commonplace and much more like a daily occurrence than a fancy new technology. After a few minutes, a faint picture dawns in my long-term memory: On Anna's table, when I helped her move in, about seven years ago, there was this flat silver machine that didn't even resemble any computer I knew back then; but the modern, pleasantly Brutalist machines flooding the households now, they might be the direct ancestors of the mobile, matte, polished, abstract monster Anna has in her possession. Thinking about it, by now I even know what Anna meant with a mobile. I didn't bother asking her about it whenever she mentioned it and when finally I saw some people using

them for real, I somehow understood what was going on. It felt like reading the *Gilbert schema* after already having read, or rather flicked through, *Ulysses*. It brought some clarity in the sense of letting one connect some dots here and there, but still no clarification at all about what one had consumed there earlier on. The sympathetic brute in Paper Woman's store is a friendly *Gilbert schema*, published long before *Ulysses* has even been typed out. Or so, I think. There must be some flaws in such elegant a thought, and my guess would be that the main flaw is the passage of time.

Just when I have discovered tapping my toes as a worthy pastime, I see Paper Woman coming around the corner. Her hair looks flaky and her eyes are reddened. She didn't have a good morning. Her walk is swift and she only slows down and finally comes to a halt when our eyes meet.

- Are you fine?,

is the first thing I ask. I hug her, and she hugs me back. I hear her sniffling.

- I'm alright,

she replies, and we turn to the park. I offer her my arm, and we face the path that seems to be a dramatic one. As we make our first steps, she starts:

- I've been thinking a lot recently.

And then, skipping all the tiny bits that spice up a story, after a pause of maybe five seconds, finishes her tale immediately:

- I want to break up with you.

She holds onto my arm and looks me straight in the eye as she says it. I need a minute to process what she announced, and we just walk on for a

while, before finally I manage to speak:

- You mean, you want to end our relationship?

- That is correct.

- I don't understand. Have you been unhappy with me?

- Yes.

- What did I do?

- The fact that you're asking this implies that you're even doing it right now.

We pause for another minute and pass the pond. We silently decide to not take the route that leads around the water, but go straight forward.

- You have been crying,

I say warmly.

- All night. I was fighting with myself, because – well, because I still remember that first dinner with my parents, you know? I still question the trees.

I am surprised, but remain silent.

- I kept quiet because I loved you. And the very first private thing you ever told me was that you loved me. But while it took me years to say it, my uttering of these three words was heartfelt, while I doubt yours was any more than what you had convinced yourself you felt for me. Us who deal with books attract certain kinds of admirers. I didn't allow myself to see you as one of them.

I stay silent, because I have to think. There must be a way out of this. I cannot live without Paper Woman. She must know that for sure.

- And even now I think you are not one of them. In fact I think you are worse.

She glances at me, then looks at the path in front of her. I can't hear the sound of our footsteps anymore, or the wind blowing ever stronger through the shrubs and leaves. And I wish I couldn't hear her voice either. For the first time I wish for that.

- The trees,
she says,

- I doubt them. They shouldn't look like this. I always thought that. But – but if I was right, then you would have been in danger. And am I allowed to put you in danger?

She snuffles once more, but suppresses it enough to keep it from turning into sobbing.

- After ten years of endurance, my answer to that question is Yes. I will not live another day with this. I am done with the haunting.

I stop, let go of her arm and turn myself in front of her.

- What did you just say?

It sounds intimidating, how I ask her, even though I don't mean it. She isn't afraid of me, and shows no sign of challenging my choice of tone. At first I think she wants to obstruct any further escalation of the scene, but then, without a doubt, she topples this thought of mine with just one blink of her eye: Escalation is her aim exactly.

- Haunting. That's what you do.

I have to make sure.

- What do you mean?

The wind intensifies. My skin itches.

- Listen, I wanted to spare you this,
she says, intensely surveying my every move,

- But I am done with you.

Her coat and hair flutter in the wind. And even though my frock is only tenderly set in motion by the impending storm, it makes me feel discarnate until I can persuade myself to concentrate on Paper Woman again. I try to stop the time or turn it into something less intimidating. A second into a minute. I could deal with that. But she won't let me. I feel spongy. Every single cell of me. She can't mean it.

Over the wind, she raises her voice, exorcising me:

- What are you but a ghost,

she asks,

- who briefly decided to materialise at this point in spacetime?

She said it.

- How should I not have observed it, after ten years, how the world shapes around you? How you have little psychology or inner life, but everything you touch is charged with it? *That* is haunting. I don't know how powerful you are, for I cannot remember that there ever has been such a thing as winter in this city. I have no idea how long you have been here, and of all the nameless, homeless men I could have picked up, I wouldn't have guessed I'd pick up one of your ilk.

I stare at her with my eyes wide open. I could kill her. I don't know why

the thought crosses my mind, but it does. Of course I don't think about doing it. I just want her to disappear. Otherwise, I might do just that.

She looks around. The wind weakens, and she faces me again.

- Listen, listen one last time,

she adds with a voice as fierce and stable as in the beginning of our relationship, to formulate her penultimate sentence ever to address me:

- I do not leave you because you are a ghost, or because of all the haunting. I go because you're using it so badly. I do not care about you being a ghost; I care about you being a bad one.

The weakened wind doesn't mean that safety is anywhere near. I still feel the breeze blowing through my disrupted molecular structure. I might burst into pieces at the slightest touch.

But she doesn't touch me.

She turns away and starts walking back to where we came from, minutes ago when we were still a couple.

- Do not follow me,

she concludes,

- ever again.

And at the speed of falling leaves, Paper Woman walks out of my life.

10. Invader

- She called you a *what?*,

Anna screams into the phone.

- Jeez man, how immensely did you fuck up?

I don't answer. I have enough trouble holding the receiver, because in the process of my molecular structure weakening and loosening up, some parts of me, to put it mildly, disintegrated. I have lost two fingers, my ring finger and pinkie of the left hand, and yet have to get used to it. Take into account, I could have died back then, and therefore do not think that I should be ungrateful. Two fingers are fine. I mean, it wasn't a nice scene, two fingers disappearing, my nerve endings trying to connect to them, my heart still pumping blood in their general direction and all that. I must have been a pretty unpleasant sight when I went to the hospital that day, which luckily is close to the art museum's west and therefore easy to reach from within the depths of the central park. I must have looked emaciated, shell-shocked even, aside from my face being distorted with pain. Everybody who gets their very tissue challenged by the environment and circumstances loses a lot of weight in the process. Oh, and bloody. I must have been bloody. Bloodshot eyes and the whole deal with the hand lacking two fingers. Unmistakeably, I wasn't there for any doctor's edification and delight. Luckily they estimated that I was in shock back then and weren't too worried about me not being able to answer their questions about what happened and where the rest of my hand was; they didn't even ask about

my medical card before I left, and I left quickly. That day, I would have been bold enough, if they had continued to interrogate me, to answer that the remnants of what once was a part of my physical being were now dispersed into spacetime variations I had no access to, or, had I felt more religious at that very moment, that the uncaring universe had demanded a tribute for the sake of balancing out a mistake, which was me letting myself go. Letting a person, granted, a paper person, shatter me. Sometimes, imagining myself in that situation again and giving this elaborate answer, I hear some plaudit at the back of my head for that speech. But I was taciturn and didn't receive any applause for my meek subterfuges.

Time continues and I continue to not answer, driving Anna even crazier.

- Did she deliberately say *ghost*?

- She said ghost,

I murmur into the earpiece. On my own, I would never have told Anna. The whole thing happened months ago, for me at least. I'm still struggling with the fingers because I'm a slow adapter. With Anna, it's different. She's a lot slower with things in general, but at the same time very punctual, so for her the whole thing happened about twenty minutes ago, which is late, but precise. This explains why, when Paper Woman turned on me, Anna saw snow. It was falling down from the clouds into the garden of her office, and therefore she noticed it when working on her computer and, briefly, looking out of the window.

So, this needs explaining. I think finally some explanations might be due.

I just don't like to explain, I like to tell the story as it is and let whoever is interested draw their conclusions, but I have to make clear that the snow was only falling very, very briefly. Hardly more than maybe one or two minutes of snowfall in a city in autumn, which is not so unusual that its denizens should suspect a thing. I mean, it can even snow in the summertime. People don't necessarily think of winter when they see snow. So, it shouldn't be that much of a problem, and also the snowfall explains where my two fingers went.

I, myself, I didn't notice any snow. I have to add that back then I just lost my girlfriend, whom I loved very much, and two fingers, which I was fond of, too. I think if there was any snow, I had my reasons why I failed to notice it.

However, Anna noticed the snow when looking out of the window and knew that this was Autumn City, or for her, Autumn Town – at some point, I might find the time to explain that, too – and that this shouldn't happen. The only things falling in Autumn City are raindrops and leaves. So, being a well thought out person, she guessed, quite, if not absolutely correctly, that I had something to do with this, and because she wanted to inform me when she saw something wintry anyway.

- She said ghost,

Anna repeats, after not having responded for a few seconds.

- She knows who you are,

she then concludes,

- and fucking messed with spacetime. Why would she do that?

- I don't know, Anna,

I say, but am reminded immediately that when I call a person by their name, that means I am trying to remind them of a shared comradeship, and usually people are smart enough, the right people are smart enough, to see through that, and are unabashed enough to not allow themselves to be guileless once in a while. Anna is such a person. Of course she is.

- So you know,

she fetches a groan. This isn't going to be a pleasant phone call.

- Buddy,

oh dear, she buddies me. I am in moderate trouble.

- Buddy, stop shittin' me. Something's awry here, and it's got everything to do with your sorry ass.

She breathes heavily, and, to my disappointment, has taken on the talking patterns of people of the late twentieth, and supposedly, twenty-first century, which I would repudiate even in the queasiest of situations. And in most, even a lot of queasy situations, I would inculcate in Anna that I do not have to put up with such a tone, even though her usual answer is that I am bloviating. This time, however, everything feels rather quaint and bilious and sordid and uncomfortable, before all else this is *uncomfortable*, and I cannot form a wry sentence to challenge hers. So I have to let her continue as if she has a point.

- From the very beginning, I had a feeling that this place was out of order. I couldn't put my finger on it because I didn't like the thought of the thing being off being *you*.

Her voice is mean right now. Very low and snarly and – it's quite intimidating. The first time, I remember, when Anna, in a situation including me, reacted like this was when I wouldn't stop flirting with her. We're beyond that now. Then, another time, when we had this dispute about paper and glass and – but enough of that. What I want to say is, even though her snarls are, in a way, sexy, I would never go so far as to provoke them, because there is causing trouble, even wreaking havoc, and there is Anna. She is very moral in a way, thinks a lot about what one, we, should or shouldn't do and think, I think she's too much into self-censorship to even notice that her ideas on morality are very demanding and general and principal, not allowing exceptions or reconsideration. She is very belligerent, to not say abrasive, when it comes to these topics, while she always accuses me of being too garrulous. I tend to believe that there are not so many ultimate laws, the ones endangering us to the point of disintegration not included. These we feel in the very structure of our, compared to those laws, very relative bodies.

Anna seems to mull over something. The dangerous kind of thinking, the kind of thinking that made me leave Manchester back then.

- When you moved here,

she starts,

- What was this town's name?

- Anna,

I answer, blowing it from the start,

- What are you talking about? This is Autumn City. Or Town. Whatever.

- I know there are odd places that their inhabitants made themselves, that have become harbours of overthrown ideas and kindred to one or two of the circles of hell, if you ask me. I have been to Pitcairn and Rapa Nui and Hollywood and the Vatican. There are places where reality bends towards extremes, and I took Autumn Town to be one of those examples, a descent leading out of reality. But there's also you, and you never ever liked reality much.

- There are so many realities.

- None of them ever satisfied you, at least not since our little brocade war. Say, the Victorian era, what kind of weather do you connect with it?

I stay silent.

- Well, I take then it's not summer.

Anna pauses for a second, then explodes:

- Is this why you moved here, you dumbass? Because this place was weak and your toxic worldview could remain unchallenged? Did you *impose* autumn on this town?

I have a feeling that I will not have much explaining to do. She is pretty spot-on, but in her words, the whole affair paints me in a most unflattering light.

- And she, your girlfriend, whom was so special to you, actually *is* special, and has the wits to see through the façade of eternal autumn, and she calls you out, and you become insecure, and suddenly everything buckles and ripples, and then there is snow. Is that the story?

I nod, ignoring that she can't see me. I'm happy she can't, because I hate

people seeing me cry. Crying people are so pathetic. And crying ghosts especially.

- Anna.

- Don't 'Anna' me, buddy. I should have guessed it. You never change, do you?,

she asks, angrily, but with a calmer voice than before. I don't see why I should answer to that conjecture, because changing is, and Anna knows that, or would know it if she would take up a more pensive attitude, something extraordinarily detrimental to our kin. Changing means to accept that one is, for example, inchoate. I am not supercilious for the fun of it.

- You never change. I shouldn't even be angry, or act as if I was disillusioned. You just fucked up as usual. You know, you're getting yourself into so much trouble, and it never pays off. I was so happy when you finally left Manchester. You had been so consumed by the darn red brick houses and the overall coldness of that nation,

by 'nation', Anna does not mean England, but Manchester,

- It was good to know you finally moved on from that wintry part of the world.

Manchester was something we could never agree on. She lived in Manchester, the winter nation, I lived in Manchester, the slightly gross English city with a slowly dying textile industry, separating me even more from broca- ah, I digress. But Anna is right about there being lots of winters.

- It was good to know you couldn't bury yourself in the overall dullness of the whole British island anymore. Most of that dullness was only in your perception anyway. But it felt good to know, pardon me, *to believe*, that your life went on, that you had decided to develop yourself further and experience something new, and then, by coincidence, I have to move to the same town you secretly made yourself the emperor of. That is just amazing.

- I am no emperor,

Emperors are, in my opinion, colourful, dour and fun – a complicated combination – not mousey, agitated, and missing two fingers.

- But you try to be. You always tried, with the little power you have over the world. You do it better than I ever could, but by now I guess that's because you can't do anything against it. Denying yourself a story, and a character, and all of that, I mean, of course that gave you a story and a character all the more, but overall it made all those little pieces you deny to link themselves with you into tools to shape your surroundings into these ridiculous clichés. Of course you've been shaped by them, fused with them, all that shit happens all the more because you reject it so much, but you have to reconstruct your environment with everything you deny entrance to your inner life, too. Why is that? What is the deal? Is it still that brocade bullshit you never got over?

- Anna, please.

- I'll say it again: The brocade bullshit!

I do not respond, signalling her she hit a raw nerve. Not that she had ever

been unaware of that.

- I thought we were over this,

Anna sighs.

Let me explain. I don't think that it is fair to grant her authority over the narration of my philosophy. It is a very simple one that is hard to disagree with:

There are different types of people.

If we accept the existence of different behavioural patterns and all what we can observe in the animal kingdom, not to mention all of human history, that must strike one as an almost universal truth. And having accepted that there are different types of people, one also has to accept the inevitable illation that people of one group are more similar to one another than those of another group. That isn't something to be contested.

