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She squints her eyes while looking at a reflection of herself in a window of a train, peripherally noticing a man wearing knee-high leather boots, looking at an advertisement next to the window. She turns her head to see a neatly framed poster of an unnecessary living room set on sale, then briefly looks at the man sitting in her front, at his boots, and back at her own reflection. She recoils at a thought of having sex with him. There is another man sitting two empty seats next to the other. He looks at her with a queer look of either disgust or malice.

She sees every passing face wither. Some return the look, most move on by cautiously like rats creeping on rotten food. She thinks of the men, but dismisses them almost instantly. Her mind is now fixed on the decadence of human kind, herself included.

She looks at the reflection one last time and a sense of unease rests at the sides of the back of her throat.

The same sense crept up the wet skin of another person's shoulders. Sitting slouched by a wall in a decrepit apartment that saw neither the light of Sun, nor the hand of cleanliness for countless days, Milan recollected his past actions, ever haunted by the constant dread of failure and degeneracy that he thought coursed every string of air that entered his lungs. Milan's mind would be clear for the most part, but a small fraction would never cease to challenge him.

He began his longest week then and there.

Monday

He rose after dreamless sleep. The clock was ticking, but not by his tempo. He took a shower and didn't brush his teeth, put on pants that no longer fit him and a sweater that would keep him warm. He then left the apartment and met with his neighbor waiting for the elevator. He thought of saying hello, but only nodded when the neighbor turned his head after hearing the sound of his door. The metal box came promptly and he dreaded the ride down for no apparent reason.

He entered into a small waiting room with many seats spread about seemingly at random, almost as if they were just delivered and none had the time to put them in more convenient places. He noticed many chairs stacked on top of each other and many more lying the wrong way up. A man with a big nose sat in between the legs of one of the chairs that was upside down and grinned. Even though the position of the big nose's body would not be considered healthy for the spine, the nose seemed incredibly comfortable.

Milan said good day, and only after then saw another man, this one with incredibly bushy eyebrows, lying in what one could at best describe as a chair fort. He looked cautiously. The nose replied to the good day with a good day of his own and added a giggle. The man in the fort said nothing and kept his eyes on Milan. There were doors around the room, two of which he figured to be restrooms, for two pictograms of a person in a wheelchair, one for a man and one for a woman, hanged nailed at waist height. Another door had the image of a generic person sitting on a plain chair. The rest of the doors, some with handles, some with balls and quite a few completely smooth, were not labeled at all. There was one however with a pasted handwritten sign 'knock.'

The thought of knocking on any of the other doors amused Milan, but he dismissed it. In fact, he began wondering why he should knock at all. There were other options to consider. He seated himself, keeping distance from both the nose and the eyebrows. A photo book lay on the seat next to him.

All the photos were of various things one could sit on, but the style varied greatly. The first photo, that of a bar stool in an airplane, covered the whole page, but the very next page had four photos of the same blue wooden chair in different environments. The last of the four captured the chair hanging by a rope from a chandelier in a Parisian hotel. The very bottom of the page had simply the word „date,“ printed on it.

Having turned the page, Milan's gaze centered on a photo that both intrigued and disturbed him. It was that of a man with a head of a horse, sitting on a stack of hay set ablaze.

Some of the photos had no artistic value at all. After flipping through the thick omnibus, he put it back down onto the seat next to him and just now noticed a painting of a little girl on a white chair in a basement, hanging on a wall.

Before Milan could consider his next action, he realized the man in the fort had been speaking to him: „I wasn't quiet at all.“ Milan had no response. The chair fort man continued, the caution now gone from his face, as he was comfortably lounging wrapped under and around the chairs: „I said all that I could've, and believe me, I would've said even more, and it doesn't matter what you say as long as you never talk.“

Nodding back with innocence of a fool, Milan hoped the man would stop speaking, but he did not. „I didn't choose to come here, but when I set off, I made sure to come on time. To no avail, the service here is horrid. They'd leave a man stranded for eons before taking his credentials, so coming on time does really make your stay here shorter than coming early, but from what I've discovered, it's best to come late.“

„Have you been waiting for long?“ Milan finally asked. „I haven't been waiting at all. I haven't knocked yet and nor has he. The chairs are too much pleasure to let go.“ The man paused and licked his lips, chasing the eyebrow hair that ran past away. Milan thanked the man and walked to the door with the sign. He thought about using the restroom, but wasn't sure which door to pick or whether there was a door for him at all. He knocked three times and intuitively stepped back, knocking over a chair.

„Excuse me, but do you knock and enter or knock and wait?“ Milan didn't really address anyone and it seemed as if he was asking the door. The man in the chairs was now connecting the long hair of his eyebrows into a braid, but he promptly stopped and tied it in a knot over the temple of his nose, like Milan would a shoe lace. „We wouldn't really know, we haven't done it. But I've seen this room full of many colored folk, even those that glow in the dark, and they've all gone through one of these doors.“ He pointed at the door with the sign and added: „As to how? That's always different.“

Nothing else was happening and there was no response from the door for considerable time. Milan knocked again, instinctively stepped back and fell onto the tripped chair. A different door opened elsewhere and a lady in a striped dress that ran to her ankles walked out.

