

WAITING FOR THE MACHINES TO FALL ASLEEP

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WAITING FOR THE MACHINES TO FALL ASLEEP

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Punch Card Horses

Jonas Larsson

Translation by P-O Rehnberg

It was a four and a half hour drive to the market in Skrivsjö, so Lage only made that journey when he had to. He had nothing against the ride itself – he quite enjoyed the change of scenery, changing his own fields for new streams, hills and forests. There were many stops on the way at the numerous gates in the roundpole fences that divided Småland's villages, farms and pastures. Lage always took the time to talk to the boys and girls who, for a fee of a few *öre*, would open and close the gates for passersby like him, and keep him updated on the fates and fortunes of faraway neighbors.

In the case of Skrivsjö town itself, Lage did not care for it as much. You could often find some old acquaintance at the market, but there were also people who did not belong. They had traveled far and it was hard for Lage to understand what they were saying. Some talked about how they had returned from America while others told of places that were mysteries to Lage.

He jumped off the cart with the kind of heavy yet springy steps that come from hard work, and tethered the tired ox that had brought him there. The poor beast wouldn't last much longer, that was clear for Lage to see, and the reason he found himself in Skrivsjö. The plough would not pull itself.

The walk to the market was usually a quick one but Lage had to stop halfway there to stare in amazement. The Skrivsjö church tower was visible from most parts of the market town and, when Lage shaded his eyes and looked up toward the light, he could not believe what he saw. Whose idea had it been to tie a large weather balloon to the top? It was ugly and modern and blocked out large parts of the sun.

The market was full of people as usual. Farmhands were jostling and maids were tittering. Children were running and playing and parents were quarreling over prices, but Lage could not find what he was looking for anywhere.

"Excuse me," he asked a passing gentleman with strange spectacles and a pig in his arms, "doesn't anyone have any oxen for sale this year?"

"I believe I saw someone who had one, but it is already sold. They have become more rare with each passing year."

Lage preferred it when things became more common with each passing year. Now the journey here, wearing out his old ox, had all been for nothing.

"Though there is a man in a stall who sells horses," the man with the strange spectacles continued. "Perhaps you can do your business with him instead?"

"Yes ..." Lage said as he scratched his chin. "Switching to horses doesn't feel right, their humors are different and they eat more. But it doesn't hurt to look. Thank you anyway."

When Lage talked about horses eating the man with the strange spectacles gave him an amused look. Then he shrugged and continued on with his pig.

As Lage continued through the market and got closer to the man who was said to have horses for sale he felt a curiosity that was quite uncharacteristic. Sure, oxen were better, but perhaps horses weren't entirely without merit. Sometimes, when he looked out over his fields day after day, with all the responsibilities and obligations they entailed, he felt a certain weariness inside. Getting to know a horse, with its own unique personality, perhaps might ...

Lage stopped dead.

"What is that?"

"These, my good man, are my horses."

"No, those aren't horses."

In front of Lage stood a man much younger than himself, in something that could have been fancy gentleman's clothes had he not worn dirty work wear over them. They had many black stains and the pockets were full with what Lage assumed were tools.

"Yes, they are horses and much more. They never sleep, never eat, and they can do anything that a plain old horse can do."

They reminded Lage of bronze statues, but they were not cast in one piece. It was as if the sculptor had tried to cast three statues at the same time, depicting a horse, its skeleton and its muscles all separately, but still somehow together. Everywhere there were joints, cogwheels and strange holes.

"I would have preferred to have a real horse," Lage tried explaining. "Do you know where I could get one? Or an ox?"

"I am sorry to inform you that there are no bionatural horses left at this market. They might have some at Backhorva."

"Backhorva. That's a two day journey from here."

"Then I think that you, rather than to go all the way to Backhorva to buy an inferior horse, ought to buy one of these superior automaton horses."

"How do they work?" Lage asked after a long while. "Do they need to be trained?"

"Not at all. Everything is operated with mechanics and plain, simple instructions. You can buy additional modules and modifications, but this basic model is incredibly simple." The man pointed to something wheel-like on one of the horses' chest. "In order to begin working, wind the horse up just like a pocket watch. A one-hour wind-up gives three hours of work, with a maximum time of nine hours. If you haven't already adjusted the horse's obedience memory you need to do so before winding it up."