- You lost so many years in France when they disappeared.

And logically, with different types come different tastes. That I had a rather exclusive taste in a very limited group of people when I was still in my formative years – I just made clear how unappreciative I am of any phase one might come through that lastingly reprobates one's mind through change in a developmental sense, and therefore use the term 'formative' rather loosely here, only implying that I did not encapsulate myself and instead fathomed which barricades were still salvageable – is hardly anything anyone might see something morally offensive in.

- Listen: They existed. I know you like to ignore that. You pretend to act as if it never happened because you're still ashamed. You avoid theatres and

music halls to not be reminded of them, of their innate art forms. The brocade people existed once. They called them nobles. It was a class issue.

The brocade people, you see, are a third group of people. There are glass, paper and brocade people. There are others, too, like ghosts and deaths, but they are minorities. Anna is hinting on my, in her perception, buying into the assumption that the brocades were a superior group, and therefore me, demanding only the very best quality of companions, valuing them over everyone else. I do not accept this notion entirely, for it is true that most of my friends from a certain period have belonged to that group that was called 'brocades'.

- The nobles disappeared, and you went nuts. That's the whole fucking story. I don't know why you're still running from the fact that you are just as prone to discrimination and privilege as anyone else. Go on, tell yourself you never really liked them. Tell yourself when they disappeared you didn't fight for them to stay. And go on telling everybody how much worthier the paper people are than the glass people without acknowledging you use them as a surrogate.

Her point is, of course, the brocade people never really existed. They were a made-up class trying to differentiate themselves from paper and glass – about the existence of, for example ghosts, they either didn't know much, or it didn't worry them. The brocades only pretended to be brocades, but just as we can go on and on about how races are just made up, it doesn't mean they do not exist in behaviour, language, prejudice. They might not be scientifically evident, but they have real-life consequences. That is not

to be doubted by anyone.

That I believed in the brocade people, who, Anna is not wrong about this, at times were called nobles or clerics, is not my fault alone.

- France, France didn't teach you a lesson, right? Buddy, people killed one another! The brocades went extinct because those who protested to stop believing in them were assaulted. We had to grow up there. And I did. I think I did. I moved on, but you, you did your best to preserve them. A lot of people did. It was hard to free one's mind from their existence. But would you say that the attempted preservation was fun? I didn't like Napoleon much. Did you?

Now this is just plain nonsense. It is true that some people who did believe in the brocades as a type thought they could make themselves into them. But we are born with a certain set of traits. We cannot make ourselves glass or brocade or paper. No matter how fictitious, our type is one we are born with. I don't make the rules.

- Look, we had to see that we were mistaken. Just as everyone else, we typecast people and cling onto our beliefs. We are not above the crowd just because we're outcasts.

I can hear Anna massaging her temples. We have had this conversation a dozen times before. Or rather, her soliloquising me into submission. But, by principle, she doesn't like me pontificate about anything, of course. She would be so much happier with me if I was merely a doll to complete her ventriloquising act about right and wrong, because I will never be able to convince her that I'm not a despondent demagogue at heart and not in

need of a custodian.

- I received your evasive lip service that you accepted the brocades were never a real thing and we, well, you first, moved on to England. England, one European country where you can still adore some real-life nobles in power up to this day. I knew you wanted to go there because of that. But the magic was gone, wasn't it? It was all so transparent and fake. The brocades had become a lie.

As if I hadn't known that! I fail to see what her point is.

- But paper and glass, they weren't so fixed. Everyone can typecast people, and paper and glass could just apply to everything. I don't know when your fixation on paper people started, just because you perceived them to be rare. You never fixated on ghosts because you don't want to be among equals, right? How will you react when we finally accept that we are no more real than the brocades have been? Would you even survive your type being questioned? You pretend that you don't like it anyway, but I believe being the wise hermit is just your thing. You don't tell anything about yourself not because you dislike your own opinions. You just hate to be called out for them. You are done with being held accountable. I should have known you left Great Britain because you couldn't bear it any longer, these nobles reminding you of what you'd actually like to believe in again. You went here to be left alone with stalking those you allowed to be paper people, and froze the whole fucking place to a state you could live with, right?

- Are you implying that I have a propensity to haunting?

- A propensity? You fucking nitwit didn't do anything else here, right? Your ex is a wise woman for having seen through it. She might not possess any powers ghosts have because, and that's what you like, paper people still *do* belong to the spacetime continuum. And you know what? You do, too. We're no exception. Our powers come from the agreement of everybody involved that we have them.

That is another thing I and Anna cannot agree on, but arguments can be very productive, can't they? I like to place us ghosts a little bit aside from continuity and the like. Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative; some writer I dislike, but who was right more often than not, once said that. I do believe we have an impact that isn't necessarily better or more powerful than-

- I know you're rationalizing everything in your head right now to a degree that must be borderline delirious. If that's how you cope with everything, so be it. Yet – Buddy, if we wanted to, if we all agreed on it, the brocades would be back tomorrow. I believe they are back already, and it's not as if no one pointed that out. The nobles have been replaced with property and celebrity a long time ago. We're just too afraid to grant them the title because we know what happened last time.

I can't hide my sobbing anymore and scream into the receiver:

- *What do you even want to tell me?*

There is a short silence. Then, in a slow, explanatory voice, Anna dictates:

- That the world is exactly as we think it is, and if you don't start censoring your thoughts properly, you're going to hurt someone. It's fine

to wish for autumn to last forever. It's fine to even believe in it. It's wrong to treat it like a universal truth. You made yourself believe in Paper Woman and Autumn City and, back then, the brocades, as truths. Stop doing that to yourself and others. You can have the birds fly south for a while, but at some point, someone will protest. And it won't help that you then say you didn't do a thing, or that that is just how the world is. It isn't. For some people, the birds come back. And the birds themselves, who knows what they believe. Do you even care?

- I don't understand you. Isn't this all just some theoretical reasoning of yours?

- Do you want to go matter-of-fact on me? Do you really want to do that?

- No, Anna. I'm sorry. I don't.

Again, a short silence follows.

- You know, the worst part is that I'm only allowed to be angry with you until tomorrow or something, because then it will have happened years ago, and it would be silly to still disabuse you like that. It even feels silly now. We had that talk so many times, and whenever we have it, it's been some time since the actual shit went down. I just can't process how someone like you, who has so much power, who has unlimited youth and life force and access to the rulebook of the spacetime continuum, how can you be so imperfect? Why are you just some outré, piteous, fragile demi-god instead of something nice?

I hear her gnawing on something. Maybe a pen, maybe her fingernails.

- When did she leave you?

- Some months ago.

- How are you? I mean, how is your condition?

I feel small and am not able to raise my voice to a normal level. I'm not squeaking like a mouse, but I feel like one.

- Lost two fingers.

- Oh, that explains the snow. Important fingers?

- Left hand.

- Are you left-handed?

- No.

- Index or thumb?

- Ring and pinkie.

- Oh, that sounds okay. You can cope with that.

- Getting used to it.

An awkward silence arises between us. We are both uncomfortable. The good thing with arguments is that while venting, we are too busy to feel bad or awkward. As long as the anger doesn't dwindle, there is a limit on how strenuous the whole conversation might be. There is something liberating and rapturous in being awful to one another. Albeit I am not skilled at being awful directly. I must have been awful indirectly. Otherwise, I wouldn't be single now.

- Where is she gone?

- To her book store, I suppose. She forbade me to follow her.

- Did she ban you from her store?

- I don't know. I didn't check.

- You're not following her?

- No.

- Then at least you're not a stalker.

- I think of her a lot, though.

- What do you think about?

- If she left me for someone else. Someone better. Maybe the man, I suppose it's a man, from Southeast Asia she had business with. I wonder whether I am so disgusting that not even someone as patient and kind as her could ever bear with me. Stuff like that.

- Compared to everything else, that sounds healthy and unprecedented for you. Stick with that for a while and you might one day develop human feelings.

- I have feelings.

- Keep telling yourself that.

- I have them.

- For other people, not only for you and your sorry ass?

Anna sighs.

- Ah, I – I need to get back to work. This city cleaning stuff is still on my schedule. I'm – I'm sorry about your loss, and please, grow the fuck up. I don't have the time to fix whatever you break. Do me a favour and build up the strength to free this town from your grasp. The people here are dumb and decent. They don't deserve to be haunted.

- I see.

Anna hangs up. I have reddened eyes and a headache and am exhausted

from my feeble attempts to cover up my sobs and sniffles. Luckily Anna was angry enough to ignore them.

I hand the phone's receiver to Hagen, one of the pub owners. I don't have a phone, so Anna and I agreed upon me calling her from the pub whenever there was a need to do so, and she'd call the pub too and leave a message now and then. Hagen – he insists on being addressed with his first name – is fine with that, since I am here every other day. I am his favourite alcoholic.

Paper Woman never visited the place with me and I never told her that I spend so much time here. The owners don't care. I'm here since the opening night, I always pay in cash, am friendly and polite, cause no trouble, just sit here and drink. It's what you do when you have nowhere else to go to but a museum or a park from time to time, or pick up your girlfriend after work. Hagen, the eldest son of one of the owners who has, by now, retired from the business, guessed some weeks ago that I was single again. I don't leave around six anymore or stay absent for longer periods of time. Luckily Hagen's English is much too bad to have him inspired to say encouraging things like

- It's getting better

or

- You'll get over it,

and also he can't pull that trick where the barkeep acts like he has wants to listen and cheer you up but actually is well aware that you drink more the more depressed you are and therefore uses backhanded remarks like

- She was your whole life, huh? All you had, I mean,

or

- Think of all the time you have for yourself now,

or

- Don't worry, I've been left too, and I'm doing fine, you see?

I used all these sentences on myself with the help of an imaginary barkeep who speaks with an adorable Welsh accent already.

However, Hagen noticed that the call wasn't great – half the bar did. I don't even have to order something to turn the headache into a hangover, he already pours a dark brown liquid into a glass for me, and, fighting his instincts, asks:

- Her?

- Another one.

- Some busy man you are.

He's lacking the Welsh accent. It is completely charmless.

I think that from now on I will have to limit my reports a bit. Of course I will go on reporting because in order to stay alive, I have to. Stories which aren't told do not happen, and people nobody talks about do not exist. In the beginning, I was very peremptory about what to tell and how to structure everything by granting maximum insight while protecting what I deemed to be my privacy. The line seems to have faded, and the border has been crossed without me being able to do much about it. I was so precise in my planning – for example, my sticking with the present tense, and the first person. In the present tense, there is an immediacy and

urgency no other form could evoke. Of course the past tense is elegant and aesthetically superior, but everything elegant is dated – like the Victorian era, for example. And the first person – isn't there an element of trust in this, an implied companionship between storyteller and audience? There are things in the first person present tense that couldn't happen elsewhere. One example: While telling this, someone could enter the pub, pull out a gun, and shoot me on the spot. I could die while narrating it, urgently, exasperatedly, blurting out some last important sentences. In the past tense, how unexciting, in the third person – gone is the intimacy by inviting yet another person to the crime scene who ogles everything from some unreachable place. For sure the person describing my mishaps isn't exactly the same as the one living through them, but there are similarities.

It's true I give little information about who I am. I have to describe my surroundings and present them as things I do not feel or think, but truly experience, objectively live through. And I do think I give enough information. I am not an unreliable narrator, I am not lying. I might not get everything right, but that is also true for Einstein and most police reports, and still we rely on gravitational waves and someone to write 'case closed' on cleared files, no matter how much residual doubt there remains.

By now, I have not yet decided on how to limit myself. The element of time is, I think, the key – one cannot grow close to a friend you only see every twentieth year – but I do like simulated coherence. On the other hand, if I managed to recount ten years in a format that can be consumed within a day, how hard can another hundred years be?

II. Reciter

I made a habit out of visiting the park once in a while, on my own. Even though the pub is pretty much my home now, from time to time, something in me insists on watching some falling leaves.

It's a bright day and the sun's dimmed rays very favourably illuminate the pitcher sage on each side of the path I am currently walking on. There was a heavy autumn rain yesterday and the ground is still humid and the smell of the air I irregularly inhale has many heavy, earthy undertones to it. To finally accustom myself with eternal loneliness, or at least the fact that Paper Woman will never come back to me, no matter how often I re-walk the path we took on the day she sacrificed two of my fingers, I find myself quoting poets, something I usually wouldn't do, blaming her, and women in general, for as much anguish as possible. I even make some serious attempts at loving the word 'wench'.

- This withered root of knots of hair,

I recall from memory what seems to be the best description of Paper Woman to be found in poetry,

- Slitted below and gashed with eyes,

I remember the poem as I go on, already feeling uncertain whether I should continue or not,

-This oval O cropped out with teeth;

this description still is kind of disgusting, but I know there is a catch I cannot put my finger on right now,

- The sickle motion from the thighs,
and with a very confusing hard-on, I remember that this is a T. S. Eliot poem.

For a minute, I stand still, watching some picnickers close to the pond, unsure whether they take notice of me or not. For a while, I observe them like animals in a zoo, feeling terribly out of place, then, more relaxed, delve into quoting Dylan Thomas. This might be due to my nearly constant intoxication and the felt brotherhood thereof, wherefore I ignore the exuberance of the two of us. Walking on, I notice that some of the tiniest pebbles of the path stick to my soles, rendering my sashaying a little awkward. I try to make it look spunky.

I catch myself wondering whether She, she isn't even Paper Woman anymore, just one universal 'She', disparages or endorses or ignores Thomas, on which side of cultural ignorance she might be regarding him, this, at this point in spacetime, favourite metaphysical drunkard of mine. From *A Grief Ago*, I stumble to *The Hunchback in the Park* and back again, and there we are.

- Who is my grief,

I mumble, having forgotten the following line, skipping two verses, ending up uttering

- Who then is *She*,

then giving up. My self-pity has either passed Thomas', or it isn't quite there yet.

A bird in a nearby tree chirps and after a few seconds, other birds join

him, singing a cruel, uncondacted song.

I think about quoting Whitman, but that is impossible for ideological reasons, and I can't think of many hostile poems he wrote. Auto-eroticism is nice, but I lack the confidence to recite and believe in a park full of families and couples and happy birds and freshly-cut sage. It might bring me some peace of mind, but I want to be aggressive. And while Whitman at least was active during the Victorian era, the Victorian spirit is lost on him. He was a silly American.

The people around now definitely have taken notice of and offence from me, the badly dressed half-drunk loner staring at them while, every other minute or so, eruptively disgorging carcasses of poems once ingested.

Emily, I think,

Emily!

Not believing my luck, I start uttering the bittersweet lines of *Fall, leaves, fall*, starting to feel better about myself and my decisions regarding Autumn City. That I didn't think of her from the beginning must be rooted in my depression. She rhymes, even, something most other serious poets dismiss as bauble and cannot be asked to do.

Still, after having quoted the entire short piece, I don't feel better, or worse, or more or less aggressive or lonely. Just indifferent.