„Mister Dvorsky? Excuse the wait. Please, come in.“ She spoke with a tone of a disgruntled secretary past her interest in her boss' advances. Milan got back up on his feet and considered picking the chair he knocked over as well. The man in the chair fort with braided eyebrows eyed him very carefully again. The lady looked bored, but in no hurry whatsoever. Milan decided to pick the chair up. As his hand neared the chair, the man's stare intensified insurmountably. Milan picked it up and walked to the open door.

It lead to a hallway with two benches that ran along its walls. The room could probably seat sixty people comfortably, but only two sat on the benches now, one on each, as far away from one another as the length of the hallway would allow. Both attempting to seep through the walls to get away from the other. The only one other door was at the opposite end.

The lady entered with Milan in tow and closed the door behind them. „Follow me.“ Every of her words came with the utmost lack of interest for all mundane things. Milan walked closely behind and when they stopped at the other door, he got a good look at the person sitting there, trying to phase through the wall. A woman missing one of her arms and half her face kept pressing herself against the wall, while sitting on a puffy pillow. The lady in the striped dress opened the door. „Come along, mister Dvorsky.“ And he followed her through.

This room was similar to the very first with many unlabeled doors scattered about, but the only chair in this space was a wheelchair that stood in the middle, facing Milan. A rat sat in it. It looked at the disinterested lady and thanked her, addressing her as Erika. She shuffled away through the door Milan came in and closed it when she left.

„Mister Dvorsky, welcome. Out of respect I would of course give up my seat to be equal in your discomfort, but I can propose a better solution and that is you earning a chair of your own.“

„I can stand. Will this take long?“

„I understand that you can stand, but I'd very much prefer for you to be more comfortable.“

„Where can I get a chair then?“

„Oh, how I wish it were that simple. There are none apart for mine as you can see. This place is barren of any extra chair. But enough with this furniturism. You are here why exactly?“

Milan didn't know how to reply. The rat sighed. „Mister Dvorsky, why have you come, if you do not know?“ The rat in the wheelchair closed its eyes and let out another sigh, pausing briefly. „Excuse me, mister Dvorsky, for being rude. It's this lost shipment. Over seventy thousand chairs gone. We had to give up our own to meet the demand. The stock? Don't even ask. Have you any questions about the job?“ He had none, but thought hard whether he should. „All good then. Best of luck to you, mister Dvorsky. Head on through.“ One of the many doors opened and Milan entered after thanking the rat without question.

All too late did he realize his next step wouldn't land as he put his foot through the door and plummeted down stairs.

Tuesday

Two plainly dressed boys dragged Milan's body into a room with nothing but a single bed and a painting of an unoccupied chair. This one of exquisite design. They struggled to get him onto the bed, but eventually succeeded. They left his sweater and the pants on, but put a blanket over him, as to make him comfortable in his unconscious state. The boys then triumphantly sat on the edge of the bed and relaxed.

„Have you seen Eva?“

„What about her?“

„It's these earrings she's got. She looks like a renaissance woman, which is not a good aesthetic. Not in these times. Not at this place.“

„Who cares? Let a woman wear whatever she can get.“

„I mean well for her being. If I noticed the placid things in her ears, a lot of folk did. And you know I'm not very mindful.“

„So what? Isn't the point of extravagance to be noticed?“

„But there’s good and there’s bad extravagance. And don’t give me the whole bit about not judging things. Because some outfits especially, for the benefit of society, deserve to be critiqued. But much beauty can lie in the crazy, I don’t deny that. All I’m saying is that Eva’s earrings lack the makings of the good aesthetic.“

„Tell her then. Since you’re so very clearly a fashion connoisseur and an aesthetic guru born into one. What I don’t understand, not that I care whatsoever, is, especially with these phenomenal qualities of yours, why do you dress so poorly?“

„What do you mean poorly? Are you joking? Incredible amount of time went into this design. This is not poor. This is impeccable forethought. Just because you don’t see it, doesn’t mean it isn’t there.“

„You dress just as boring as me. So if that’s the ‘aesthetic’ you’re going for, well done.“

„No sense being jealous now.“

One of the boys removed the blanket from Milan, silently examining his choice of wardrobe up close, while the other sat by motionlessly, staring at the painting.

After unspecified time, when their arms were no longer sore from dragging the body, the boys climbed off the bed and left, putting the blanket back over the sleeping man in a sweater and oversized pants.

Erika in the long striped dress entered briefly to check if Milan was awake. Her feet were cold and the shoes she wore were one size too small. She’s worn them since she started here and by now got used to them. The dress fit her well and was perhaps the last thing she felt any connection to.

Seeing that mister Dvorsky was still out, she walked out of the room with the bed into another room with a bed. This one occupied by an elderly woman. She was lying on her stomach, drawing with a lump of coal on a paper tissue. Under and around the bed lay many other tissues, each with a different face. She looked over her shoulder when Erika entered and joy filled her dull worn cheeks. „You would not believe the things that have happened since you were gone.“ „No sense telling me then.“ Erika replied snarkily. The woman sighed, „I wish I could feed off your resignation.“

Erika rolled her eyes. „Quiet, or I might resign from coming. Here.“ She handed the woman a single clean tissue, having received a tissue with a coal drawing of Milan’s face in turn. She examined it. Her eye twitched for split moment, as her brain fought to conjure up emotion, but failed. She threw the portrait away and walked to the next room with a bed, and then into a corridor with benches running along it. It seemed to have no end, as it stretched on into a single point.