"Obedience memory?"

"Do you know your Bible?"

Offended, Lage took a step backward. Perhaps he wasn't among the best when it came to answering the questions the parson posed when he made his catechetical hearings, but being a good Christian meant not to recognize such shortcomings.

"Of course I do."

"Then this will be a piece of cake." The younger man took out a box and balanced it on the horse's back. From this, he pulled out something resembling thin metal book pages covered with different kinds of holes. "These are called punch cards. You can get the automaton horse to do different things by putting different combinations of these cards in one of the slots between the horse's ears. The cards are named after various Bible passages, which means that anyone can remember them, at least the easier combinations."

The younger man handed Lage a card to look at. "Jonah and the Whale", it said. After having studied the card, Lage let his eyes rest on the mechanical horse.

"I'll take it."

The fields wouldn't plough themselves.

A month passed, and once again there was a market in Skrivsjö. Lage saw that the young man's stall had become larger, and had more mechanical animals for sale. In addition to horses, chickens went about and pecked at the ground, much to the delight of the children.

Skrivsjö town itself also seemed to have grown, but it was not a flattering change. Now there were three weather balloons blocking out the sun, and several of the roofs were covered by strange metal rods. Lage was not sure, but every now and then one of the rods seemed to crackle.

"Why, good day!" The young man's face brightened when he recognized Lage. He appeared to have more tools in his pockets than last time. "How is life with your new automaton horse?"

"Not too good. I would like to return it."

"Return it? Doesn't it work?"

Lage did not reply.

"Did you use it to drive here to the market?"

"Well yes, it works for lighter chores. The journey here was perhaps faster than last time with my ox but it's difficult to stop and change punch cards every time the road bends."

"Oh. At how many degrees do you have to change the obedience memory?"

"Degrees?"

"There are more advanced configurations that allow the horse to detect the road conditions and thus manage turns up to 85 degrees. You don't need more than five punch cards. I'm more than happy to show you, free of charge of course."

"Thanks very much, but I still want to return the horse."

"But if you drove here with it how will you get home again?"

"I was thinking I'd buy a real beast for the money I get when I return the horse."

The young man got a tired expression on his face and put a hand on Lage's shoulder.

"I would have loved to give you your money back, but you have to understand that I'm not the one who builds the horses. I'm only a subcontractor selling on commission: hence I can't provide a refund."

Lage blinked his eyes. Subcontractor and commission were difficult words.

"But I can't keep it," he said. "It's not just the cards. I'm getting old and find it difficult to wind it up in the morning. Beginning the workday in that way takes its toll."

The young man's smile suddenly became confident.

"Is that the problem? Oh, my dear friend, then I can really help you. Hold on a moment."

The young man went to the back end of his stall and returned with something that looked like a clothes drawer on wheels. At the base of the drawer was a grille which could be opened, and at the top edge was a toothed hole that looked like it could rotate.

"This is the steam-powered clockwork assistant. It runs on firewood, just like a stove, and when heat and steam have accumulated this thing here starts to spin." He pointed to the serrated hole. "This is called the operating port and you place it over the horse's wind-up key to save you the workload. In the future there will be customizable clockwork assistants

that can be raised and lowered for different animals, but because you only have an unmodified automaton horse this will do fine.”

“I don’t know ...”

“And since you’re such a good customer, almost like a friend, I’ll give you a discount and a few bottles of ignition oil for the clockwork assistant. It increases ignition capacity by seventy percent in the winter, when it might be difficult to start a fire. If you look at the numbers it will be vastly cheaper than buying an old bio horse and isn’t that what it’s all about? Saving money to make life easier? You want to give your family a better and easier life, don’t you?”

“Well, I guess so.”

The younger man’s smile grew wider and wider.

A few weeks passed. The rain had been pouring down for several days and the mud went up to the market visitors’ knees. The metal rods on the rooftops had multiplied once again and they crackled in the wetness. The young man sat in his stall and counted his money when a familiar and soaking wet figure stepped inside.

“Welcome back. Lage, right? What can I interest you in this time?”

“The horse gets stuck in the mud. I had to ask a neighbor for a ride to get here today.”