Ah, I simply am not a lover of poems. They are much easier to quote than novels and complicated theories, but so much harder for me to identify with. There's still too much beauty in them to convince me of some innate ugliness of their respective topics. Strangely, like some subconscious

literacy, they surface now, when they and their learnability are all that's left for me to remember with ease.

My phone rings.

This is odd, because, except for Anna, whom I dictated it on her answering machine when I first got it around a year ago, nobody has the number, and Anna hasn't called me since, and we have not been in contact for some years anyway.

When I answer, and immediately hear her voice screeching happily:

- It's over,

I need a minute.

- Hello stranger?,

is the first thing I can reply, and Anna laughs.

- Oh, sorry, it's been a while, right? Yeah, I didn't call for a week and a half or so. Sorry about that. I have been busy.

- It's fine,

I answer, concentrating heavily. She mustn't notice my current drinking habits.

- Busy. That's one way to call it.

- Are you okay?,

she asks, still so gaily that I cannot let myself go and have her deal with the full awfulness I have been producing over the last years.

- Everything's fine,

I repeat.

- So, what is over?

Anna chuckles.

- I broke up with Emma.

- You did?

- Well, yes! It's so weird, I know, because I moved here because of her, and now after a month of living in the same house, it's over – and it's great! In fact I feel so good I caught myself binge-listening to Taylor Swift the other day.

I feel a sarcastic answer building up in my throat, that the only good Swift I know of was called Jonathan, but then I have a strange throbbing between my ears telling me that this might evoke something that has to do with Paper Woman, even though I don't know what, and say nothing. I have no idea who the aforementioned musician is, anyway.

- You know,

Anna continues,

- It's perfectly strange. Since I started working for *Rouault*, some issues arose we didn't notice when we were in this long-distance relationship. She seemed very unhappy with everything I did and the friends I made,

I manage to not mumble 'I wonder why that is',

- and I found her too aggressive and nervous and three days ago, we just broke up.

- You did?,

I ask unconvincingly.

- Yes! It's funny how easy it was for the two of us. We didn't even make any ridiculous 'Let's stay friends' promises, we both just realised it didn't

work out.

- And you want to stay here, or...?

The picnickers seem distracted about the strange man who abruptly stopped versifying his sorrows to have a perfectly normal conversation on the phone.

- Well, of course I'll stay. I'm not that much of a fan of Germany, but the job is quite easy and, well, actually I shouldn't commend you for that, the climate is nice, and my schedule is full with interesting people to meet.

- Katharina?

- Oh yes, her above all! In fact we'll be meeting this evening. I can't wait for her to mock me for my Taylor Swift phase. We're still reading Zweig, and thinking about something English or American I could read to her. Any suggestions?

- No, not really.

There is a short silence between us.

- Say,

Anna asks,

- Are you really doing okay? Have you been drinking? It's around four o'clock in the afternoon. Or is it later for you?

- No, you're right. I've been hanging out with some people and still am pretty hungover.

- Oh, which people? It's nice to know you're socializing.

- Uhm, there's this guy Thomas, and Dylan, nice guy from Wales who just moved here, and a chick called Emilia. Pretty cool people. Students at the

university here, all of them majoring in literature. We just started hanging out.

- A 'chick'? I never heard you using that word. What year is it?

What a question. I must think for a moment. Around four years ago, the IRA had placed a bomb in a delivery van in the centre of Manchester. I saw that on the news; that was in 1996.

- I think it's around-

As far as I remember, no one died.

- You *think* it is *around*?

But over 200 people were injured.

- Yes, uhm, around 2000 or so.

I feel a little homesick thinking of that.

- Oh, really?

If she wasn't in such a good mood, Anna for sure would be more concerned, and rightfully so. But right now, she is as self-centred and flaky as anyone who just started a new relationship.

- So, maybe you could get me a Polaroid camera? For this city cleaning project I'd like to work with an instant camera, but they're not available anymore, at least not if you want a new one with some films. Think you could get hold of one?

- That shouldn't be a problem. When do you need it?

- Could we meet tomorrow?

- Sure,

I reply,

- How about I continue showing you the city? Have you been to the central park already?

- Not as of yet, but some of the adverts I'm working on will be set up on billboards there, so it'd be nice to visit the location before I finish the project. Tomorrow in the park around noon? I'll find it myself and call you when I'm there, tell you which gate I am at.

I immediately forget what I reply, but it seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, because Anna's reaction doesn't indicate any alienation from me:

- Great! I'm going to listen to some more happy break-up songs. There's something in me that cannot resist trashy pop music. See you tomorrow!

She hangs up and I am alone in front of the picnickers again. I move on, walking towards some piles of rotting red, yellow and brown leaves that have been harked into a small village of leafy hills, thinking about where to buy a camera and some films for Anna. Next to Paper Woman's shop, there is an electronics store. I might be lucky there.

On my way I might see Paper Woman through the window, sitting behind her desk, reading, or in front of a new computer, on her never-ending search for books out of the ordinary. I might storm into the shop and quote Darcy again, this time his second proposal.

And she would take a minute to recognise me, then send me away to sleep off my inebriation.

I kind of look forward to it.

When I pass her store, I don't even catch a glimpse of her. The windows

of her sanctuary are dirty, and everything behind it seems blurry and sepia brown. Some people are in there, going through the shelves. It's never been half as full before the information age hit Autumn City, which is exceptional for an antiquarian book store. On the door, it newly reads: 'Finden Sie uns im Internet unter www.-', and it is this writing that blocks my direct view to her desk. How sneaky of her, using modernization to repel me.

After a while, I move on to the electronics store and enter half an hour of consulting service on the subject of which Polaroid camera I want and if I really do not want a Fuji instant camera instead. While doing this, I think about the boring year – or more – ahead of me of carrying this camera around before Anna and I will meet tomorrow, and then decide that I'd love to see her.

When buying the camera, I allow myself to let go a bit and allow time to accelerate immensely. It won't pass faster for me so I can meet Anna sooner, but the faster it moves, the more I have to tell her. And with some more years ahead of me, I can flesh out the stories of Emilia, Thomas and Dylan. Me and Anna, we rarely have to tell each other important things which are also true. The thing is, we only lived for so long because we never got into trouble. Whenever in any form of fiction characters appear who lived through the centuries, they will prove it by showing photographs in which they are standing next to Stalin or by pointing at historical paintings revealing their likeness with one of the portrayed figures in *The Death of General Wolfe*, or by proving that they knew Christopher Marlowe

or are his secret student Shakespeare living under a new name, but in fact things like this do not happen. I think it is safe to suggest that people who make it through more than one century in general shine with historical and cultural insignificance. They are expatriates who do not make a fuss about it, people without any strong motifs or political beliefs that might get them into any danger. They are perfectly adaptable, flexible beings and therefore pretty boring. Me and Anna, of the whole bunch we know, are the ones with the most character and life story, and we didn't leave any marks on history, if one ignores the fact that autumn has become obligatory for the places I go to, which is little more than a mark on climate. But most ghosts have lived through the centuries without any interesting things to say. There are historians with more impact on what happened than us nondescript bores. The biggest influence I ever had on history might be that I didn't participate in any wars, and that, when Friedrich Engels lived in Manchester, I already used to spend time there, too. In my memory, we never met one another, but since he wasn't too well-known back then, I might have just not taken notice. We never were of the same creed, as we both were in Manchester for the same thing – the textile industry – but while I was there to see my beloved brocade industrialised and felt like retribution had come upon me, he had to write an avalanche of misconduct on the matter. Anna met Alan Turing once, during the time he was teaching at the University of Manchester, but it wasn't until the trial concerning his homosexuality took place that she recognised his photograph and knew who she had been talking to.

Leaving the store, I find myself in front of Paper Woman's shop's windows again. The street lights outside just went on even though it's still fairly light, and people are still flocking together in front of her cash register. I still can't make her out among the shadows, but I recognise a book one of the men near her desk is holding. It's a collection of poems by Philip Larkin, which immediately explains to me why I can't grow fond of poetry:

Novels are about other people and poems are about yourself.

That is something he liked to note, or people like to note that he said it once, and it explains my problem perfectly, even though I never agreed with this notion. This journey is a novel, after all. I can't simply include poems and hope to change topics with them. I have to stick with one format if I want some flavour and suspense out of my opinionated reports, even though poems and short quotes make for better signature slogans.

At least Larkin possesses the right amount of dismissal for everything modernist, even though he himself, in my opinion, doesn't pass for a proper conservative artisan, and in this specific quote I just thought of, he might have mixed up the dependencies.

One last time I squint my eyes to catch a glimpse of *She*, but Paper Woman doesn't grant me one.

I look around, watching the sun set between some faraway buildings. If I had one, I'd go home now. Instead, I scrub my throbbing head, run my fingers through my bristling hair, usher most shreds of my consciousness on the backseat of my mind, and decide to get hammered whilst I wait for

Anna to arrive.

The night is near.

And the wild boys innocent as strawberries had followed the hunchback
to his kennel in the park.

12. Flapper

- Is that cocaine?,

I ask when offered some white powder in a clear plastic bag by Anna. She smirks.

- Buddy, I work in an advertising agency. Do I even have to answer that?

I shake my head.

- No, thanks,

I finally respond to her offer, and she puts it back into her bag,

- You know my rules: No other drugs than alcohol, the occasional cigarette and people.

- How utterly arbitrary. When did you quit coffee?

- When did you start cocaine?

- Back in Manchester, actually, but it's even trendier in this town. To feel bodacious and at least slightly grandiose seems to be something the citizens of Autumn Town are a bit addicted to. So when it became obvious to me that practically everybody at *Rouault* was taking some, I asked the one most likely to be the source of that where he got his powder from, went where he told me to, and re-stocked my inventory. It's pretty good; I didn't expect that much.

- I don't like the thought of you getting high at work.

- And I strongly dislike the idea of reminding you of your shitty liver. You either were very hungover yesterday, or still, or already drunk. So I thought some variety in how you shut the world out might give some of

your organs a nice break.

I shrug my shoulders.

- You are not mistaken. But I am almost convinced cocaine isn't the best thing to do to my liver.

- Probably not. I didn't read much about it, to be honest. It's just an offer.

I look at her, and she at me, while we take a seat on one of the benches near the pond. The picnickers, of course, are long gone. Instead, a stray dog is busy hunting ducks.

- When do you live at the moment?,

Anna asks.

- Yesterday, it was 'around 2000', so today...?

- Early June of 2014.

She raises an eyebrow.

- No way. You made it through fourteen years since yesterday? That's a new record.

- I let go of time a bit. Also I stopped, or at least limited my drinking some ten years ago. You needn't worry too much about it. I'm better.

- Well, that's amazing.

Anna is truly impressed. She isn't used to me getting over anything and rather presumed me to be fully complacent in my squelching, logy bitterness and, probably, prepared herself to be a lenient, affable, benign listener for most of the day, hence the cocaine.

- Also,

I continue, foraging in my bag,

- I got you the Polaroid camera. I had to re-buy the films though. They didn't make it for a full fourteen years. These are about six or seven years old, I'm not sure. With some luck, they still work.

I hand over the camera and earn a bright smile from Anna.

- This is great, just great,
she twaddles with an astonished voice,

- What do you get for that?

- Nothing, really. Buying that camera for you was the first thing I actively *did* in years. It kind of helped me getting on the right track again. I won't say doing your shopping made me a productive, proactive member of society, but it might have if I had ever been such a member before.

I smirk.

- My God,
Anna gasps,

- You can smile! I am amazed!

She puts down the camera next to her and hugs me.

- You can actually raise these mouth corners! What happened?

I don't answer and simply hug her back.

- But when you let go,
she mumbles into my ear,

- why then is it still autumn?

- I wish I knew,

I answer,

- We're hardly the only ghosts here. Maybe I had some assistance setting

this up.

She lets go.

- You mean the whole town might be under control?

- Maybe. Or this city *is* Autumn City, and I never had anything to do with it. I'm not sure.

We smile at each other. Anna repeats:

- 14 years – I cannot believe it. So, these friends you told me about yesterday, the literature majors...?

- Long gone, every single one of them.

I lift my left hand, the one with only three fingers left, and, with my right index, point to my left hand's thumb.

- Dylan's gone to New York and developed a severe alcohol problem. Pretty excessive guy, but it was fun while it lasted.

I point to my index.

- Thomas went to Great Britain to start his literary career. He's not doing too well, so don't expect to see anything from him published anytime soon. Last I heard is that he joined the Church of England. And lastly,

with some grief in my expression, I point to my middle finger,

- Emilia died at age thirty of pulmonary congestion. She could have been a great writer. It's all very sad.

- Oh,

Anna slowly processes,

- I'm sorry to hear that.

- Oh, we weren't much in contact anymore when it happened. But of

course, when I received a call from her sister, I was shocked.

- I can imagine,

Anna says with a nod,

- You've been through a lot, huh?

- The last few years surely have been eventful. But enough about me – how are you? What's going on in your life?

Anna smiles a little abashed.

- It all feels so small and meaningless after hearing that – I hope you're planning on telling me more about your last decade and a half. Well, what can I say, since my last call, barely twenty hours passed. I got home from work, took a quick shower and set off to Katharina. She found herself a writer she wanted me to read to her.

- Who was it?,

I ask, feeling very complacent and still amused by the stray dog who now started to dig some holes into the moist ground.

- Fitzgerald. She's into him because, like Zweig, Fitzgerald relies on a pretty passive narrator in this novel. And I have to say, there are similarities. I'm reading *The Great Gatsby* to her now, it's great.

- Gatsby?

- Yes, *old sport*. You remind me of the chap and the narrator, just that Jay Gatsby might be considered a decent human being if he weren't so obsessed with wealthy empty-hearted and -headed women he projects all his longings on.

- Was that a hint? You know how bad I am at understanding cues.

- Partly. The last beloved of yours I know of I only met once while you were absent, and she was warm and nice and sophisticated and all that jazz.

Her voice pitched higher with those last three words. Naturally she is happy about Katharina's choice, having been such a perfect flapper girl once. It's the wrong weather and period, but seeing her stand up now after having opened one of the sealed films, putting it into the camera and running frantically around trying to make some interesting photographs of the stray dog and the ducks he playfully mauled, the feeling of having let a period pass we just fit in perfectly besets me. The Roaring Twenties were a magnificent time, and the glassy Americans simply obsessed with brocade, trying their best to re-enact some of that long-gone and unreachable glory with money and fashion. I was good, I fit in well into prohibition and crime, but Anna was a breathtaking embodiment of that time's virtues. It was as if spacetime had finally granted her an entire period to be herself: vain, good-humoured, pliable and cynical. If this lucky woman named Katharina knew what kind of a favour she was doing to Anna right now, she might reconsider whether that was a good idea.

- The camera works!,

I hear Anna shouting,

- But the films are shit! I can't recognise anything!

She laughs.

Standing there in her tasteless Capri jeans and weirdly modish layered top, she reminds me of the epitomised flapper herself, Joan Crawford, in

her mature years. Maybe, after having her ideal time, she outgrew it, and just fits into this strange present period that I still do not understand entirely. But looking at her now, at least her fashion choices seem less alienating than back when I picked her up at the airport.