Erika began walking. The benches were populated randomly. She began to count in her head how many people she walked past every twelve steps. Sometimes it was four sometimes it was seventeen. She didn’t look at any of them directly and she had no intention to. She kept walking. A thought of tripping crossed her mind and she fell.

There's blood on her hand. She fell and scraped her face on the carpet. The tripped lady wiped the hand on the dress, followed by cursing that instinct and seeing the precious outfit ruined. She got on all fours and looked around. The bench on one wall was interrupted by a door, before continuing into the far distance. There was a window on the other side. She hadn't realized before that there were any. On each side of the door someone sat. Erika struggled not to look but failed. They were looking at her already, for it's hard to miss someone pummel their face in front of yours. The man on the left, wearing a leather jacket offered his hand, which Erika refused and stood up on her own. On the right was a lady in a cheer-leading outfit for the football team 'Angels.' She just watched, her hands in her lap.

Nobody said anything until Erika broke the silence, „Aren't you going to make me more miserable?“ „That's on you,“ replied the cheerleader. The man diverted his look when Erika faced him and remained silent. „I'm going in,“ she stated and turned the door handle.

It was another hallway, this time with a distinguishable end in sight and many doors in its walls and individual seats between them. The place was empty but for a single occupied chair. He was an old man in a Victorian suit, waving her over. She approached him.

„Now that you're here, your estimate for the day is seven hundred and thirty six processed. Here is the list of names.“

Her hand reached for the list. She entered the door by the man while memorizing the names. It was a tiny room with massive piles of lists such as the one Erika was holding right now. After going through the seven hundred and thirty six names, she placed the list on top of a neatly piled column of paper.

Wednesday

„Mister Krupka? Please, come in.“ said a toneless female voice from somewhere behind Cyril. The many doors of the waiting room kept opening and closing, while animals and people rushed through, answering to their names. He snapped from a state of staring at another man pulling a shoe lace into his eye socket through the nose. He followed the voice through the packed waiting room. Standing in one of doors, Erika idled, expressionless face, blood on her cheek. „Excuse the delay, mister Krupka. Please, follow me.“

She led him through rooms and hallways, diversely populated.

„Look where you’re going!“ Cyril stepped on a duck. „Are you blind, man? Huh? Cat got your tongue?“ The incident shocked Cyril and he lost the ability to react. Erika stepped in. „I’m sure mister Krupka is mostly ashamed. Let’s not make this a waste of energy.“

The duck grunted, but seemed to loosen. „Alright, alright, it’s my bad. Don’t think I don’t know I’m a duck. Just another day. You would not believe the things I deal with. Yeah, yeah. No sense telling you then. I know you.“

„I don't know you. Don't take this the wrong way, but you're just another duck to me. Have we met?“

„I keep getting stepped on frequently by people lead by you. Not always am I vocal about it. But don't worry, you're just another human to myself.“

„What has happened to you?“

„Seventy four casualties already. Don't they give you estimates?“

„Just for the processed.“

„Must be a different department. I make the numbers. Someone, I don't know who, gets a report on expected casualties for each day. Today it's one in three.“

„I did notice.“

„It's been getting worse each day for who knows how long. But there are other issues to worry about, since nobody knows how this cog turns.“

„Of course,“ she agreed sarcastically and they parted ways.

She walked Cyril through a door in the hallway into another room. It had a reception and six seats. A door behind the reception seemed to just close. There were about ten times as many people as there were chairs. Some opted from conflict and sat on the floor. A few conquered some of the seats and guarded them with all they could muster. One corner of the room declared Chair Alliance and three people and their followers, those who were promised the chairs eventually, guarded the source of comfort. One chair was destroyed in what was now considered a Great War, which prompted a more political approach to the lacking furniture debacle. The myths say that the fifth chair was birthed by the queen of comfort herself and granted it to everyone in this room. A long snail-like line of people, waiting for their turn to sit down, spiraled around it.

„Wait here, mister Krupka. You will be seen shortly,“ she told him and walked to the reception. Behind a small desk sat a girl with cancer in a wheelchair, keeping history of the room on her hospital gown. She began explaining: „They came and took the sixth seat. ‘Something was lost and needs replacing,’ was all they said. You wouldn’t want to know the casualties for that day.“ „I wouldn’t.“ Erika remembered seeing the window when she ruined her dress. The blood was still there.

She left Cyril to the room, and made her way back to a corridor. On her way for the next name, she took a wrong door.

Some time passed before Cyril grew comfortable enough to approach one of the chair pacifists, sitting on the ground. He was a young man in a business suit and expensive reading glasses. „Welcome. She told you to wait? Then it shouldn't take long. Some do choose to stay though. I can tell you're a man of few words. Those rarely used to last here, but now it's better. I won't bore you with the lore of this place, especially if you're here temporarily.“ The man offered him a cigarette. „For good luck.“ The door behind the reception opened and an old man with a cane called out Cyril's name. He pocketed the cigarette and entered. The elder lead him through a short corridor to another room.

