

The wind blew against the window of the empty apartment. Its walls had been repainted, its floor sanded and varnished. In the center of the living room floor there lay an information sheet from a real-estate broker. It read: "Convenient location... spacious and sunny and affordably priced too! This prewar 2 bedroom has a brand new kitchen and lovely entry foyer leading to a sunny living room with views of the bridges. The bath is centrally located between a large master and a good-sized 2nd bedroom. Hardwood floors.... prewar detail and lots of charm! Live-in super, pet friendly, and basement storage in this elevator prewar building." Outside, a clamor grew and waned. A phone rang in an apartment below, while something slid, shifted, cursed, cocked, and farted in the ventilation shaft. The refrigerator compressor turned on and the wind subsided as the light bulb in the living room ceiling fixture flickered briefly, then died.

13

The phone rang. A woman's hand reached out from under the covers and brought the receiver into their paisley folds. "Hello?... oh it's you. What is it this time?" she asked. There was a long silence. The hand stretched back to the receiver, the earpiece still broadcasting the muffled speech of a seemingly upset man, and hung it back up. As it swung back in under the covers, it grabbed the pillow and pressed it down against its owner's ear, a tousled head of blond hair briefly emerging from the covers in the process. Outside, there was a crash, a scream, a thud, then another scream, followed by the sharp retort of a door being slammed shut in the building, but if she heard any of it, which in all logic she must have, she did not betray any interest in it, but simply fell back asleep, gently snoring as the sirens howled, the crowd squawked, and the whistling wind spun and sung.

9

The wind blew into the empty apartment. The walls had been stripped of their paint, the wires pulled from the casings and sockets, the floor stripped of its varnish. In the middle of the L-shaped living room was a canvas tarpaulin, on which there stood a small paint-spattered stepladder, along with an orange bucket, an empty cardboard beverage cup, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, also empty, and a mail order catalog for home electronics. The wind blew in a single yellowed leaf while the sounds of an incident and its aftermath came in from outside. The light in the apartment was slowly growing in intensity, its color turning a brighter, lighter white. A phone rang upstairs while a door slammed in the hall. The wind subsided.

5

A faded image of a cat on a photocopied flyer looked out across the empty lobby, its muted gaze floating over the worn corduroy armchair, the plastic parlor palm, the grimy tiles, and the gap-toothed row of named and numbered mailboxes. The cat was wearing a miniature bowler hat and holding an umbrella in its paws. "Have you seen me?" read the caption. Underneath it was a phone number, the name of a local bar, a date, a time, and the following incentive: "Two-for one drinks from 7 to 8." A man in a dark blue suit stepped out from the staircase, moved past the flyer, then stopped suddenly in his tracks, as if remembering something. He turned and ran back up the stairs, just as a door slammed somewhere above him. Outside, traffic was stopped and a crowd was forming in front of the building. An agitated man entered the lobby and pulled out his cellphone. He dialed, waited, then said, "Hello, yes, there's been, well we need, can you, umh, sorry... oh...yes, I'll start with that, ok, wait, let me find out..."

1

The apartment was an elegantly furnished one-bedroom unit. One entered into a large kitchen and dining room, adjoined by a small living room, whose diminutive size was palliated by its beautiful view of the two city bridges and the river. To the right of the living room was a small bedroom, which also looked out onto the river, and a diminutive marble and chrome bathroom. The curtains were open but the windows were shut, locked, and protected by bars. The apartment was sparsely but tastefully furnished. Though there was no one to be seen, someone had just been there, for the ashtray was full, and a strong scent of menthol cigarettes still lingered in the air.

Three large suitcases were stacked by the bed. On the bed itself, as well as on the desk, coffee table, sideboard, kitchen counter, and dining room table, four million six hundred and ninety five thousand three hundred dollars were laid out in neat stacks of one-hundred dollar bills. The air was still, and the apartment strangely, yet unequivocally silent. Time passed.