I remember Paper Woman, when she made her first steps into the world wide web, worrying:

- Finding your place and time when there are unlimited options, that seems plain impossible.

I don't want to think of that, so I concentrate on Anna.

I get up and run towards her, grab the camera and take a shot of her face before she can say anything.

- How did the reading session go?,

I ask, and she tells me the usual infatuated gibberish. She always fell in love easily, and out of it, too. What baffles me is that she still hasn't noticed herself.

- And did you offer her some powder, too?

- Good heavens, no. She isn't like that at all. She never even smoked. A true lady, if it weren't for the dungarees.

- Then what were you guys doing when you weren't reading to one another?

- Going on YouTube,

Anna screeches and snatches the camera from me, only to stumble into the shallow waters of the pond, close to the stray dog who grows ever more curious of the two of us. When I come closer, she snaps my face, too, jumps

up and runs from me, laughing.

- Going on YouTube, watching Taylor Swift videos. I informed her that I just broke up with my girlfriend, so she understood that urge.

I follow her into the woods, myself being followed by the dog.

- And when the sappy songs came on, she reminisced about her sister and we got a lil' cuddly. A sweet night, really. I'd like to introduce you two at some point.

- Why not?

- That's the first time you ever said something like that. You really must feel better, better than in the last half couple of centuries!

I catch up with her only to have some more shots of my unpremeditated face made. Behind us, there is the dog, wagging its tail. Anna stops, smiles at him, hands me the camera, and fearlessly pets the mangy pooch who barks without interruption.

The last time we were at the same point in spacetime must have been the Roaring Twenties, when we travelled between Great Britain and the US regularly. At some point back then, suddenly Anna moved forward, while I stayed put.

The day ends with ten lousy brown photographs we both love, me silently reminiscing about the time I openly lampooned Anna for wearing a cloche hat, and the two of us bringing a stray dog into a shelter.

On the night of the same day, I pass a pub I normally don't enter – much too middle class – and see a familiar face sitting alone at the bar. Well, not

a face, a back and buttocks seated on a barstool. I haven't seen her for over two decades, but it's definitely her; I feel her name re-entering my consciousness. This pretty nice back belongs to a pretty nice figure I have seen and interacted with before. For a while, I don't know what to do, then finally decide to enter.

- Emma.

She turns around, looking surprised and disappointed to see me.

- Oh,

she says,

- Hi.

- I've heard it from Anna,

I say to her bitter face that slowly turns back to the bar and her glass. I approach her, and when she doesn't say anything, take the stool next to her. The barkeep asks me what he can do for me, and I order two drinks. I do all of this with the brightest of smiles, perfectly apt for a war of attrition.

- What do you want?,

Emma asks grumpily.

- I take the breakup wasn't as peaceful as Anna told me, right?

Emma looks at me. Her eyes widen.

- She already told you?

- Well, yes.

I still smile. She is grave enough for both of us, and to be honest, I have no idea why I suddenly am interested in her side of the story, or her in

general. No, that's not the right way to describe it. I am not interested in knowing for which reason I am interested to be in her presence.

- Shit.

She needs a second to focus on what to say.

- I thought she might think over everything again. Shit.

Accidentally having told her that the breakup is final, I still don't feel worse. Seeing her in a vulnerable situation instead of one where she just self-identifies as vulnerable and clueless makes her a dozen times more relatable and addressable. She wears a short light blue frilly dress and looks like she put some effort into her appearance, but didn't notice that in her back, her bra is showing, and that her galoshes are unbuckled – or maybe that's intended. Still, obviously she is not used to prettifying herself up.

- Let me guess,

I start,

- You planned on going out and getting white girl wasted and maybe pick someone up to show yourself that you are above such things as heartbreak, but after like twenty minutes in a night club you felt old and pathetic and childish and alone and decided to just sit down here and be miserable.

- Do you want me to splash this drink into your pudgy face?

- If that would be a relief for you, treat yourself, have a go,

I answer, pointing at my cheeks. She twitches.

- What happened to your hand?

I have to take a look at both my hands to understand what she means. I've

grown very used to my handicap by now.

- Oh, that. It's a long story. Some stray dog in a park, you know?

She nods, her eyes fixated on her drink.

- What kind of dog?

- Much like yours.

- Wouldn't have thought you could withstand that much.

- It's not like the dog asks their victim if they'd like to go the extra mile for his pleasure.

- Got vaccinated afterwards?

- I looked like a heroin addict.

She forces a smile, then swallows her drink. I sense her questioning her perception because the scars look too mended to be only one or two weeks old, and therefore, when I helped Anna move in, she must have been overlooking the fact I was an octodactyl man.

- Listen, if you want to build me up – we're not friends. You and Anna are, so you're on a specific side of the argument. Why don't you just get lost?

- I was in love with Anna.

- Watt?,

she reacts with so much of a German accent that the necessary 'h' after the 'W' is replaced by a 't' at the end of the syllable.

I bear with her confused stare.

- Is that supposed to make me feel better or something?

Our beverages arrive and I pay the barkeep immediately.

- Well, I just wanted to reassure you that one of your first assumptions of

me – don't worry, you never voiced them – was indeed correct. I like to tell myself that I was just sexually deprived, but that is not true. I was in love with my lesbian best friend. Shame on me.

- Like, when?

- Long ago,

I try to remember the exact dates for myself rather than Emma,

- I felt absolutely alone. You see, I'm from South Africa, and Apartheid had just ended, and I was on the wrong side of history, so to speak.

- Whatt?,

the 'h' is back, but the double-T also remains.

- Do you mean you were-

- A racist, spot on.

I give her a thumbs-up with my healthy hand.

- My institutionalised worldview just, you know, broke down entirely, and then there was Anna, whom I met in those days, to comfort me in these confusing formative years of mine. I don't know what she got out of our relationship, though.

- But, uhm, isn't Anna-

- Of Indian heritage, yes. I guess that helped getting kind of over the racism thing, but the love – oh well.

I elegantly sip my drink, being proud of my story. It's fun to play the ex-racist to earn some good will, and it works so much like a charm that Emma doesn't even question how old I was when Apartheid ended – for all she knows, I'm not even in my mid-thirties – or what Anna might have

had to do in South Africa back then.

Emma looks at me with some newly found interest and even amazement.

- Anna never told me.

- I ask people not to tell anyone. It's nothing you make tons of friends with. Imagine I had introduced myself with 'Hey, I grew up pretty convinced that there are inferior people compared to others, but being head over heels into this lesbian friend who never offered more than a shoulder to cry on really helped me get over it.' That's a charmer.

Emma smiles, and this time doesn't have to force herself in order to do so.

- Does she know?

- She told me if I ever mentioned it again she'd kick my butt so hard I would land straight back in Apartheid period South Africa. And you know that's something one better take seriously when it comes from Anna.

Emma nods.

- Yeah, indeed.

She drinks, and sighs, and drinks again. A minute goes by in silence. She plays with a beer-soaked mat on the counter.

- How did you get over it?

I take one of Emma's busy hands and squeeze it.

- I realised it was not worth it.

I tell her this in a way that sounds like I was sharing a dark secret, which is why she moves her head closer to mine.

- In all the years I know her, I saw her having so many affairs and

relationships, and you know what? It's always her who breaks up, and she always manages to convince herself the breakup was mutual. She is far too flighty and light-hearted to have any relationship, be it monogamous or not, that lasts for more than a few months. People who can just be as happy alone as with a partner – that being said, I have never actually seen her alone – seem to be even less choosy than those who are desperately searching for one. She is far from being heartless, rather the opposite. She is too full of love for everyone, but her love's shelf life is rather short.

- And that helped you to get over it?,

Emma asks disappointedly, forcing me to let go of her hand by grabbing her glass.

She sighs:

- Ah, for you it's easier. You never actually stood a chance. You didn't experience something slapdash and turbulent like this.

- I am also through some pretty ugly breakup.

- Who isn't?

She lifts her drink.

- The relationship lasted a whole ten years.

She puts it down again.

- Did you love her?

- I was crazy about her.

- What happened?

- Too crazy.

- When?

- I called Anna when it happened. Did she tell you when we visited the art museum?

- Yeah, that was just some weeks ago.

- A few days after that, I called her.

- Oh,

Emma responds,

- Oh. So, it's still very,

she searches for the translation of a word she has in mind,

- recent. So it's – it's that Paula you told me about,

of course she remembers that,

- How strange, you seemed so happy and – ah, I'm sorry. So, it's recent.

- Yes, it is.

I drink up.

- We've both been abandoned.

I smile at her, gravely. She smiles back. The preparatory work is pretty much done.

- Hey, I know a much better pub at the other end of the city. How about I call us a taxi and we get really drunk in an environment at least one of us feels homely in?

She runs her fingers through her hair, suddenly insecure, trying to look bashful. I didn't leave any 'maybes' in that proposal, and there was not the slightest indication of affection in my wording. It's pretty obvious that I am not offering her my friendship. For sure I am not the guy she thought about picking up this evening, if she thought about picking up a guy at all.

But now the offer's been made, and she still can splash a drink into my face.

She doesn't answer.

- Alternatively,

I reason,

- I could simply walk you home like a true gentleman and then insist on having a coffee with you in your kitchen, bothered by your lousy dog, but I thought you might like to get drunk first and have the coffee alone with your dog in the morning.

Emma is completely overpowered, probably thinking about whether I'm repugnant, repulsive, reprehensible, or all of that and yet bizarrely fuckable. She rubs her forehead with one hand and grabs my arm with the other one.

- Call that damned taxi.

13. Angel

A rainmaker has entered the city. That is unfortunate.

It starts to rain when I'm busy observing a nuclear family on their way home from the animal shelter southeast of the central park. Ever since Anna and I brought the stray dog here, which by now is long dead and never got adopted and therefore never visited the park again to hunt ducks, I grew interested in people visiting animal shelters. I won't go into detail about whether all the clichés about couples and singles and families and their preferences regarding pets are true, because they are. What drew me to this specific family is that the parents are both made of glass while the daughter is a paper girl. I followed them into the shelter, pretending to be interested in a rat or something similar. It was delightful to watch the parents acting as if they wanted to adopt a dog, preferably a presentable one, for the sake of their daughter, who didn't show any interest in dogs at all. When asked by the voluntary worker assigned with advising the prospects what her favourite animal was, the girl answered 'fish' - and when told that she couldn't adopt a fish from this shelter, changed her answer to 'leprechaun'. It was the only form of rebellion she knew against the execrable outlook of having to share her living space with a hairy, fetid, barking animal for the next ten years. Her parents were skilful at ignoring her and went on telling the worker and each other how their daughter would like this and that one, and how beige matched their living room wallpaper so well, while their daughter wandered off to watch the

turtles. At some point, she had looked at me, and I at her, and we both nodded in agreement. She asked me in German whether I knew why people liked dogs, and I answered that my guess was adults liked to mistake obedience and subservience for loyalty and friendship. She was about nine or ten and appropriately compliant and docile for her age, so this information hardly struck her as something new. She shrugged her shoulders, mumbling 'But they already have me' in German, and wandered off again to go on watching turtles. That was when I left the shelter and waited for the family to leave, too. When they did, they were accompanied by a tail-wagging ball of fur that looked like a dwarfish crossbreed of Shih Tzu and German Shepherd, and they had even forced the daughter to take the leash. Just when I tried to get a look at her expression to see the whole disaster that her life was from now on, it started raining. The following darkness was almost immediate and I barely could hear the dog's protesting yelps through the thick layer of water separating me from the family. I lost them quickly, and about that time I realised that this wasn't the usual rain.

I need to protect myself. Everybody does. Understandably, one needs a viable messaging system or some infallible indicators to index intruders entering one's territory. When conceptualising the basics of Autumn City, my best idea was to have it rain whenever someone entered who pushed the boundaries too hard; who not only was fully capable of understanding what had happened here, but who also attempted to influence the environment by themselves or at least was capable of that.

This rain, falling perfectly vertically, with long cold drops that seem to be able to cut through flesh, and the accompanying darkness are, in all the years I have been residing in Autumn City, unique. Heretofore, rain was influenced by things such as the availability of clouds and the direction of the wind, among other things.

When it started, the family must have headed towards their vehicle immediately, since the only thing I could see in this windless storm were a car's headlights receding.

So, standing in the rain, after a few seconds my mind has explained to me in an intelligible manner that the alarm I set aeons ago has finally set off.

I start wandering through the city, looking around for someone who might be responsible for this. The people barely notice that this is not the usual rain, and I was careful enough when plotting the city's limits to not have them wonder about constant rain for a hundred years or more. Nonetheless I need to find the person causing me such distress as soon as possible. Not that they pose a threat to me specifically, but with me and Anna, we are already two ghosts here, and another version of this place might be rather unstable and is undesirable at best. I like the world as it is, not its potentials.

However, for one and a half years I have to live with that. Anna only calls me once and by carefully interrogating her I find out that it's been raining in front of her office window for five minutes by now. She is more concerned with interrogating me about what there was going on with

Emma and whether I am insane or not. I barely remember what she refers to. I haven't seen Emma in about fifteen years, and when I tell Anna that, she calms down. She doesn't like how things I did are always too far in the past to be rightfully angry about, but that probably is because time works in my favour and not hers.

So, for one and a half years it's been raining already, and I am in search of the cause.

When I finally find the rainmaker in, of all places, my favourite pub, I immediately recognise him: When I enter the place, a bony, tall figure is seated in front of the counter. His hair is dry and his clothes – a thin beige T-shirt and a pair of barely heterosexual skinny jeans – not even slightly damp, setting him apart from everyone else in the room. Only someone with some insight into the matter could influence the rain enough to make it stop falling on them, and only someone who kept in practice over the centuries could be able to incapacitate my weather system far enough to still have this amber-tan skin tone.

At first I identify the rainmaker as an ordinary young man, but approaching him it becomes obvious that he is a death.

For a moment, I am stupefied. I am wont to ignore their existence due their superciliousness and their unwavering dexterity in causing, without any single one of them having ulterior motives or a vindictive personality, alterations to spacetime I usually am livid with, for they tend to interfere with my habits and lifestyle. Their cherubic faces are presages of a reality I

am probably fond of being skewered, atrophied and excruciated, and the ham-fisted narratives they facilitate rarely have my blessing.

I am convinced that he has already taken notice of my entrance, but keeps himself busy building up this gloom-scented atmosphere, emboldening the surrounding drunkards, usually preoccupied with their own matters, to abjure their own depths for a moment to form a bulwark of eyes and ears, because the most regular of all the regulars of this shady ramshackle hut being so distraught by the sight of a stranger that he doesn't even dare to come closer to his usual seat is the most exciting thing they will experience today. They refuse to give me their allegiance while I, left alone, make my first step towards the intruder. Immediately, their interest dwindles a little – I didn't say or do anything out of the ordinary except that I stood in the entrance for a little longer than usual, so I might still be able to win back their lack of interest completely.