Behind a a metallic desk covered in paperwork, sat a worn looking man with thinning hair, wearing an expensive, but clearly not ironed suit. He stood up, shook Cyril's hand and offered him a seat at the opposite side. They both sat down.

"Mister Krupka, I'm certain you're not aware why you are here, so I can make it very easy for you, or I can do it any way you like." Cyril didn't know what to say. "Let me rephrase. I can tell you to get up and walk back through that corridor, back to that place with the cancer kid and into the hallway. Then take the third door to your right. The one with a brass, which is a yellow metal, handle. Or I can tell you the very same and add why."

The wrong door lead Erika into a large hall. Its walls completely occupied by paintings in the thousands. A mustached man in a tattered suit jacket sat in one of the two armchairs that were the only source of physical comfort inside. The massive room resembled a hangar, with its tall walls decorated in an endless variety of images of chairs and portraits of people lounging for miles in every direction. The collection seemed to be willfully unorganized, but heart-pausing. An arched ceiling hosted industrial light bulbs that hung on long wires encased in black rubber. Rays of dim bronze light raced around and flickered on occasion. A sound of a transistor hummed from somewhere beneath the concrete floor covered in a thick blanket of dust.

Having never been here sparked a brief moment of curiosity and she dared herself to feel.

The man noticed Erika's intrusion and turned his head to have a look, supporting his chin with two fingers and stroking the stubble underneath the mustache. One of his eyebrows rose with interest and he called out to her, "Come on over, you might as well, since you're already here!" Erika approached the two armchairs, while looking around at the paintings. "Well, sit down! I'm not standing up," and she took the empty armchair that has been clearly gathering dust for some time.

"This chair was my husband's. We would sit here together. Wrong door?"

"Yes," a lady answered. The nihilism had gone from her voice and a hint of enthusiasm gave it some color.

“I had only expected that answer because that’s the only reason anyone ever comes here, you see. Even when we moved here originally, the place seemed abandoned. Maybe it’s served its purpose. I reckon it was a warehouse for surplus furniture. Not in this economy.”

“Are there any other doors here?”

“All of these,” and he looked at the paintings, slowly stretching out his arms, “nobody uses them anymore, perhaps they do not know they can.”

“The paintings are doors?”

“To my understanding, the actual chairs in them are. You do have to sit down to walk in.”

“So they’re all open?”

“Except those that are occupied.”

A small painting the size of a book caught her eyes. It was of an empty wheelchair in a hospital room by a window overlooking a spring garden with hyacinths in bloom.

“About your husband...”

“You’ll have to excuse me. I shed my manners ages ago. Never really thought I’d talk to another being ever again. I’ll tell you, what I would care to hear, were I sitting next to myself.

Not many have the luxury of arriving with their spouses, but it made little difference once we were to be processed. Suppose they had a real nice room for my husband, with some important bureaucratic business awaiting his learned wit, but not for me. I was always something of an undesirable and this place only strengthened the theory, when they would have me clean carpets.

My husband wouldn't have it. Said he'd rather opt for mindlessness with me than purposeful servitude. I guess, I thought it the right choice then, now I'm not so sure. We abandoned the job openings and began wandering the endless corridors.

To me it felt a reasonable choice to settle on one of the many metal benches. I wouldn't really mind, but my husband urged us not to give in to mediocrity. We wouldn't have found this place otherwise, but now that he's gone, it makes little difference as to how my eternity is spent.

We thought we had it made, when we found this place, but it was no luck, for there is none here. On one occasion, in a bout of jealousy, I proclaimed I would no longer burden my significant other with my common presence and charged through the closest door, venturing in here. Little did I know, my statement would eventually find its fulfillment.

None can tell the length of time we spent in these chairs and around this place inspecting, admiring, critiquing and debating the paintings. However long it was, it was too much. No two beings can tolerate each others' presence endlessly, even those that would have you believe the story of eternal love, which I must admit, we never bought into. And mutual tolerance only goes so far.

Eventually I would find the purpose of these paintings, as during another one of my outbursts, my husband asked for peace and sat down on the most plain looking chair in a painting. He's nothing but brushstrokes to me now, but one can only imagine what he is to himself.

I chose to remain here. At least I can be sure of what's to come, as opposed to the still world behind the paint.

But make no mistake. It is nothing but fear that keeps me here. Fear and jealousy, for I had no courage then and I could hardly muster any now.”

After uttering the last words he would ever speak in the presence of another, the man sunk into the chair and his eyes filled with water. Erika eyed him with sympathy, but had nothing to say and could do nothing to lift the curse the mustached face in a tattered jacket put on himself.

Before quietly tiptoeing back through the door she accidentally entered and returning to her duties, she took one long last look at the paintings. The portraits of people, no matter their expression, resonated with serenity, and the frozen scene with a hyacinth garden seemed ever more inviting.

She would never find this place again.

Thursday

Milan woke up with splitting headaches. He sat up and stretched his neck. After climbing off the bed and taking the first step towards the door, he discovered the debilitating pain that would now accompany him every time he'd place his right foot on the floor. He waddled to the door.

The old lady on the bed was lying on her back, arms crossed and resting on her stomach.

"You're up, that's good."

"Hello. What's with the drawings?" he asked when he limped over to her and inspected the tissues on the floor.