14

The man (short, skinny, thinning blond hair, thin mustache, narrow tapering face, with a tattoo of a siren on his right forearm, and a gold wedding band on his left ring finger) slowly eased a floorboard out of its setting with a screwdriver and slid the blue plastic package inside the cavity. As he gently nudged the board back in place, he heard a crash and a blood-curdling scream coming from next door. After a short pause, he calmly finished resetting the floorboard, before picking up his jacket and his phone, then unscrewing the wall vent cover from its frame with a Leatherman™ tool. Sliding feet first into the metal corridor, he pulled the vent cover back on, fixing it to its frame from the inside with two pre-installed hooks. From within his hiding place came the sound of cursing and fabric rustling, then of a gun being cocked. After a few seconds, the man farted loudly, cursing once more under his breath before falling silent, having heard the door of the neighboring apartment slam shut.

10

The door of the apartment was locked. Its canvas blinds were drawn, their outer edges taped to the window frame. A barely discernible hum came from within it, intermittently covered up by the noise of the street outside. A window broke above, and someone screamed, fell, and landed on the street below. As another scream sounded outside, a lock clicked and a faucet ran briefly inside the apartment. Seconds later, a phone rang down the hall and a door slammed shut upstairs. There was a sudden flash of light inside the cloistered space, barely discernible from the outside through the fabric of the blinds, then silence, darkness and silence, as sirens waxed and waned in the near distance.

6

The young woman brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face and turned the volume up on her computer speakers as a new song started playing. Bopping her head to the music ("Away we go...away we go..." sang the singer), she started typing in the chat window. "R u there?" she asked. Seconds went by, during which she was informed by light gray type that "Snapdragon" was "composing a message." "Yes," said the response, then, "What's up? When are you coming?" She bit her lip, drummed her fingers, then wrote, "I'm not." There was another virtual silence, as the loud music and soundproof windows in her apartment sheltered her from the brutal sequence of events that was unfolding outside her apartment. "Why?" "You know why, Sarah told me. She knows every thing. She told me and I believe her." "Wait! What? I'm calling right now." She smiled, closed the chat window, raised the volume on her speakers another notch, turned off her cellphone, and went to run herself a bath.

2

Light filtered in through the drawn shades. Things had been left as they were at the time of his death. Stacked books and magazines littered the floor, his bathrobe was carelessly tossed on an armchair, the ashtray brimming, almost spilling, a glass of water slowly evaporating on the coffee table by its side. A few dishes were piled up in the sink, along with a banana peel, and a used coffee filter. Amidst this disorder, the uncluttered surface of the writing table stood out, accentuated by the sharp oval of light cast by the desk lamp, which had been left on. In the center of the oval lay a notebook and a pen. The notebook was open, and the poet's trembling hand had written the following diagram on its lined surface:

sator rotas X torah tarot
anna (gramma) X arepo's opera

And at the bottom of the same page, in darker, more accentuated strokes:

Now do I repay a period won.

15

MAN FALLS

A 16-STORY NOVEL

BY
JULIEN
JONAS
BISMUTH

11

The couple slept facing one other, her left ear on the pillow, his left hand on her shoulder, his right ear on the pillow, her right hand on his neck. As the glass of the windowpane shattered in the apartment above them, he slid the forefinger of his left hand into her ear, still sleeping, still dreaming, as she slid the forefinger of her right hand into his, still sleeping, still breathing. They slid closer to one another, his breath mingling with hers as a man screamed, a body landed, a woman screamed, cars braked, tires screeched, a crowd formed, and, after some time, sirens sounded, their disjointed yelps rising, nearing, as the crowd grew, a phone rang, a door slammed, a woman sobbed, the wind blew, its head bled, a man died.