The death's most defining feature, from where I stand, are his long, long legs. They make him seem feral, but not in the sense of Paper Woman looking like an insect queen, and I don't feel like I am approaching a spider or a feral cat either. Being lured closer by his lack of reaction to my movement, this juggernaut awakes in me the image of a reptile, of a snake.

Silently, I take a seat next to him and have a look at his profile. He is a frighteningly beautiful man, with sharp, elvish and overall lovely features. Thin lips and almond-shaped eyes, long, dark, straight hair, and delicate eyebrows that seem just arrogant enough to be absurdly attractive. He has a very young face, yet he is far from looking boyish or juvenile. Just young,

sporting this unreachably ideal variant of youth most people do not even possess in their teens. I am smitten, and so is everybody around us. He gathers admirers just by sitting there, his long thin fingers right above the base of his wine glasses' stem, conveying his superior knowledge of old fashioned etiquette. This is the last man one would like to have as one's suc- or predecessor in terms of being someone's lover.

He turns his head and glances at me, smiling the faintest, but most fastidious of smiles. There is nothing cherubic in his serpentine look. As of yet, I cannot identify any malevolence either, but his expression is neither benign nor candid either.

Deaths have always been utterly frightening to me. Anna, all the more positive on the matter, calls them angels. And indeed they have alluring features if one ignores the skull that lays underneath their epithelium, glia and soft tissue. It's been a while since I last saw one.

The barkeep, it might still be Hagen, it might already be some other lad, asks me if I want the usual. I nod, and he leaves the two of us alone.

I'd like to initiate contact, but don't know what to say. That is when the death looks around in the pub for a second, to then address me:

- You're narrating, right?

I look at him as if I don't understand what he is saying.

- Hoping to fix yourself onto something. I get that.

His glass is empty, which is why he doesn't drink and only looks at its bottom.

- It's one way to stop being a pure ghost. But I have a feeling like you're

not too good at it. Causality and spacetime and personalities seem awkwardly warped. Is that intended?,

he asks with his buttery, soothing voice.

I still don't say anything, just obstinately, pigheadedly, petulantly look at him. The corners of his mouth move half a millimetre up while his eyebrows move half a millimetre down. I might be mistaken, but I think he also squints his eyes a tiny bit.

- Adorable and pathetic. The story will be nothing but weird, but I admire your tenacity.

- Why are you here?

He raises his empty glass to my eye level to show me his appreciation of me finally joining the conversation.

- To pick up the usual few souls. Also, this village,

I cringe when he says that,

- has quite the hairdresser.

He puts down the glass and runs his fingers through some silky strands of his hair, smirking smugly.

- Any souls you came for specifically?

- I'm just looking around, picking up the ones I particularly like. Any recommendations?

- None coming to mind.

There is something wrong with him. I feel a presence that has never been around here, as if he had taken a soul I was fond of.

- Do you know of Paper Woman?

He laughs.

- Plenty. Any name you could attach to that description?

I can't, and fall silent. This quandary won't leave my ego unscathed. He makes a horrifyingly charming face, then says:

- Of course I know who you mean, and of course I know her.

I stare at his wristwatch, ignoring the internecine feeling of my day of penance having arrived. There is an anti-digital fad going on, and people have started using mechanical clocks and similar anachronisms again, because they are afraid that the government and private companies might track how late it is on their watches or something.

- She is my girlfriend, but I take you already knew that. Made some investigations on the stranger who made it rain, didn't you?

Against my will, I pout. I must look pathetic and feel like all the supreme qualities of my attractiveness, which are relative and on which I worked very hard, fade in front of his absolute gruesome beauty.

- How is she?

- I don't think you're too interested in that. But well – older. She is much older now than you'll ever be. And still stunning. We are very much in love.

I breathe heavily. A drink appeared in front of me, and I didn't notice anyone putting it there. Minor reality blackouts aren't anything out of the norm for situations like this, I think. So I take the glass and empty it. The death waits patiently.

- How'd you meet?

- What better place is there to pick up souls than in an antiquarian book

store? I have been working there for some time already. She can't pick up all the boxes full of heavy-weight page turners anymore and hired a help.

What an outrageously disgusting way to enter her life, I think. And he even dares to be so self-confident about it.

- She doesn't talk much about her ex-lovers,
the death continues torturing me,

- but I guess it's safe to assume you are the notorious one?

Did she really betray me? Did she talk about me? What an unsightly thought, what an undignified action of hers. To think I was lovelorn about somebody sharing this kind of behaviour with the commonality.

- I don't know what you mean,

I answer slowly, carefully decelerating time to have a chance to think about my answers,

- Nothing bad happened. It was true love.

- Of course it was,

he says reassuringly,

- and therefore a one-sided one. Me and, uhm, 'Paper Woman', we despise one another a little bit. That is just healthy.

- One-sided,

I repeat,

- That is true. I never managed to make her love me back the way I loved her.

The death starts laughing.

- Oh, better be happy about that. I didn't assign you with the whimsical

'true love' position. That was hers.

I stare at him in terror, trying to conceptualise an Autumn City where he does not exist. It doesn't work. The envoy of snakes stays in place.

Normally, the people around me don't take notice of my presence unless I want them to, for I am here so often. But with him by my side, I feel them staring. This is a public conversation.

- You know,

he continues overzealously,

- there is a condition, take into account, an exclusively human condition, called erotomania: the conviction that someone is in love with you. And then there's you, being the exact opposite – you have to convince yourself that she was not in love. You downplay her feelings so yours don't fade by comparison.

- That is armchair psychology.

- Hearing that from someone applying his complete inner life to the appearance and processes of an innocent village, I will not take your remark too seriously.

- What is my crime, then? What did she tell you?

- She never told me much. You are the one ex she had a very long relationship with and was reasonably scarred therefrom. Not anymore when we met, of course. It's been far too long; but she showed me some old photographs and her scars, as I showed her mine. I don't think you committed a crime that is unforgivable. She is over everything. Are you?

I stay silent. Suddenly, the death's facial expression changes to the worse.

- You force yourself to care, and listen, and be tender and loving, when all you really want to do is to own other people. I'm not even telling you that you are manipulative or controlling. Just obsessed with the images you create. And now you're going full *Selfish Giant* against me, the child that wants to play in your garden.

- Is that why you are here? To tell me that?

- You would have found out about me sooner or later, wouldn't you? You hang out around the store a lot. I'm done with hiding.

- I have lots of business to do in that area.

- Of course you have.

His glass is full again, and he drinks. A second time, I didn't notice any barkeep.

He can see I am still chewing on one of his last remarks and figures out which part I didn't understand remarkably well.

- Wilde,

he murmurs austerely,

- the 'giant' reference.

- I never read much of that fellow,

I answer, trying to look like the pundit for literary discourse about the Victorian era I actually am,

- I have a lot of disdain for dandies.

- Well aren't you one remarkable rocket. Coming from you, that is like saying that you don't like bohemians. It makes you one of them *and* a wanker.

I choose silence again.

- Ah, forget it,

the death says in a more relaxed, but still loathing tone,

- the reference was lopsided anyway. The child with the wounded palms and feet is not going to show up for you, after all.

He keeps on drinking, then sighs.

- She is such a special person,

he says.

- I always told her that!,

is my immediate response.

- When I say that, I mean that she is special for things she can do and does and says and believes and knows. You said that because she existed for you to be your special someone. Huge difference.

- Are you mocking me?

- A bit.

His face remains fierce when saying that. I try to think of anything I might have done wrong to incite such aggression in him. As I cannot think of anything, my next attempt is to change the topic:

- Can I ask you something?

- Why certainly.

He doesn't look any friendlier yet.

- Why does your kin never kill ghosts?

He sighs again.

- We don't kill, we collect. And besides,

he glances at my left hand,

- you guys usually manage to do that yourselves.

He waves at the barkeep and points to his glass. The barkeep nods while sorting his booze in the rack.

- If I recall correctly,

I go on,

- We are related.

- That is true. Kindred even.

- Isn't the saying that a ghost is but a death with a pure heart?

My opponent chuckles arrogantly.

- 'Pure heart' is a mistranslation from ancient times. One could even call it superstition. An *empty* heart is what is needed – purity can be corrupted, tainted, made impure. But did you ever try to fill up an empty heart? There's nothing to be done. Like a black hole, it just sucks up whatever you throw into it; You cannot undo emptiness. That's something you're stuck with once you've been turned into a bottomless pit.

For a moment, he looks at me with some kind of sympathy, as if he had just realised who he was talking to – as if I had a mental disability limiting me in so many ways that my actions couldn't be used against me anymore. That is not the kind of pity I like.

- Then how,

I ask,

- does a ghost happen, and how a death?

- How deaths happen, I cannot tell you. We spawn into the world like any

other being. I think it is a thing of universal necessity. But a ghost-,
he takes a second to find the right words for what he has to explain,
- A ghost happens when paper burns, or glass breaks, or brocade loses its
value, and the beholder doesn't die. That's the funny thing actually: The
paper, the glass, the brocade, all that's natural, that's always been there.
But you, you have been *made*. It's a destructive process that results in one
of your kin.

I have some trouble digesting that, even though it hardly comes as a
surprise.

- Well isn't that evocative,

I murmur.

The death isn't done yet:

- Everybody's a ghost. They are banned: written on paper, bottled in
phials, or woven and stitched into curtains and rugs. You simply do not
possess a shell anymore.

He chuckles again.

- How obvious is it that you once were made of glass or paper? You either
belonged to the glass people and always wanted to belong to the other
group, or were a paper person and liked to see your group as the superior
one. And at some point, you managed to drop out of that spectrum
entirely. That the brocades were still around back then is hardly anything
more than decorum for your longing for grandiosity.

My widened eyes attract his attention.

- Don't worry, she is unaware of these stories. From the few things you

ever told her which she then told me, I could make out what kind of person you are. Your back story isn't that unique.

- Then how,

my mouth feels dry,

- are we related?

- We like the same kind of woman.

He lifts his glass with the smug look back on his face.

This is the second time in my life I can recall to have thought of killing someone, or to at least feel a certain desire to do such a thing. Obliterate, that is the word I think about – how could he be obliterated, how could his whole kin be eradicated? Why don't they all do me a favour and just evaporate?

- But let's change the topic,

he says,

- You seem uncomfortable.

- How do you take them?,

I almost shout, talking about the souls, but actually asking how he will take, how he took Paper Woman.

His face transforms into that of a professional.

- If you really want to break paper people, just let them give birth to a glass baby, and let that rip them apart. There's plenty of ways actually, but anything disappointing or lowering their expectations and standards forever normally is sufficient. You really don't need to do much. Put them into a storm or any other unpleasant company, and usually it's over pretty

soon. And glass people – Oh, either smash or crack them. Cracking them takes a while, but it's delicious following them as they lose one shard after another. Smashing is boring, but that's how it's done when you have little time and some other appointments at a similar point in spacetime.

He smirks.

- Take what you want from that. I might have just been bullshitting you to meet your expectations. I might have told the truth, or my truth at least. You can believe me that I am not one of those modernised relativists who say that glass and paper are all just made up categories. I do believe they exist. But who is what, and to what extent one's condition is unchangeable, that is something we might disagree on.

I can't stand this guy any longer. I throw some money over the counter and stand up.

- Well, then one last question,

I ask,

- What is she?

A long silence follows. So long that I have time to notice the baffled audience we have gathered that doesn't bother the death at all, and that, if I was alone, would severely frighten me.

After what feels like aeons, he replies:

- You never bothered to find out.

He shakes his head once, and that sympathetic expression is back on his face.

- You didn't bother to find out if she was a wizard, even, and now ask me

to sum up your loss in a sentence you can take with yourself to chew on once you've left the pub.

When I don't move, he sighs one long, last time.

- Wizardry or not, her shell is mortal.

That's when I leave the pub.

When he also leaves later on, I have been waiting for him a few blocks away and beat him up pretty badly. For a while, nobody intervenes, then the police shows up. I can't convince them that I was trying to do the city a favour by beating the smugness out of his pretty face.

I don't have any papers and when the opportunity arises, I escape from the police station before they can investigate further. They don't find me, if they are even searching.

I don't hang around the book store anymore, which, I have to mention, I didn't do much before either. Death's perception of reality obviously is strangely warped.

The rain doesn't stop for another fifteen or twenty years. I forget to count. But I always feel this man's presence, and when one day it's suddenly gone, I don't know whether I should feel relaxed about it. The roads stay flooded for some time afterwards, but after a while, it's all over. I wish he had died, but knowing his condition, I suppose he just left the scene and moved somewhere else.

14. Therapist

I have picked up running as a hobby, because by now the Victorian era ran out of books to provide me with. I have failed to fall in love with any more modern literary universe and grew tired of the popularity of the even older ones because I don't like to share my passion with just anybody, and in Germany, the Victorian era tends to be something of an underdog except for some very passionate housewives I usually do not have to converse with because they tend to get drunk at home.

So running it is, not running in the logical sense of going quickly from one place to another, but rather running in place, or circles in my case. I chose a path leading around Autumn City, and over the years in which I developed from someone considering jogging over someone considering to do some more jogging to someone who actually jogs on a regular basis, I noticed something peculiar: Autumn City's boundaries change, without any political actions involved to forcefully alter its administrative borders. They just change on their own, as if they were altered by some aggressive dimension-warping input, and my best guess is that it has everything to do with Anna and Katharina, but I will cover that later.

Running isn't something that satisfies me enough to fill my days with it, even though the fact it was supposedly a no-brainer to put on some tasteless sportswear and move my legs while listening to podcasts about self-improvement and -optimisation at first drew me towards it. But after a while the hosts of the different podcasts all have ceased to constantly

amuse me with their lovely attempts to sound like practising professional evolutionary psychologists and not like circus performers, and the whole thing went down from being hilariously pathetic to being dull and sad.

So I thought long and hard about getting a day job, and thus assigned myself with a therapist.

It is difficult to translate the world into his terminology, hence the preparation of our bi-weekly appointments fill up my schedule perfectly. I barely have time left to go drinking, which is still a favourite topic of his to discuss. We cycle through all the possible questions about the wherefores of me enjoying pubs and inebriation more than work and soberness, and by now found out that all possible answers, like self-medication against emotional and physical pain, a need for stupefaction, callousness and escapism, anti-depressant surrogate abuse, boredom-bearing, as well as a certain degree of frivolousness, apply to me. I think he prefers to talk about my drinking because it represents the part of my storytelling that is actually consistent. Everything else I tell him with the premise of pre-interpreting my generally indifferent experiences and beliefs into a direction I want him to draw the correct symbolic conclusions from, based on my current opinion on the matter. He does it very well, which relaxes me because I actually didn't pick him because of his professional pedigree.

I chose him because of the convenience of his location on the city map: His office is east of the central park, which has grown much nicer since the rain stopped, and north of the animal shelter.

- So,

he says, and surprisingly, it is a very American-sounding 'So', a 'So' he already has used in a lot of our conversations which makes me suspect he spent a year in the US, if not longer,

- Anna, this closest friend you have – when did you last chat?

- It must have been a few days ago.

- But you don't know exactly.

- I think it was on Tuesday.