"A hobby of mine. The pretty lady brings me a napkin from time to time. It's a rare opportunity to get anything here. I dread the moment I exhaust this lump of coal."

"Surely there's other means to create."

"Surely there are, the trouble is getting them. Don't think I'm the only artist here. And there's not exactly a delivery service in place. Especially for casualties."

"Here? Casualties?"

“Yes, here. Round and around. This place hosts all, make no mistake. One could run into their former lovers and ancient foes, it’s no laughing matter. Though from what I’ve experienced, nothing here happens by chance. Of all the endless corridors and halls with plenty doors, there’s no room for coincidence.

I know it is scary becoming a casualty, but think how worse off you could’ve been.”

“What happened to you?”

“I have clinical depression, unfit for work. I was an illustrator. When I got here, I prayed for something akin to that profession. Alas, what I was offered didn’t exactly help me find sense or fulfillment. They’d have me deliver numbers without telling me what they were or who they were for. I couldn’t do it. Didn’t take long for me to break down. Three thousand seventy six. That was the last number I was to deliver. Now here I am.

So that’s us, the physically, the mentally, the spiritually broken, destroyed, sawed in half, tormented, crucified, self destructed, despairing, and all those lost in the absurd.”

“I never got to figure out what I was here to do and now I am a casualty?”

“Indeed you are, young man. But it is not without its benefits. All of us are free to seek and give in to comfort, should we choose to. And most do. There’s not really any alternative.”

Milan got on his knees and rummaged through the napkins. All had on them drawings of different faces.

“Who are these?” He asked.

“Each time I draw a face, from memory, randomly, arbitrarily, but every time I do, it comes in through that door in no desirable state. If you were to look long enough, you’d find yours.”

She paused and scratched her forehead.

“A small tip for the handsome man. Mind the stairs when you can. It doesn’t get better. And do tell the lady I said hi.”

She smiled, relaxed her head and her eyes began exploring the featureless ceiling. Milan said farewell and continued to the next door which lead him to to another room with a bed. This one was occupied by an old man vertically sawed in half. Only one half was present. Two boys sat on the edge of the bed, not noticing Milan’s entry. There was no sense trying to tell the boys apart, as they could be twins, dressed the same and all. He glanced at the person on the bed breathing heavily, blood and mucus dripping from the cut where his other half would’ve been and his entrails had spilled onto the originally white sheet. The smell was unbearable.

“Remember the Manchurian man?”

“Got his head removed.”

“Yes, him. He had a good outfit.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then? Did you just now remember he impressed you?”

“No, I’m just worried about starting a conversation about fashion again.”

“Yes, because that put a strain on our relationship. Don’t be so irritable. Well, to humor you, I am inclined to agree. The olive jacket went fantastically with the headless ‘aesthetic.’”

“See? You’re doing it again!”

“I think it’s about timing really. The fella over here? You think he wants to hear a critique of his horrid fashion sense? No, I think he has bigger problems. Namely looking for comfort when his other half is missing.”

A gurgling sound came from behind them.

“See? That’s no sound a comfortable man would make.”

“But you can see it though? The shirt would never work the shoes. Or the shoe in this instance.”

“I don’t know. I just feel we shouldn’t be so desensitized to what’s happening to these casualties we’re hauling around. I may not sound it, but I dread the day you trip and rip your leg off. I know it’s coming, because we can’t really do this work forever, right? Maybe I’m just subconsciously mad at your defense mechanism.”

“Well, it’s not very subconscious and it’s not a defense mechanism. I said it before, and I’ll say it again. You’re jealous that I have something you don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Appreciation for fashion. When this is over and we’re wandering around, or limping, or whatever, looking for a chair to spend the rest of it on, you’ll be as empty as this fella’s cup of chance to ever feel anything but excruciating pain. Me on the other hand, will always be able to pass the time through fashion appreciation and the likes.”

“Time? That’s good.”

“You know what I mean.”

The boys finally addressed Milan without turning around.

“A cane would go well with your aesthetic. Good luck getting one though.”

“Might have to wrestle it from another cripple. I’d probably watch that.”

Milan made his way to the bed to face the boys and asked. “You sound to know something. What do I do?”

“There’s endless opportunity of comfort for the lame, but I feel you’re not there yet. The fact you didn’t stay in the bed and waddled here, shows some determination. I say there’s something waiting to challenge you still, before you get to settle down on a cold metal bench somewhere. You may have forfeited your only chance for purpose through work by taking a cruise head first down the stairs, but who’s to say it’s all over for you.”

“I still recommend finding purpose in looking for a cane. And maybe shoes. If you can fit it over that ankle.”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a remark...”

Well, look fella, you’re screwed, no doubt there, but it can always get worse, so I’d recommend not pursuing that path.

Now for those of us still employed, I have a feeling there’s a lady in accounting who got her eyes plucked by a chicken.”

One tipped an imaginary hat and the other winked. They jumped off the bed went through a door into a corridor. The door closed behind them. Milan had no desire to stick around with the breathing corpse, made it to the door and grabbed the handle.

It opened into a set of stairs leading down. Milan grabbed the rail and began his descent.

The first thing Erika did when she opened her eyes was to check if the blood stain was still on her dress. It was. There was only one name to remember for today. She left the room with pillars into a hallway. Commotion. Hordes of people and animals were trying to get past each other, flowing through the many doors in the hall like grain through a cheese grater.