7

The sleepless man twirled the puzzle piece between his left thumb and forefinger, tugging at his sideburn while a cigarette consumed itself in the ashtray beside him. He was humming or rather breathing along to the music playing through his headphones. Putting out his cigarette, he set the puzzle piece back down, removed his headphones, and crept silently towards the kitchen, halting briefly to cock his head at the animated din outside. He frowned, then sidled up to the bedroom door and listened anxiously. After a few seconds, he straightened, looked at his watch, fetched himself a glass of water from the kitchen, fished another cigarette out of the crumpled pack on the coffee table, and sat back down to finish his puzzle, replacing the headphones on his head, and turning the music back on just as the first sirens sounded in the distance.

3

The toilet flushed once, then the shower started running behind the closed bathroom door. The television was on in the cluttered living room, but the sound was off and no one was watching. Onscreen, a man was drinking alone in a saloon, his weathered face crusted with dirt, his features indecipherably opaque. The saloon doors swung open and a pair of boots entered. The boots stopped. There was a close-up of the barman's face, his eyes wide open with fear, his brow pearly with sweat, as if the drops were blooming in accelerated motion on the surface of his skin. The camera panned back to the boots, then zoomed back out to reveal the familiar features and trademark smirk of a famous Hollywood character actor. The intruder reached for his gun as the other man drew from his holster, their guns blazing in unison. Smoke filled the bar, then slowly dissipated. One man was dead, the other unharmed. The survivor flicked a coin at the bartender and exited the saloon, pausing briefly to tip his hat at his prostrate foe. In the bathroom, the shower had stopped running. The program cut to commercials.

16

The sleeping woman silently mouthed something then turned her head back on its side, her lips parting slightly. She was sleeping, and if she was dreaming, hers was a dream which pulled her between poles of pleasure and pain, her grins punctuated by winces, her winces halted by groans, her groans muting into smiles, stirrings, and moans. Her right hand flopped out of the sheets, while the forefinger of her left hand flicked at the foam plug in her ear canal. A thin dribble of spit formed and leaked out of her open mouth. Meanwhile, her automated coffee maker set itself into motion, first roasting the beans briefly to warm them, then grinding them, before tapping them into place, and brewing them. As the first siren sounded, her alarm went off, just as the boiling water started dripping through the coffee grinds.

12

The young man took off his headphones and lit himself a cigarette. He was sitting in a dark and empty apartment in front of a gray box adorned with an array of switches, knobs, dials, and buttons. The needles on two of the dials jumped. He reached for the headphones, stiffening as soon as he put them on. Pulling them off his head, he ran to the door, but stopped upon hearing a crash and a scream from outside. Pouncing quickly to the window, he carefully pried apart two of the slats from the drawn blind and scrutinized the street below him, shifting positions before stiffening once more and emitting a series of hushed curses. He moved to the side of the blind, pulled it aside a few inches, and looked up at the broken window of the apartment diagonally above his. Something made him recoil sharply. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he quietly slipped into the dark bedroom, pulling a Kimber M1911 pistol from his side holster and closing the door softly behind himself as another door slammed shut in the hall and two sets of footsteps clattered down the stairs, turned, then moved loudly towards his door.

8

The sleeping man's head turned from side to side, then settled into the hollow it had formed in the pillow. The sounds of his breathing and those of the world outside his room were being drowned out by the steady drone of the humidifier beside him. He was dreaming and, in his dream, he was crawling up the smooth flank of an inexplicably titled world. There was a house from which he had come and to which he was seeking to return. Around him, pine trees grew on steep sandy slopes, while street-vendors stood on their toes and casually grilled skewers and corn-dogs. Suddenly, the scene changed. He was now in a park. The world was once again more or less horizontal. Cherry trees were in bloom. A foghorn sounded in the distance. He was eating a corn dog and engaged in a complicated conversation with a co-worker. Then came a sudden and unexpected turn of events in his dream, at which point the sleeper shifted in his sleep, briefly scratching his calf with his toenail before settling back down into the mattress with a pained moan.

4