It was on a Tuesday several years ago, but still, I am not lying. From Anna's perspective, we have been arguing on the phone less than a week ago, I am sure. By now it must be obvious even to him that our schedules don't coincide. Time is something very relative, and for our kin, it is even a little more relative than usual. I like to sound as if I had actual grip on time's behaviour, but while time can be generous, ultimately it doesn't care much about whether I *want* it to move fast or slow or in a staccato, even though my condition allows me to influence its behaviour more than it allows the next few hundred people. It just so happens that time works in ways that suit me quite often without intending to do so, for it is ultimately without intention. It might be that after all I am just used to it. Time also behaves differently at different places and altitudes, and of course in motion. In Manchester, my schedule oftentimes was so much slower than Anna's, and before, hers was.

By now, from Anna's point of view, she seems to be the one whose time moves in a much more relaxed manner. She needs forever to complete a month. And whoever's time moves slower at any given point must be the

one to call or write a letter so the other one does not end up with a dozen messages per hour on the receiver when actually there was just one call per week or so. When we are together, our schedules synchronise; but that never lasts for much longer than the exact amount of time we spend at the same place. When she moved here, Anna was a bit farther on the generally agreed upon timeline, a head start that has since been nullified, even inverted.

- But apart from that, you are living quite isolated?

- Since my breakup, yes.

When we met, I told him that Paper Woman only left me some days ago, which, seen from Anna's perspective, still appears to be true. But now we know one another a while and in his book, it's time to get over it. We already established how much I idealised her and left her little room to breathe and how important her occupation was in the matter, and I completely agree with that, of course: If she had sold e-books, I wouldn't have been so infatuated with her. But in times of the e-book, booksellers who deserve that title have become rare anyway. I don't see why some romanticising of times gone by should be considered a bad thing. Maybe a psychologist who believes in mortality and houses and money can have such a view that allows him to look forward, but for me, memories and images are everything I can build upon.

- Did you have any romantic encounters or situations since then?

- Didn't you ask me that last week?

He didn't, but his propensity to believe me rather than his notes didn't

cease to amuse me yet.

- Anyway,

I go on,

- There might have been little nothings going on, but that doesn't change my situation a whole lot.

Which for him is my putative alcoholism and the very precisely timed relapses I built into my phases of simulated abstinence.

- You mentioned a brief relationship with – you never told me her name?

- I don't remember it.

Anna has an obsession with names, while I never manage to remember any. I don't remember the original name of Autumn City, if there ever was one. I might have read it on a signpost when I moved here, but I didn't pay any attention to it, and by now, it should be long replaced. And asking Anna won't help me there because when she moved here, the autumnisation had already taken place.

Obviously though, for me it is Autumn City, while for Anna it is Autumn Town. We have a different sense of space, too. While for me, we are living in a large, socially rather heterogeneous city, for Anna, this is a pretty rural town with no social classes but the poor, the slightly less poor, and the rich who would be middle class if there were less poor people around. The advertisement company she works for is one of the town's biggest businesses, and its customers are the few businesses which are even bigger, as well as some companies from a nearby city. In my version, her ad company is a monster among many.

- Do you live alone?

- Yes.

- Did you ever think about moving into a flat-sharing community?

I suppress a chuckle.

- Well, I did think about a shared flat indeed, but most people just aren't my type, and I'm not theirs. Also, my German is still pretty lousy. Germans tend to dislike that.

- You might find some people who would like to practise their English.

I let that one slip.

I do not know why I prefer the company of paper over glass people, which are so much more common. They age differently: while paper, even if untouched, yellows and rots, rips and crumples, and behaves even worse when exposed to some stress, glass people can last an eternity without even a scratch; but when they break, they break. They have no resilience, are completely static. Sometimes, occasionally, they even burst. It's quite a thing to see. And it's nice to know that they don't really feel their demise. They don't have the time.

Interestingly, their innate art forms are different; the paper arts, drawing, writing, painting, they are close to being eternal. Literature easily is the most stable institution I know of, and whenever I am at a point in spacetime Anna is not in, literature is how we can connect, because we can be sure that some things we agree on exist written down for both of us somewhere, be it rotten or not. The glass arts, to me, they are rather ephemeral. While for me, images, photographed and moving, are the

greatest glass art to date, and therefore the most objectionable, Anna, when not yet questioning the existence of people variations, insisted on sculpture being a glass art, if art forms could even be assigned one particular nature. She might have been right, but I somewhat like sculpture, and that doesn't fit my formula. Anna would also state that I disqualified a lot of art forms to be regarded as such for the sole reason that they didn't fit my taste, and tell me that I was complicating matters by oversimplifying them.

Thinking about this, I decide to concentrate on Anna's and my diverging views on art when continuing my conversation regarding my mental health.

I always leave my therapist's office in a better mood than I had before. I don't understand why people who feel miserable go there to talk about their misery. It is a very odd habit they have.

It makes me feel good to know that I give the man something to do by telling him cryptic nothings about my life and let him indulge in debilitating my so very unedifying vices.

15. Researcher

A café.

That is so typical, so absolutely normative and predictable, that it apprises one of nothing but a certain cynicism of our – my – time.

I am not surprised that after some decades in which I have avoided her book store, Paper Woman's life work is long gone. But that of all things it had to become a café, that is insanity.

I am so shocked that all I do wish for is some very strong alcohol, but since my preferred low dive, which will probably never close down because it is a sad but successful family business, is quite far from here, I enter the once sacred, now rather consumer-oriented space and order the strongest coffee they have, plus some wine. The waiter catches my eye and after a few minutes I have figured out that he is a ghost who failed to trigger my warning mechanism due to his youth. He must have become a ghost not too long ago, having already lived here when it happened.

I manage to talk him into accompanying me to the museum the next day. He doesn't seem to be too infatuated with me at first glance, but I can see from the way his eyes glisten that he is overjoyed to finally talk to another one of his kind. Up to now, he must have thought he was the only one. That is both a loathsome and a wonderfully lofty feeling, and I am a remedy for that.

We share our specifics while watching two wildly different exhibitions – mine is about early media art, featuring some basics from Nam June Paik

to Cory Arcangel, while his is about the newest media art, featuring Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell – I need some time to digest the museum’s modernization in both time frames, but from that information, we can deduce that we are more than a century apart from one another: He’s the son of a former G.I. and lives in the early nineteen-seventies, back when Paper Woman’s book store had been a café, too, and also he is one of the first black students to study in Autumn City. Thankfully, he agrees with me on the ‘City’ part. Since he is with me, our spacetimes intermingle, and for the first time in his life, the young man can enjoy some anonymity, because although the folks in my realm might not have escaped racial issues yet, they are diverse enough a crowd to not find anything strange in a young, articulate, outgoing black man being accompanied by someone who looks like an art critic.

He sports black rim glasses and a chin cleft. Normally I don’t find either of these two characteristics attractive, but I am mentioning them now because for once, I do.

Art is completely lost on the young man, but I wouldn’t have expected anything less from a physics student. We agree that, being a ghost, studying physics is the rational choice, since understanding spacetime and other concepts is very beneficial for us. And even though he lives, compared to me, in times that from the current state of the theory of quantum-relativity, are ancient, having a professional with me is very convenient.

By common accord, a year or two later we are married, at least in my

time, where same-sex marriage is regarded as equally antediluvian as any other kind of contractual community. But we are both up for something stable and monogamous, and tax evasion from one time frame into another is much easier this way. Being a ghost, of course he is good at what he does, namely researching the conditions of our very existence and giving the whole thing fancy scientific names to make it seem a little less philosophical and imaginary.

Moving in with him into the richest, still most Brutalist part of the city into a very nice high-rise building that took its inspiration from the Genex Tower, close to where once *Rouault Medienservice* was, I discover that he is full of unoriginal ideas – for example, before we started to share an apartment, he wanted to know where I live. I tell myself that he is a very young ghost indeed.

By the end of his studies, he is a physicist specialised in life according to spacetime.

I reject most laws of modern physics, not because they are wrong, but because they are unacceptable. According to them, eternity could only happen in a space with no elements, or elements that do not interact or move at all, or beyond the event horizon of black holes – the latter idea is true, but more on that later. They, the physicists, do not understand that eternity is not a state, but a sensation. Without someone feeling it, it doesn't exist. Therefore, a certain movement of the mind is an essential prerequisite, an indispensable preliminary for everlasting snippets to happen, be they of time or space or spacetime as a whole. Also, physicists,

long ago, destroyed my dream of time travel in a way that interests me.

However, he, Glasses Man, as I call him, is happy with studying our limitations and also quite successful in his field. We travel a lot. That gives him the chance to attend and sometimes even speak on a variety of conferences, and me the possibility to visit a plethora of conservative art museums – New York, above all, has become notorious for them, since New York itself has become less notorious in the public eye compared to back in the late 20th and early 21st century – and uniformly unique antiquarian book stores without an internet connection. I become increasingly interested in book towns and their ability to, instead of slowing it down, ignoring time altogether and successfully bathing in nostalgia and the smell of ageing paper. Jinbōchō has a fetish for modernization and doesn't really fit in, but my Japanese is limited anyway, while Hay-on-Wye does its best to, whenever the rest of the world moves one year forward, move one to two years backwards instead. It is comfortable to see that I'm not the only one with a time problem.

The constant travel fits us well. After all, people who move, when observed by a stationary person, age slower than people who do not move, while themselves not perceiving their slower ageing. Well, actually, that is only true for a large percentage of mankind. It might be accurate for people who use space as their medium to move in. If your preferred means of transportation is time, people who move in space are kind of out of reach. I could just lie down here for half a million years and wouldn't age a second. I will be balding forever, as Autumn City's tree's leaves will forever

be falling: There is no real tomorrow in a world where time has become the space you inhabit, and space the segments of how you spend that time, of how you move through it. This only somewhat voluntarily assigned principle is what separates ghosts from the ordinary people. While I have built up some arrogance as well as some desperation about this, Glasses Man doesn't seem to be influenced by any of it. He just does his research and assigns everything with numbers and values.

I find his theory interesting that space, just as time, also moves forward forever, but we are too small to witness this phenomenon that he substantiates with the constant expansion of the universe as a whole. That would lessen the advantage ordinary people have over ghosts, since they also wouldn't have any fixed-points they could return to.

At some point, we plan on moving abroad, and after a while of considering, I come to think of this as a potentially nice idea to leave Autumn City behind. So we start planning while he is heavily involved in a project about black holes, for which he needs a lot of my experience on them. The reason for that, of course, is that basically, from a practical point of view, ghosts are physically identical to black holes. Anna is a perfect example, and that is strange because in theory that means that she holds much more onto time than I do.

In the centre of a black hole and right in front of it, after crossing the event horizon, time stands still. Therefore, Anna and I do not age.

For a while that made me feel safe, but then there was Stephen Hawking, whom Glasses Man admires very much despite his notoriety for being a

nasty tyrant. According to his calculations, black holes radiate, and do collapse. Therefore, Anna and I can disintegrate. The fingers I lost ages ago remind me of that in a very painful way. Whatever happens when full disintegration happens, we do not know, and much like the scientists who do their research about black holes, can only speculate. Happily, we, Anna and I, have never been around when one of our acquaintances did collapse. It happened quite a lot.

Glasses Man writes down all my adventures with Anna – I never tell him of Paper Woman, or any other woman – immaculately, then generalises them until he has some simple formula distilled from my personal experiences. I like his attitude about all of this, because his interest in me is so excessively scientific we rarely discuss my misdemeanour on a personal level. All we ever do is discuss physics, and eat. I like him saying that my cooking is what keeps him alive when he spent another two days without a break in the university or the observatory.

Talking about black holes and why they slow down time, it is impossible not to mention gravity. The rule is simple: The more powerful a source's gravitation, the stronger its slowing down of time. I am very flexible. Whenever I let my grip loose and lower my gravitation, time moves remarkably fast. That is my typical flight behaviour, of course, and not exactly letting loose in a psychological sense. Anna, I think, is not capable of loosening her grip all by herself, or alternatively, right now and for a while already, she is eager to savour every moment she lives through, a behaviour I would identify as the desperate side of positive thinking. But

at some point, she must have moved forward much faster than I did. I think she, over time, just gathered more mass and now her gravitational field is too powerful. High gravitation always equals a slowing down of time. After all, she is older than me and had some eternities to acquire more mass. No matter what the reason, her time now is painfully slow to me.

Glasses Man releases a book about me, calling me 'a potential astronaut orbiting a black hole with his ship', and using his wonderful neutral language capabilities to describe time paradoxes and the impossibility of anything faster than light speed.

To celebrate his successful release, we take a ride to Saxon Switzerland and test his newest travel telescope. Thinking of the time I wasted here thinking about Schiller, I can hardly recognise myself. Paper Woman, and therefore I, her wilful copycat, firmly believed in difference, in existing through disagreement with one another. In physics, what is strived for are equations. Of course, I liked agreeing with Paper Woman because the difference is what made me happy; being the other is what I liked. But happiness might never have been an option. We might as well just all be the same, made from the same particles.

The twin paradox and so on all show remarkably how fast movement and acceleration slow down the ageing process, but objects that move fast also gain weight. Anna and I moved fast for a long time, and it seems we cannot accelerate beyond a certain point that is not relative. Of course, I need to mention that it is entirely possible to move very fast while staying in place.

Autumn City doesn't move much more than any other city does, and neither do I move much in the physical sense. But as I said, that is only hard to understand for those who use space as their means of measurement. We shouldn't pity ourselves or feel remorse for what we did to get there.

Our plans to move out of Autumn City are still alive and well when Glasses Man's state of health worsens. He experiences some existential crisis, faced with all of this futility in the universe and the hollowness of ghosts, but that is a phase we all had to go through. I encourage him to keep on writing, and so he does.

Everything I said leads to the conclusion that time travel is entirely possible, but only forward, and that is my entire problem. Forward is the least interesting option for me. Returning to the past, turning your future backwards, means one has to move faster than light. It is the only possible way of being charged with negative energy and perambulate time in the other direction. Sadly, one then might be trapped on the other side of the light speed barrier. And whether we live in a universe where even particles which, right after the big bang, failed to slow down to 300,000 km/h or less and now might be trapped in a universe constantly moving backwards, and whether it could ever be possible, Glasses Man researches. He doesn't find a solution, not only because through moving faster, we gain so much mass that it is impossible to ever reach light speed, but also even if we ever reached it, we could never know, because light doesn't age, and doesn't feel or sense anything. In black holes and at light speed, time

stands still.

Glasses Man's desperation on the topic reaches a new height in his latest book, which by critics is celebrated and hailed as his masterpiece. Sadly I know that, in my time frame, the answers to his questions not only have not been answered, but that the questions have been reformulated heavily. But being a ghost, he has eternity to research his condition.

I admire his talent as a writer. He writes devoid of any passion, failing to awake any engagement in his audience. That is something few poets ever achieved. If I wasn't a reader, but a writer, I would like to be his disciple. Still I remember my deepest low in Autumn City's central park, trying to impersonate poets – it was my entry level of trying to become like instead of unlike to something, I like to believe, but since all I was used to was trying to be someone else, I failed at my first attempts. Now, with Glasses Man by my side, I have eternity to study his style based on exactitude and dispassion.