A camel noticed her from the swarm and swam through the gelatinous mass of beings to say something. The striped lady grunted annoyingly and sunk into the crowd and disappeared.

Eventually, the many doors filtered the horde and it was no longer crowded. The girl was now in a waiting room with a reception and two empty seats with a coffee table and a selection of furniture magazines.

Behind the desk sat another lady with extravagant earrings. She was holding a phone by her ear, but began speaking to Erika the moment she entered. "You can go right in, he's in good shape today."

Massive wooden double door lead her to a long room with a man in a patchwork vest behind a desk. A Persian rug ran towards it from the doorway. "I am getting replaced, Erika. A fantastic moment worth celebrating," the man shouted. She approached him.

"Yes, so you are. What will you do?"

"Were I to be left to the casual comfort, I would spend the timelessness looking for a pillow so large it would feel like a cloud. As for the other scenario, I suppose I'd find out. But that's not for me to decide, is it? Either way, I'm through with chairs.

However, since this is possibly our final non-incidentaI encounter, I would like you to do something out of the ordinary. There is a door that leads to a swimming pool for people in wheelchairs. In the waiting room is a chair that nobody uses. I would like you to keep it.”

She felt something. “I understand, mister Valach. Please, follow me.” He stood up from a padded armchair and bent over the desk to give his legs some time to accommodate. “Let’s go, Erika.”

In the waiting room Valach addressed his secretary for the last time. “I know I wasn’t the best boss to you, but for what it’s worth, you were the best secretary I ever had, Eva, and not just here.” At this remark she lunged from her chair and wrapped herself around him, with tears in her eyes. After a moment she regained her composure, nodded and wished him well, like the true professional she was.

Valach followed Erika at a casual pace, as if he was soaking in the atmosphere of the generic hallway that stretched out into a single point. A few times they passed someone walking in the opposite direction, but the seated Erika didn’t count. Eventually, they arrived at the door where she tripped two days before, with the man in a leather jacket and the cheerleader. The window was still there.

Valach approached the door, while the striped girl examined the window. “You’re going in already? How fortunate,” the cheerleader commented. “There’s no such thing as fortune. Just good work ethics. Am I wrong, Pavel?” asked the leather jacket. Valach replied, “To pretend that I knew, wouldn’t sit well with me. I did as needed to be done. The rest was always beyond my will to comprehend. Suppose they found someone better for the job and that’s the end of it,” he then looked back at Erika to see her looking into the black outside. In the vastness devoid of any life or color she saw herself in the reflection. He smirked and walked through the door between the two seated people.

“It’s a painting,” said the man in the jacket. She blinked and realized she’s not been looking through a window, but at a faded painting of nothing but black encased in glass. Valach left the door open and she followed through.

It was a small spherical room. The Victorian man was there, standing by the only other door. The men exchanged silent nods and shook hands, and Valach followed the striped lady with a blood stain on her dress through.

They entered into a narrow corridor that was slightly turning to the side. One couldn’t see where the end was. Single seats attached to the walls ran along them. No one else was there and none could tell how long they would walk.

She sighed and they began a quiet march.

Friday

No end was in sight. Every other step tormented Milan's body. After getting used to the excruciating pain originating in the shattered ankle, his mind chipped in and eventually consumed him in a terror quite different to the physical kind. There was no telling when the stairs would end, indeed it seemed as if they were not to stop at all.

While reflecting on his past regrets, failed relationships, betrayed friends and ruined self worth, he contemplated throwing himself down into the unknown, but remembered the depressed artist and kept stumbling down foot by step, step by foot. Moments of physical pain changed places with emotional torture and back. It was impossible to say for how long he's been making this descent.

But now, below in the distance he could make out a person struggling to climb the stairs towards him. Eventually, the two would meet on the same step. A man with a wooden peg for leg and Milan, the young adult with a shattered ankle.

The legless man tipped a straw hat that decorated his head. He was wearing farmers' overalls.

“Didn’t think I’d meet anyone on my way up. G’day, partner.”

“Hi. To be quite frank, I forgot there were other people.”

“And animals, of course. But I catch your drift. This place takes its toll on all. The name’s Jeremiah. Jeremiah Meier. I remember that much.”

“Milan. Milan Dvorsky. Where are you headed?”

“To the top. Where else could I be headed?”

“Then there must be a bottom. Is it very far?”

“That’s for you to find out. Abandon all logic, young man. An advice, from cripple to cripple: Don’t bother counting the stairs. You can’t count that high.”

“Are you a casualty too?”

“Oh? Are you judging by the lack of a leg? Oh, no, sir, I was born without it. I’m on a job. Not sure what it is, but I’m here to do it.”

“Is your job to climb stairs?”

“Well, for now it is. I guess, I’ll find out what’s next when I do. What mission are you on, young sir?”

“To descend, I suppose. No one really told me.”

“Indeed, I must admit, the administration here is lacking severely. And that’s not to mention the Employee Relationships. Forbid you ever have a conflict with a fellow worker. You’ll never reach satisfaction. But that’s not really something you have to worry about anymore.