“Yes, it is an unfortunate deficiency in the older automaton horses. It’s always difficult to test for all conditions, but it really isn’t that bad. When the rain stops you just clean the horse off and continue as usual.”

Lage took a menacing step forward, causing the younger man to almost trip over one of the mechanical cats that lay sleeping, half-drowned in the mud. He was pale and tired, for Lage was not the only one who had come to complain. The newly introduced automaton cats had also been a source of late nights and stomach ulcers – due to some punch card error they primarily ate other cats rather than mice.

“I suppose you are here to return the horse?”

Lage stopped short.

“No. It’s back home, stuck in the mud. How was I to get it here? Besides, the children love it. I don’t understand what they see in it, but they’ve made me promise never to return it.”

The color returned to the young man’s face.

“Really? Well, children truly are amazing.”

Lage sat down on a box labelled “cerebro prototype”. Under his weight, it too sank into the mud. He said nothing for a long time, and the only sounds were the never-ending rain and angry crackling of the rods. Every now and then a visitor came to the stall and the young man sold some automaton cats, at a discounted price of course.

After having handed out punch cards and received payment the young man looked at Lage. He gently pressed a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. He had first intended to bring out the imported tea, but he knew that the people in the countryside preferred the strong, black brew of the beans instead.

You could see the heat spreading through Lage. "My neighbor, the one who drove me, said that there was some module that allowed the horse to handle mud."

"That's right. The spider's legs. They can be purchased at a low cost, and once they are installed, mud problems will be a thing of the past. They also increase the horse's top speed, but unfortunately, the wind-up takes slightly longer. But that is no problem for you, because you have an automatic clockwork assistant. The horse will be taller, but that can very easily be solved with a slight correction. At a discount, naturally."

At Lage's next visit, the number of weather balloons had multiplied. At certain times of day they blocked out the sun in such an unfortunate way that the entire market was in shadow, but this had been solved in an inventive way with mirrors that threw a stylistic artificial light over the stalls and their visitors.

"Ever since I installed the legs the horse goes too fast. I don't have time to stop and insert the new punch cards."

One of the automaton cats, whose head had been replaced with a tray where the young man kept his tools, was sitting on the table inside the stall. When the young man got up to greet Lage the cat rose too, but froze in mid-motion and stood motionless.

"Yes, that happens sometimes when you install the legs yourself. It would've been better if you'd paid extra for installation assistance. But I have some new punch cards I can give you that'll lower the horse's speed."

"You just give me new punch cards every time and I can't keep track of them anymore. I don't know that many Bible verses."

"Then I suggest you buy these punch card sets with pre-programmed obedience memories. You will need to unscrew a metal plate next to where you inserted the old cards, but I have tools for sale for that too."

* * *

Alvin hadn't been allowed to accompany his father to the market in Skrivsjö town very often. The journey had always been seen as a stress factor and something Lage rather avoided and to bring the children along as well would have been too big a hassle. However, Alvin had accompanied his father in secret a few times and, even though Skrivsjö seemed large and

scary, he had thought it was beautiful at the same time. The metal rods on the roof tops reminded him of dragonflies and the balloons resembled exotic fruits.

Now Alvin was grown up and could go when he wanted to. But you never did want to in Småland, you only went when you had to.

It took quite a while for him to find the stall where his father had always gone. Alvin had only ever seen it at a distance and he went the wrong way at first. More and more people had started buying automaton horses and other beasts, and so the man who had sold the horse to Lage long ago was no longer alone in offering his goods.

The man who managed the stall was much older than Alvin and wore highly unusual clothes – fancy gentleman’s clothes covered by work wear, which had become fancier and dirtier over the years, respectively. At first the older man didn’t react when Alvin arrived, he was far away, staring at the other stalls with their more advanced creations.

“Oh, excuse me.” The older man adjusted his overalls. “How can I be of service?”

“Hello, my name is Alvin. I’m the son of Lage who used to buy parts from you.”

“Are you Lage’s son? How nice to finally meet you. Shame that you don’t have your old man with you, he’s a very good customer.”

“He won’t be coming anymore. He passed away yesterday.”