However, when I return to our apartment block one day, all I find there left of him is shattered glass on the ground and an open window. At first, I am very confused, because the glass is lying on the street and surrounded by policemen, and the window, up on the sixth floor, where we live together, seems opened, but unblemished. When the policemen start to interrogate me and ask whether I'm okay, I understand that the glass is that of a shattered glass person. This doesn't compute at all, because ghosts are capable of taking the easy way out, but normally, they do not

turn back into glass or paper in the process. Ghosts disintegrate. So while I ask myself whether I was possibly mistaken and my husband has always been a glass man or if he turned back into one at some point, or if Anna has been right about everything and ghosts and deaths and glass and paper are all the same thing and I just make distinctions when there are none to put some meaning into my existence, the policemen, in their formulaic language, note down the circumstances of a suicide.

Weeks later I will find out that Glasses Man died on the 45th obit of Taylor Swift, signalling me that either I let time accelerate a whole lot while being with him – our relationship was quite an indifferent, passionless one, which is why we never argued and all in all were very happy – or – well, both options are possible, actually – that Anna hasn't called me in about two weeks.

16. Customer

I made a habit of visiting the café that once was Paper Woman's store to meet up with my therapist. She is my fifth – I made long pauses between some of them – and with her, I am concentrating on my recent loss – even though it's been a while since it's been recent – as well as on my fear of dogs, because of the fingers, and my childhood, which is exceptionally hard because I don't remember having had one. Today is a stormy day – not rainy, just windier than usual – and the café owner has decided to move all tables and chairs inside, which is fine for me. It smells nice in here. The owner's husband, who helps out in the kitchen and has become a drinking buddy of mine, reminds me a lot of Hagen, the long-deceased owner of the pub I still visit with Hagen's lookalike. The pub's new owner doesn't remind me of anyone. Due to my age, this has become rare, and is all the more exciting. Also, I can use his and Hagen's lookalike's childhood memories they blurt out whenever they've had one too many as a base to remix and tell to my therapist. She is a pleasant woman, a mother of four and cheating on her lover with her husband. I have this information because we've known each other for years already and she's much more talkative than I am at times.

We're here because I convinced her that this place triggers a great anxiety in me that I would like to overcome. Actually, I just didn't want to be in her office today and am in the mood for some mediocre German coffee.

She pretends to be working by taking notes, and I order us two cups of

dark hot water I remember to be digestible from a previous visit. While we chat, I hear the door behind us open and the little bell's chime and don't pay much attention to this occurrence because it is all too common, but then I notice that no waiter approaches the visitor. A sudden alarm in me goes off, and turning around, I see Anna and another woman standing in the room, browsing for books.

I need a second to digest this. Anna hasn't noticed me yet, and that might be because I am sitting in a café while she is in a book store. I can see it forming around them, even.

- Do you have any business with these people?,
my therapist asks, meaning that some of their light must shine over to her.

- Yes,

I say truthfully, and then lie:

- The sturdy one looks like my mother. She looks exactly like her. It is unnerving.

I keep staring and my therapist keeps interrogating me carefully about in which way this woman reminds me of her and whether the café's atmosphere has anything to do with it and whether there is any memory including my mother and a café that might have caused my anxiety, and I lie as precisely as I can while watching the two.

I haven't seen Anna in what might have been a century. And the other woman – Katharina. This woman is Katharina.

There is nothing, absolutely nothing exciting left about this moment as

soon as I realise who Anna's companion is. She is the blandest of all the bland creatures I have ever met. Pure, cheap glass. Anna's taste is horrible. I should have anticipated that much: What good is a landscaper in a city with only one season?

They don't notice me staring. Maybe I'm blocked by a piece of furniture I can't see. I remember a shelf stuffed with Russian literature having been placed about where I am sitting now with my therapist, who watches the scene – or rather, me – with some interest I deem highly unprofessional.

I hear Anna talking. She says that she has finished her city cleaning project, and handed it in for print, and that it is about to be set up in the park, while Katharina, in German, answers that after finally having finished the front garden of Anna's company, she can concentrate on two other projects. When Anna asks which ones, Katharina refuses to tell her, but promises to show her the projects when finished. Anna smiles.

I wonder what they are browsing for.

One of Katharina's projects, I remember. I have seen it a long time ago. It's the central park that she and her colleagues are reassembling. I remember the signposts informing visitors of the regeneration; about the other project, I have no idea.

Anna points in my direction, but she doesn't mean me; she means the invisible shelf of Russian literature.

I know what they are searching for.

Seeing both of them going in my direction, I hear them chuckling, which is okay, and giggling, something Anna rarely does, and feel a lot of jealousy

boiling up in me. I'm jealous of Katharina, this meaningless shard of glass that dares to make Anna happy, apparently happier than I ever could, because for me, Anna never giggled, or spoke with such a high-pitched voice, and she never looked at me like this. Like a teenage girl admiring her celebrity crush. My hands feel wet.

I guess even a thousand years aren't enough for me to finally get over it, or anything else.

I wonder what my therapist sees.

- They certainly are two impatient ladies,
she comments, and I nod wordlessly.

Both of them have found the respective book they were searching for: An English and a German translation of *Anna Karenina*. Why don't they just marry right away and spare me this picture, comparing their chosen books' sizes and bindings and smiling at each other so gracefully?

They turn around and while they approach the cash box that materialises just when they are close enough, I feel my molecules shaking again, because I remember that they are customers in *her* book store in 2014. I never saw her obituary, but she must be long dead by now.

The two women wait in front of the cash box, and suddenly, there she is.

Paper Woman.

Paper Woman in her fifties. I never saw her like that.

I was mistaken. She hasn't aged badly at all. She looks astonishing. I even dare say that the smile she puts on when greeting Anna and Katharina, and the laughter she emits when seeing the books the two have chosen,

make her outshine Anna with ease. It is the first time I think of anyone as prettier than Anna.

My hand hurts. I hope I'm not losing another finger right now. The wind doesn't reach us, and therefore I cannot feel it blowing into the gaps of my fragile tissue, but actually, I do feel horrible, yet stable.

- Take your time,

my therapist says,

- and tell me when you can't stand it any longer.

Her presence reassures me. I'm stable. I will survive this.

Paper Woman. If I'd stand up and run towards her – I think of Glasses Man's last publications, and stop myself even thinking about that. I'd never reach her. It's just light, it's her light, coming from a source that is long gone, like the stars in the night sky. I'd have to break the light barrier to truly enter this moment. Anna and I both can see what happens in the world of the ghosts who surround us, but it is impossible to interact with what is already over. After all, there are some constants even in spacetime. There are variables, like the size and modes of the city, or town, or village, that we all can enter and use when given access to, but time is nothing to argue with.

Paper Woman has just handed them their change and they start casually chatting about Stefan Zweig. This makes me desperate.

By now, he has been dead long enough to deserve my attention, and I have read him, and I could, and I want to discuss with them. I want to belong to this group so badly. I feel a headache coming.

I have read him too, I scream internally, all of it, with his despair and fever and the apathy, with his transient narrators who always belong in the world and wander through it, but never are the focus, never participate. It's awful, and if they knew about my current misery, they'd know, and they'd stop reading this goddamned charlatan!

Anna, I think,

Paper Woman, I remember,

- Katharina,

I whisper.

My therapist immediately grabs my hand.

- You are not doing okay,

she ingeniously concludes,

- We should pay our bill and take our leave.

- No,

I still whisper,

- Let's wait 'til they are gone.

My therapist gives in.

It takes another ten minutes for Anna and Katharina to finally approach the door, and being left behind, Paper Woman vanishes again. I try to remember her face as good as I can, for I am sure this will be the last time I will ever see her.

My therapist lifts her hand and the waiter arrives shortly after. She pays for both of us.

Outside the café, I check my structure. My body is fine. I didn't suffer any

damage this time. The wind blows heavy, and I only feel it on my skin and in my hair.

My therapist grabs my arm out of fear I might collapse.

I wish I'd collapse.

I want to have a major breakdown now, but nothing happens. I just survive.

I have been reminded of an unfulfilled love, a most unhealthy obsession, and an insignificant marriage at the same point in spacetime, and I'm doing okay.

I'm a wreck.

17. Stroller

I remember all too well how much I despised flâneurs when they had just appeared, and their petty attempts to catch some of the glory that was gone when the royals weren't what they used to be anymore. But over time, I noticed that I tend to dislike what I am most akin to, and therefore do not wonder why I left jogging behind and only stroll through the central park now, which has been revamped a lot over the last decades. It has become a very pleasant, artificially natural space, and thanks to Katharina's influence – she worked on this project for over a year and tended to the newly planted trees and shrubs for even longer – there are no asphalted lanes left, but only gravel and dirt paths. In terms of fashion, this decade is wildly nostalgic, in its bigotry reminding me of classicism or the Pre-Raphaelites, allowing me to sport a frock-coat, a walking cane and a top hat. For once, the rewriting of history fashion companies tend to do doesn't bother me, because their vanity resonates well with my taste, and I can buy frocks, ankle boots and walking canes resembling the paragons of centuries I like most. The suits of the twentieth and twenty-first century were offensive to say the least, and I do hope there will never be another eighties revival, be it of the former or the latter century. Bothersome is, of course, that a walking cane held by a hand with only three fingers doesn't look very classy.

The leaves are falling beautifully today, and some birds decided to sing instead of leaving. My last therapist managed to get me to quit drinking

for real, even though I didn't want to. What a manipulative, scheming nature she had. I liked her. But I quit therapists entirely after that experience; I am not interested in my problems to be solved. Without problems, I'd have nothing left to do. No matter how much I enfeeble my gravity, it's still not moving fast enough to provide me enough past to dwell on.

Close to the pond with its crystal-clear water full of decoratively arranged shore plants and colourful fish, I see a very old paper woman with a dachshund on a leash.

Well, if that isn't interesting. Of course the times have changed, but elderly folks tend to stick with what's traditional, and traditionally, no self-respecting paper person would burden themselves with a dog.

I approach the old lady, who is busy watching the fish, and greet her with the hand gesture that is customary for this time. She greets back with a hand gesture that has been customary back in her time, and I find myself liking her. We both first stare at the water, but after a while, stare at each other. The dog just sits there and watches whatever dogs watch when they are dragged into the park.

I know this woman.

She looks at me with some disbelief.

- Sind Sie das?,

she asks, and I turn to her.

- Yes, ma'am?

- I'm sorry,

I hear her crackling voice address me again,

- I didn't intend to stare at you. You remind me of someone, but it's impossible.

She smiles shyly.

I think about the consequences my answer might have, and decide to ignore most possible outcomes:

- So you finally got used to dogs?

She looks at me with even more disbelief, then smiles in wonderment.

- I have grown accustomed to their obedience and subservience. They are much easier to handle than most people, and they don't require you to take their opinion into account. Also, you know that there is always someone around who is even more obedient than you.

I nod.

- I'm sorry you had to grow fond of them.

- Oh, it was awful,

she replies,

- But you see, I even got a stereotypical one working for me.

- You did well,

I affirm. Even though I fear that her accommodation with the circumstances might turn her into the progenitor of a movement that will destroy paper people once and for all, I cannot deny that this morose-looking old lady with her parsimonious movements is loaded with dignity. It mitigates my pain a bit. I don't want to have any enmity with her.

- So, how are you still alive and young?,

she goes on talking,

- I mean, I'm not up to date with *all* the scientific developments there have been in the past, but I am convinced that eternal youth still cannot be bought at the supermarket.

- Is it of importance for you to know?

- Of course not. It's just small-talk, you know.

The dachshund decided to approach the waterside and tries to hit some fish with his paw. The ducks nearby seem annoyed by him and back off a bit.

- So,

I start, drawing in the dirt with my cane's tip and offering her a smile showing almost all my teeth,

- What have you been up to?

I am genuinely interested, and she understands.

- I have become a biologist and spent years researching cichlids, especially those in Lake Malawi.

She takes another look at the fish in the pond.

- Let's have a walk, shall we?

I follow her lead. She must be dying soon. Her body only obeys her will with some opposition, she limps, and her blue, spotty hands shake.

- Of course I also had to research overfishing and environmental destruction, but mainly I concentrated on listing all the different breeds of cichlids. There are about 800 mouthbrooding endemic breeds in that sea, and the ones that aren't mouthbrooding are not endemic there. I always

found that fascinating. In that large sea, they are special and unique only because they also exist elsewhere.

- That is interesting indeed.

She laughs faintly.

- I know there is a metaphor hidden in this observation somewhere, but I am not the one to formulate it. Anyway, I do miss them a lot, the cichlids, and the sea. I'd like to go there one last time.

- Why don't you? Afraid of going there alone?

I notice that I like her sense of humour disguised as sense of fashion. She wears all the old lady assets in a manner that is ridiculously over the top.

- Save some assistants, I have always been there alone. No, the dog. It's complicated to travel with a dog.

- They are cruel, aren't they?

- Absolutely.

The little nuisance has approached a large tree to relieve himself. We stop and wait for him.

- How people can love them, I still don't understand,

the paper woman says,

- furry slaves with lots of needs they are, and it's good that way.

I hum in an affirmative tone.

- The cichlids from elsewhere,

I form a question,

- Do you think they targeted the sea especially because of the status they'd have there?

- Granting fish that level of intelligence would be unscientific, but yes, I do think so.

With some effort, she turns her head closer to mine. Her face is wrinkled beyond comparison and her glasses almost have the thickness of my thumb. It makes me envy her a little, this propensity to ageing and to having a purpose. I've never been built that way.

The dog is finished and we move on.

- Now you tell me, what are you still doing here?,
she asks.

- I'm here to take a look at the advertisements they put up on the billboards. It's charming they're still using billboards, isn't it?

- It is. What draws you to them?

- A friend of mine was a designer here and influenced advertising so heavily that you can still see her traces today.

- What was so special about her designs?

We stop again, this time to look at one of the billboards.

- Anna has never been interested in selling anything, and she feels very bad about lying, which made her ads and commercials pretty straightforward. It must have seemed ironic to most people, but she was very genuine. I'm not saying that that was something new. It has been done oftentimes before. But she managed to have an impact, maybe because she was so ideologically opposed to commercials, and therefore her designs lacked passion and delusion. They were brutally matter-of-fact and informative.

- I see,

the woman says, looking closely at the poster in front of us,

- You're right. This has nothing of the exuberance of vintage ads. They used to show people when trying to sell furniture and food, now you've got to be lucky to see them showing anything at all.

- A hundred and fifty years ago, it would've been art.

And then I got Anna this camera that didn't take any pictures.

- You think so?

- Art wasn't very interesting in the last three or four centuries.

She examines me again.

- I see,

she nods.

- Anyway, sales skyrocketed and campaigns Anna worked for were highly successful most of the time. And now she's still around on the billboards and on the advertising pillars.

- Is she dead?

- Oh, no. She is just somewhere else.

- You measure your whereabouts in time?