Of course they say that there are always new openings, but all the fresh arrivals have priority over all the casualties, and as you know, the new ones never stop coming. But, I say, keep your chin up, no reason to waste away in a depressed state, especially if there is even a minuscule chance for you to be given a new purpose, rather than struggle in limbo, looking for one yourself. Not many can do that.”

“From what you say that sounds like false hope.”

“Then that really only depends on your perspective. Illusions can work wonders on the mind. But I’ve said too much and I feel, I have to continue whatever it is I am doing. Farewell, mister Dvorsky. May you find comfort in your suffering, at least for now.”

The man with a peg for leg then continued struggling upstairs, while Milan pressed on down in pain.

Valach and Erika finally made it to the end of the corridor. There were two doors and another Erika was sitting on a chair between them. Valach stood by, unfazed by the apparition in the chair that now spoke to herself standing over her.

“Him already? Some business they’re operating here. Tell me, dear, how are you?” she asked herself in a morbidly ridiculing tone, not expecting an answer and continued, “no worries, I already know. Cold, emotionless, empty, barren, nihilistic, resigned, but not despairing, not sad, but very well incapable of accepting emotions in. Shame about that dress, though, isn’t it? Was that the last thing you remotely cared about? Ah, yes, I know about your escapades, don’t worry. A few sparks of feelings here and there. Truly you would think that you could change here? After what you’ve done to yourself? Ah, some may consider you lucky for being able to walk all the way here, but what’s behind either of these doors, you’ll never know. But you do know, I never forget to remind you.

Through which are you taking him?”

“I’m not sure I’ve decided.”

“The uncompromising Erika stands here undecided? Is that another emotion desperately trying to creep in? Go ahead, let it out.” she laughed and handed herself a paper tissue. Then in a blink of an eye, the chair was empty. Erika’s face remained expressionless and she pocketed the depressed artist’s next canvas.

Valach finally spoke: “to try and attempt to comprehend what I witnessed, would not sit well with me. I do understand you have to decide which door to take me through without knowing the options.”

“Indeed, mister Valach.”

“So tell me, what is that like for you? I wish to know.”

“I open a door and walk through, no matter which, I always enter one of the all too familiar corridors with benches. You’ll follow me through, but as for what happens when you cross the threshold, I will not know. Good luck, mister Valach.”

“There is no luck here, remember?”

“Excuse me. Force of habit.” A barely noticeable smile formed on her lips and she said confidently: “You are right, there isn’t.” And she walked through one of the doors and entered into one of the all too familiar corridors with benches.

After what seemed like countless ages, Milan met another, this time a hippo, making its way up.

“Oh good! Hello! You wouldn’t happen to see a man with a peg for leg climbing up, would you?”

It turned out the hippo was trying to catch up with Jeremiah Meier, but judging by his method of stair climbing, the legless man was gaining on the animal by a large margin.

“I feel like this is my actual punishment. I need to take him someplace, but he’ll keep going up forever and I’ll never catch up.”

“Surely you’ll meet him in the infirmary.”

“Is that where you’re coming from? You’re a casualty then. I’ll pray for your comfort.”

“What’s your job?”

“My job is to guide folk around. I simply know who they are, where they are, where to take them and how to get there. Don’t ask me how, I call it instinct, some of my colleagues call it magik, and quite a few simply don’t care.

To put it bluntly, you get a list of names and go from there. And then you get another.

It’s a bit more complicated with the animals, because not all are lucky enough to have been given names by their ‘masters.’

Forty seven million eight hundred sixty four thousand twotwoour ~~h~~

“The hat with a crooked brim won’t do. Ditch it. You’ve got the neatly ginger blonde hair. Let it shine. Loosen the tie, the shirt is phenomenal. Unzip the vest, open the jacket, hunch over. Grim look. The pants are horrid. Nothing you can do. Just stay seated. I will call it the ‘you’ aesthetic.”

“Forget I asked.”

Erika continued on until she reached a waiting room and began her day.

Sixty four thousand and twenty two. That many stairs Milan counted from his encounter with the hippo and that's where he found a rather obvious door, sticking like a sore thumb in the wall. Not much hesitation went through the despairing mind and he entered, for he wouldn't dare pass up an opportunity to in the very least take a break from the climb down.

He found himself in a small room, resembling a walk-in closet. Instead of wardrobe, canvases, blank and with pictures of chairs, hung on metal pipes that swirled and tangoed towards a ceiling that wasn't there. Judging by the heat and his dewy forehead, this was a boiler room with no other exits.

A man without pants in a long shirt stood by an easel with a canvas. His hand ran to a palette with paints and back to the image he was creating.

"Close the door behind ya; warmth doesn't come free."

"What is this place?" Milan asked, closing the door.

"This is my occupation. I make the paintings you might run across around here. Not too much thought goes into them anymore, just like anything you end up doing repeatedly. No, the irony does not escape me, believe me, I'm well aware there are no sources of comfort in this room. Who are you, though?"

"I've been going down some stairs." Milan said wearily.

"Must be quite the journey with that limp of yours."

"What are the paintings for?"

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t left the room since I started here. Sometimes I get creative, other times I rush it. There used to be folk coming to get them, but that hasn’t happened in a long time. I figured they got more efficient ways to do whatever I am doing, just nobody bothered to tell me.”