For a moment, the older man turned even older. Once again, he threw a glance at the other stalls. Then he put a hand on Alvin’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry for your loss. Your father was a good man, and it means a lot to me that you came here to the market to inform me. Is it too much to ask how it happened?”

“He fell off our horse and broke his neck when he went riding to the neighbor’s farm.”

“He rode on an automaton horse with spider’s legs installed?” The older man looked genuinely surprised.

They both stood silent for a while. Then the older man went and fetched them both a cup of tea.

“The reason why I am here is that we children never learned how to control the automaton horse.”

Alvin fidgeted and looked uncomfortable while he drank his steaming tea. “I’ve been standing for hours trying to make heads or tails of the punch cards, but I can’t.”

“Yes, they can be challenging for the untrained.”

“I came here to get help with the horse and I thought that maybe you could come with me to the farm and show me how to use it? I also would need to buy new punch cards because I think there are many that have been misplaced.”

The older man sighed.

"I would love to accompany you and show you, but if it is as you say and some punch cards are missing there isn't a lot I can do. Besides, the more recent automaton animals have switched over to smaller and more manageable cards, so I can't sell you any new ones that'll work with your horse."

Despite the fact that they were finished with their business Alvin did not get up to leave. The same thoughts that Lage had held were now floating around in his son's head and he wondered if it wouldn't be easier to just get an old horse made of flesh and blood. But such horses weren't sold here anymore. Besides, it felt as a big waste to just leave the old automaton horse standing there to rust – in Småland, you made use of what you had.

"When did you say your father passed away?"

"Yesterday."

"Wait here."

The older man came back with a big box out of which he began to pull saw-like tools. Lastly, he produced a glass container with a greenish-blue liquid inside. It was about as big as a man's head and its bottom was filled with rods, similar to those on Skrivsjö's rooftops.

"I think that I, thanks to your father, can give you a whole new control system that is far superior to the old punch cards. Normally this comes at a small cost, but I liked your father so much that this one is on me."

Since people from Småland never let anything go to waste Alvin agreed to let the older man accompany him back to the farm. Alvin's mother was against the entire procedure at first but, after a little persuasion, she came around. "God helps those who help themselves," she said.

The older man had brought a shovel out of sheer eagerness but it turned out to be unnecessary as Lage's body still lay under a blanket in one of the outbuildings. The older man asked if Alvin wanted to join in with the sawing but he declined.

Unfortunately, the new control device, which was placed between the automaton horse's ears, was not pretty to look at. Some of the younger children were afraid of it, so Alvin quickly made sure that it was always covered by a black piece of cloth.

But early in the morning, at the beginning of the work day, Alvin always left the glass container uncovered. He imagined that Lage would have wanted it that way. He had always loved sunrises, these majestic wonders of nature.

Vegatropolis – City of the Beautiful

Ingrid Remvall

21st of November 2550

11:15 p.m.

“Please, Maxine. Let’s get out of here.”

My friend looked at me and smiled. “No way! We just got here.”

I pulled the short dress over my knees for something like the hundredth time. All I wanted was a pair of adaptive jeans and a holographic retro shirt. My favorite shifted between a big, red, blinking robotic eye and the text *I’ll be back*. However, for this party Maxine had forced me to wear a tight, shimmering emo-dress. It was as pitch black as my emotions.

I had used Maxine’s makeup-spray and I guess it did some good. The smoky black enhanced my pale, gray eyes and my skin was glowing. Just enough to make me blend in as one of the least pretty in the room with my brownish, Maxine called it mousy, uncolored hair in a slick ponytail.

I looked around at the crowd and tried to forget about my uncomfortable stiletto heels. Shiny faces, shiny clothes and shiny eyes; drugs were free at this party. We would both turn eighteen soon so the drinks were legal, but the drugs that were inhaled through rainbow colored masks were not.

Maxine grabbed a cucumber jelly-shot, threw it back and licked a luminous drop from her purple lips. “Relax, Vega. Have some fun!”

“Any moment now they are going to realize that we are not one of them and that we have just crashed this party.”

Maxine snapped. “Speak for yourself! This is where I belong.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Maxine was unfortunate to be born in the poor districts outside of Vegatropolis. Her dad cleaned one of the big cor-

porate offices in the city and her mum controlled a machine packing tooth-brush pills in a factory outside of town.