- Your apprehension is impressive, I have to say. But I noticed that back then already.

- So if I asked you how old you are...?

- I'd answer that it's about three dozen cities.

We go on strolling for a while, then end up in the pizzeria that once was the café that formerly was Paper Woman's book store. While we eat, I ask

her to tell me more about the fish she spent her life on. It sounds like a life spent well.

The dog falls asleep under our table and I wonder where he will go once his owner is dead. I imagine him to be taken to the same animal shelter where this woman's first pet came from, to close the circle.

18. Child

A lonesome pilot sits in the airport's waiting area, surrounded by noisy sparrows, waiting for someone to arrive or something to happen. I cannot determine which is the more likely option, and even more unnerving is that I cannot make out whether this pilot is a glass or a paper person.

On her gravestone, it is written:

Holy, the hideous human angels!

And whenever I think about that, I catch myself whispering, even if only in my thoughts:

- Holy, the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements!,

and it always almost makes me cry, even though I hate the Beat Generation passionately. I guess it is impossible to hate something that doesn't also move one deeply.

I came here to reminisce. This morning, a sudden urge to visit the airport overcame me. I have been here so many times. It was the first place I ever saw in Autumn City, it is where I picked up Anna, it is where I went on holidays with Paper Woman, where I started travelling with Glasses Man, and lastly, said Goodbye and Hello again to the old paper lady, whose dog I cared for for about a month when she ventured one last time to see her beloved Lake Malawi. We had become close friends, and when she died, I inherited most of her belongings, for she had no children and few other friends. I don't remember ever having been someone's heir, or child even, but I think for the two years we knew one another, I was, in a way, her son.

It still baffles me how she could become my mentor and be so mature compared to me, who was so much older than her. Maybe, I think, without a proper ageing process destroying one's body, the mind can't evolve any further. There might be certain limits I don't know about. It's a pity I was married to a physicist, because a biologist with some more time left, or a physician, might have served me better to find out about this.

I know this person sitting over there is a pilot because of the uniform, but I have no idea what this scene might mean. Just like the cichlids, a pilot waiting in the civil waiting area of an airport must carry some metaphorical meaning. I cannot grasp it, and it angers me that the borders have become so blurry that I can't categorise every person around me anymore. Most people here are still definitely paper or glass. Ghosts haven't entered Autumn City for an eternity, and I think that might be because it has become infamous as a city that already is controlled by one.

Her house, on the outside an architectural masterpiece that looked like a Yugoslavian war memorial, was overflowing with brocade energy. Everything possible was made of it: Carpets, curtains, pillowcases. And there was music, from morning to night, built into the house itself, integrated into every task through the speakers in every room. She knew. And she knew it pained me.

I sold the house not too long ago. People become suspicious when a property owner never changes – or ages, for that matter. And I still have no interest in being caught. I remember the horror I inflicted onto Paper Woman when she started questioning the trees. I start to understand her,

because I haven't seen a magnolia blossom for centuries, and that slowly becomes odd. However, I don't need to go through that quarrel again with an entire city with literally millions of citizens who have every reason to be angry with me.

Just when I think about buying a one way ticket so somewhere else and finally vanish from this dull playground that fails to amuse me since the paper lady's farewell, my mobile rings.

It's a strange sight because most people don't own mobiles like mine anymore, but I usually manage to pass it off as vintage, and found some nostalgics who regularly repair it for me, even though there is only one person who could possibly call me.

- Hello Anna,

I greet my friend.

- Hi,

I hear a weak, sniffing voice,

- Can we talk?

This sounds rather serious.

- Of course,

I say and sit down on the exact same, though now historical and refurbished seat I sat on when I picked her up a long time ago,

- What is it?

The pilot stands up. The birds don't take notice.

- I'm - uhm. I'm an idiot.

I'd like to follow her.

- That's hardly a reason to call me, except for if you don't want to be a lonely idiot.

She walks off into another area, out of my sight.

- I know, I mean-,

she breathes in heavily,

- Do you ever have a feeling like all of this is just make-believe, pretend-play? A feeling telling you that we are so invested in our little stories and readings that we cannot distinguish anymore between the times we actually lived through, and those we read and heard about?

Anna might have saved her from me.

- Constantly. I'm through everything from questioning my mere existence over questioning my level of self-delusion to questioning my sanity.

I talked with my mentor-mother about this a lot. About self-pity in disguise. She was incredibly understanding for someone who condemned sympathy. She would argue that pain was meaningless, everyone's pain, everyone's suffering was meaningless, and therefore, no one in pain was ever being pathetic, because there was no more important pain to which one's own faded in comparison. She was utterly heartless and calculating, while, at the same time, always understanding and warm. In my eyes, she was insane, and I feel like I caused her mindset, like what I told her about dogs once was a seed I planted that never stopped growing.

It grew complicated roots that allowed her to read poetry, and twigs fine enough to yet believe in numbers. She could spend the whole day in a

laboratory meditating on Ginsberg and whether his *Footnote to Howl* contained the word 'Holy' so often to make us susceptible to the consonance that emerged from reading it out loud. She would dissect a frog while contemplating whether it was intentional that, with 'Howl' and 'Holy' as a given, words like 'wholly', 'hole' and 'whole' emerged. I would argue against that, but I was not dissecting a frog at that time and therefore might be wrong.

At her age, she blossomed forever. She was the one magnolia tree I couldn't keep in autumn, and while deprecating and laughing about caution or sharing and kindness and forgiveness and culture, she never was cruel or unforgiving or stingy or corrosive or uncultured. She had found a balance between prose and poetry and her numbers and fish.

And telling that to Anna might help her, but I know that she wouldn't listen. I sense the heartbreak and wait for her to tell me.

- Maybe we've just escaped from somewhere.

I can only chuckle at this remark.

- That's not true. We never escaped.

19. Tolstoy

- It's over,

she finally says in a voice as broken as the shards of Glasses Man when he jumped out of the window.

- I blew it. I completely blew it. And I will never see her again, and I see her everywhere. I feel like I'm in hell. I didn't call you for so long because I was so invested in this project and Katharina – God, for you, it must have been years! I hope you're doing okay – however, I blew it anyway. We bought *Anna Karenina* together, and because neither of us could speak Russian, we bought it in German and English. God, when I say it aloud, it sounds pathetic that something like this, I dunno, happened. So, we, we met at my place, and we just wanted to read to one another for ten minutes, then the other one would take over and so on. We really thought we could make it work that way, and then I started reading, you know how it goes: 'All happy families are alike', and Katharina immediately interrupted me and told me that that was a bad translation, and read to me 'Alle glücklichen Familien sind einander ähnlich', and I told her that I thought that the English translation was better. We got worked up about this, completely insane, if you ask me, and when we came to the other half of the sentence, it got even worse. When we realised that we could never understand what Tolstoy actually wanted to say because we didn't speak the right language for that, we didn't stop, but instead started arguing really bad in which language we should go on reading the book, and then I

said that German is classist and pedantic, and she told me that English is cold and narrow-minded, and one insult led to another, and in the end she told me that she wasn't a lesbian anyway and I should stop pursuing her in this vulnerable state she was in since her sister had died, and of course I denied that, and suddenly knew that I was lying, but I didn't want to be the bad guy and replied that she had just been using me as an experiment since she saw her chance when I broke up with Emma, and it's so silly because we never even *kissed*, and then she left and told me to never call her again, but I did the next morning, and it made her even angrier, and now she stopped picking up the phone, and now it's over. I blew it.

- It certainly sounds like it,

I answer, still trying to understand that very long sentence of hers.

I never heard such a story from Anna. Anna has never been left by anyone. Not even by me, and we never even kissed either. Sure, when I left Manchester, it was to get some distance between us, but not forever. Anna has never been left forever, and while that might be normal for most people who stopped seeing someone at some point, for someone new to the concept of the ugly breakup it must be heartrending.

Anna sobs uncontrollably.

- And now I'm at a complete utter fucking loss! What should I do?

She pauses herself to suck some air into her lungs.

- I mean, was all of this a mistake? Like, should I leave Autumn Town for good or - I don't know, should I get back together with Emma?

- Do you love her?

- Does that even matter? I'm alone! I'm not used to being alone. I'm afraid. All of this makes me afraid.

- Anna,

I find myself talking in a reassuring tone,

- That's completely normal. It sounds mean, but – you have to grow up.

- You're an asshole, and I feel weak! I'm also not used to feeling weak!

- It will be over.

- You're no one I could buy that from. Nothing's ever over for you!

- Because I don't want it to be over,
and I sound so strangely mature.

- Anna, I'm someone who is so in love with self-pity, letting the past be the past would be deadly. You're not like that. You'll wake up tomorrow, and will be a little bit better. There is no doubt you messed up. But you know what? You messed up so many times before. It's just that this is the first time you notice because you suffer.

Anna doesn't say anything.

- Okay, you know what? You wanted me to show you the city, and there's one place left I haven't shown to you. It's the graveyard in the south. It's not been in use for about fifty years, at least in my time, but in yours, it's still active, and it's beautiful. I've only been there twice to say Goodbye to someone, to a very cool biologist I'd like to have introduced to you and, uhm, to my ex-husband, and then immediately left, 'cause I'm afraid of graveyards somehow. We meet there. I'll be there in about an hour.

Anna still doesn't answer, but I take her silence as a positive sign and

hang up, then hurry to the bus station before even thinking about whether I am the only person who'd invite a friend to a graveyard in order to cheer them up.

20. Vanessa

It takes an hour from the airport to the graveyard because Autumn City has grown unsustainably under Katharina's and Anna's influence. Their gardens and ads and their respective successors plaster the whole place. It's like Autumn Town spilled some of its contents into Autumn City and made it explode.

When I finally reach my bus stop, Anna is already waiting for me, looking like she didn't get any sleep. I forgot to ask how recent the breakup is, but judging from her looks, it could have happened ten minutes ago. Being the bad friend I enjoy to be once in a while, I thought about asking her whether she still listens to breakup songs by this long-dead musician, but for once deem such a comment too inappropriate.

As soon as I'm in her immediate reach, Anna grabs my hand, the one which still has five fingers, and clings to me like the safe haven I never was. It's distressing to see her so shaken up, even though I know it's healthy to be shaken up once in a while.

- How long,

I start a dumb question, then replace it with another one,

- do you live here already?

Holy, the Anglo-Saxons founding Mamecaster, allowing us, centuries later, to settle there and be miserable in peace. I don't remember the founders of Autumn City, but I have been here for so long that I might have become one of the founding fathers.

- It's been two months,

she answers timidly,

- and maybe some more days. I'm not sure.

We go through the graveyard's gate. There has been a drought in Autumn City for years, but Autumn Town must be fine, because the graveyard seems well-tended. It really is a beautiful, calm place. And still, I am afraid.

Holy, Manchester, where the textile industry kept reminding me of my beloved brocade while destroying it forever.

- Wow,

I see Anna form the word with her mouth, but she doesn't say anything.

Holy, the Pennines I haven't visited for centuries, but whose sceneries were of the most sublime sad and grey dignity that the whole British Islands embodied when we still lived there. God only knows why, upon seeing the garden that once was a graveyard, I'm thinking of them. They might have been the proto-Brutalist landscape that got me interested in the versatility of blankness and usefulness – and this graveyard, instead of being charged with colourful energies, seems like a blank space.

- How long have you been here?,

Anna asks after a minute of silence.

- I don't remember,

I answer truthfully,

- but since you arrived, it's been about two hundred years.

- Two centuries!,

Anna gasps,

- And you told me you have been married?

- Yes.

- How did that happen?

- I was lonely and didn't really care. It was a stupid idea. I'd do it again.

Holy, quantum-relativity, that could turn a ghost back into glass.

- It didn't go well?

- It didn't end well. There's his grave,

I point across the field.

Holy, the few shards of spacetime we actually experience together.

Holy, the dancing and getting high during the Jazz age, while somewhere not too far away, Allen Ginsberg is conceived.

Holy, the two of us lost in Paris, never witnessing the Storming of the Bastille because we are too busy saving ourselves and ignoring the various deaths entering the city.

We cross paths with an old man and, presumably, his grandson, both dressed like Edwardian period dandies and both made of glass, but I can't see through them. First paper people had dogs, now glass people have become opaque. The awakening of the concrete people, I believe.

They belong to my spacetime, and Anna wonders:

- They look so strange. And you look so strange.

- Fashion changed,

I note,

- And we're in the midst of a drought. The fact that it'll be autumn forever doesn't mean the sun can't burn anymore and that the climate

doesn't change. It's burning from above and the air is ice-cold at the same time.

- So, top hats against the sun?

- It's not the most rational of all the centuries. You will experience it sooner or later.

Anna smiles a bit, but it seems to give her pain.

Holy, the two of us meeting in Nineveh, watching a young man being escorted by a strange apparition, then, some time later, finding out that our mutual friend Asmodeus has been eliminated by the two.

The gravel path crackles beneath our feet, and the wind blows through the obligatory weeping willows and messes up some freshly placed bouquets that must belong to Anna's spacetime.

Holy, Lake Malawi, that existed for millions of years and thanks to humanity will finally run dry.

I let go of autumn a while ago, but the leaves are still falling, and the birds still leaving. I narrowed the reasons for that down to two causes: Either the city has changed to an autumn city by itself, or I am not the only ghost clinging onto something.

We walk on, and I refrain from patting Anna on the back a few times, so I don't have to let go of her hand.

A long silence is followed by me coming to a stop and emitting a short gasp.

Anna doesn't understand what hit me until I read out aloud what's written on one of the gravestones:

For who could have foretold

That the heart grows old.

Not only is that Yeats, but the year of death engraved on the stone is the year the death's rain stopped.

I have found the grave of-

- Vanessa?,

Anna asks, and I nod anxiously. Of course she can't see it, because Vanessa is alive and well for her.

I never remembered her name, and there it is. Vanessa, the name coined by Jonathan Swift.

What a gravestone. I feel it yelling at me:

- That's how real I was: So physical I could die. And that is what breaking up means: Rather dying alone than by the side of the person one stopped loving. I wasn't neutral, indifferent or above everything, because I existed. That is something you still have to aim for.

But of course, this gravestone doesn't address me. I will never know if she ever thought of me again with the same gravity I am now afflicted by through this piece of granite.

I shake, but the molecules of my body do not dissolve. I survive.

Anna still holds my hand. She is shaking, too.

That is not normal, and when I look at her, the horror in her eyes bespeaks what's going on: We have just found Katharina's latest garden project. This graveyard has been landscaped by her. Only a loving eye could discern the arrangement of the shrubs and the paving of the paths

from all the others, and Anna's is such an eye.

She whimpers, and suddenly, an expression of relief and peace radiates from her face. She giggles.

- Anna,

is the last thing I can say to her, then she disappears into the air, leaving my healthy hand empty.

I'm left alone, save the glass grandfather with his grandchild and Vanessa's grave in this endless graveyard that is Autumn City.

I don't know what to do.

The air becomes thicker

and colder,

and when,

still shocked,

I finally look up,

clouds have appeared

and I see snowflakes

descending

from the sky.