“What will you do when you run out of canvases?”

“That’s a scenario I dare not think about.”

“Do you mind if I stay a while and watch you paint?”

“Not at all. I welcome the company, limping man.”

Milan smiled with an exhausted face and sat down by a wall behind the painter and watched him create.

After several dozen people, Erika lead a half burnt little girl to the reception where she previously went to pick up Valach. His name crossed her thoughts, but she dismissed it.

“Please, take a seat, miss Banek. You’ll be called shortly.”

The girl climbed on one of the chairs and picked up a furniture magazine. She flipped through it to find a comic strip about two married chairs and began laughing. Eva on the other hand sat behind the reception with her face buried in her palms.

When Erika came closer, Eva peeked at her: “Erika? This can’t be real.”

“What happened?”

“What happened? Someone walked in my ex Cyril to be mister Valach’s replacement!”

“That explains the change of clothes. Where did you get the mourning sweater?”

“You know, the boys. Anyway, don’t fall for him like I once did, the cretin.”

“I already met him, Eva. I don’t care for the cretin,” she winked at her, “you’ll be alright. After all, there are doors that separate you.”

“Thanks Erika.” Eva then called little miss Banek to walk in to mister Krupka’s office.

The girl covered in burns went on through the large double doors into the long hall with a desk behind which a man with a face of a shock sat. But he shifted his presence to the burnt child and spoke with confidence.

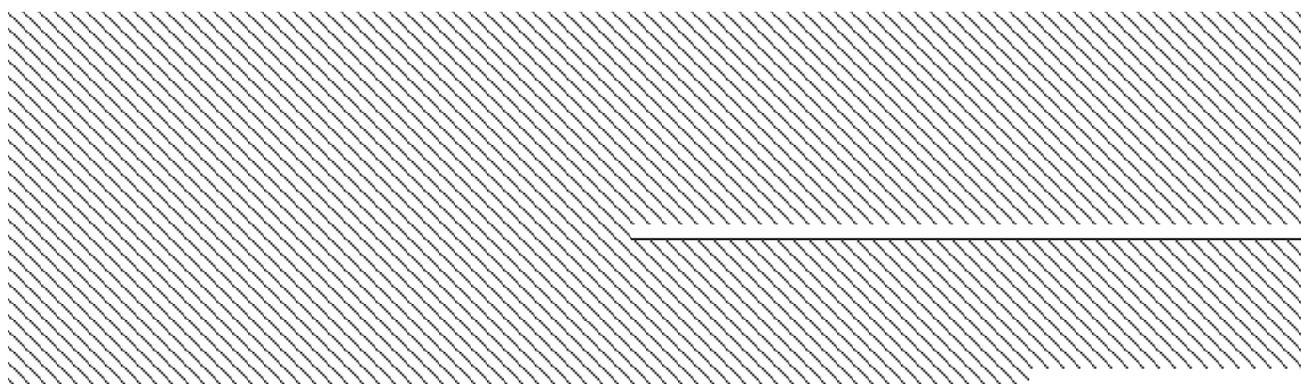
“Hello, miss Banek, there is a number I need you to deliver.”

“Hello. Of course. Is that a cigarette behind your ear?”

The confidence was gone.

“Why, yes... yes, it is.”

“Quite the find you have there. Too bad light is so hard to find,” she smiled gleefully.



“Fascinating,” she remarked sarcastically, “you look terrible. I heard you fell down some stairs.”

“Yeah, so I have. Didn’t even get to start my job. Whatever it was.”

She sighed: “That’s where you’re wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Milan climbed up and sat on the cold metal bench. He was shaking in pain.

She unfolded the chair, sat it next to him and took a seat.

“Clearly you have not had much luck yourself,” he straightened and pointed at the dried blood on her face and the dress.

“There’s no luck here, mister Dvorsky.”

“But what do you know of my job?”

“I don’t know what you did that you earned it, but yours was to not replace me. And you did just that.”

“Excuse me?”

“I guide people around, I’m sure you’ve realized as much from our encounter. I suppose it’s some twisted irony, but whenever I am to be replaced, those who are to take my job, don’t ever do. You’ve met Alice, correct?”

“The depressed lady? The faces?”

“All my supposed replacements. Casualty, each and every one. It’s really just become a part of routine.”

“But, what do I do now?”

“That’s for you to decide, you can always give in to the temptation of comfort. Just know that nothing is ever over and whatever was in store for you, will always remain there. Some find solace in thinking they are more than the casualties and the wanderers. Throw around words like punishment as they slave away by desks and in these halls, just like I do, but I realized that it couldn’t be otherwise.”

“I suppose, this confuses me even more. What of all these chairs, Erika?”

“You’re in a comfort factory,” she got up and picked up her chair, “you’ll be alright, mister Dvorsky,” she smirked.

“How do you do it?”

“I count imaginary days. Today is Sunday.”

Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday

Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday

Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday

Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday

Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday

Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday

Friday Saturday Sunday Monday

Tuesday Wednesday Thursday

Saturday Sunday Monday

Wednesday Thursday Friday

Sunday Monday Tuesday

Thursday Friday Saturday

Monday Tuesday Wednesday

Milan wandered to a door between a man in a leather jacket and a cheerleader. On a wall hanged a picture of a reflection of a striped lady.