But Maxine, yes, she was another story. She looked absolutely fantastic. Not just fantastic like the kids that have enough money to modify their appearance, she was born that way. She had red hair tumbling down to her waist, curly and as wild as her temper. Her skin was golden with freckles covering her small button nose and rosy cheeks that gave a perfect contrast to her pale brown cattish eyes.

Her looks alone wouldn't have given her the possibility to blend in with this crowd. They could spot an outsider a mile away. However, Maxine had a talent above and beyond her great looks and charm. So, we got away with it.

All the credits she earned from working extra hours at a café went to acquiring fabric. She transformed this fabric into outfits that could have come out of any high-class, digital store in a shopping mall, like this dress of mine.

The loud beat of music pumped around me and the overwhelming smell of sweet shots and cinnamon cigarettes was the same, but something had changed. The club was packed with at least a hundred people, but they were all silent.

The Royals had arrived.

Maxine grabbed hold of my arm so hard I squeaked. I would definitely have a big bruise there tomorrow.

The Royals were not real royals. Not like in the old days when kings and queens ruled the world. But these were the Royals of Vegatropolis, the royals of the 25th century. They were the children of the power elite that ruled the gaming industry, TV networks, drugs and everything else that mattered in this city.

Another thing that made them different from the royals of ancient times was that they were not human, although though they looked like they were. The power elite did not want kids with defects like ugliness or sub par intelligence. A lot of things could be modified after birth, but why take the risk of getting something that was not altogether perfect?

A scientist and artist who called himself Picasso had created the first AAI – Advanced Artificial Intelligence. After this the AI had went from plastic looking humanoids to something actually looking like us. This was twenty years ago. Picasso's next step was the AAIGP; Advanced Artificial Intelligence Goes Perfect. The "people" now entering the room were his best work ever.

They looked like us and oh *so* much better.

Lancelot was the first to enter and oh my, did he enter. He looked like a Viking prince stepping off his boat after a successful raid. He pulled back his golden hair, just brushing his shoulders, while he narrowed his icy blue

eyes. Lancelot had the body of a football player combined with the grace of a gymnast.

I closed my mouth and felt dreadfully embarrassed that something made of plastic and metal could have this effect on me.

Right behind him, arm in arm, came the girls. Sorry, the queens. Like yin and yang. Black haired Lucy was a tall and strong Asian girl with a face that could start a war. Beside her came fair-haired Gwyneth with a body that could start a world war. Like always she looked bored and chewed on her full lips. If I did that I looked like an idiot, but Gwyneth, well ... she just had it all.

“Look, who is that?” Maxine pointed behind the royals.

Was this another AAIGP? There had not been any news about a new wonder of Picasso. No, that was just a normal guy. Lucy turned to him and smiled. She stroked a black curl behind his ear and whispered something into it. He laughed. He was hot, no question about it, but beside the royals everything and everyone turned a bit shabby.

Lancelot raised his voice. “Hey everybody. Now that we’re here let the party begin. We have a surprise. Our friend is going to sing for you!”

The crowd started to scream and I covered my ears. Why did Maxine want to hang out in places like this? I just hated it. Shallow and fake, just like this entire city. I know everyone wanted to live in Vegatropolis. But not me. I wanted to move somewhere where you could still see some real trees, not the bright green fake ones in the big parks with fake lakes filled with fake multicolored fish.

The new guy entered a small stage and pressed a plastic bracelet on his arm. A black, shining holographic guitar appeared. I didn’t know who this guy was, but he definitely was filthy rich. That instrument cost more than our house. It was a crappy house, but still.

Someone shut off the music and the club went quiet. Lancelot pulled out a few glass cubes from his pocket and threw them into the air above the guy on stage. The flashcubes rotated slowly in the air, spraying the singer in colored light.

He took his time looking around the room. That guy had confidence. A smile curled his lip and his eyes hit mine. The light made his glance glimmer in red. I have read and laughed at novels about love at first sight. But, I must admit that something did happen when our eyes locked.

The smile slipped from his face and he looked uncertain. I forced myself not to look behind me to see if he actually was looking at some hot girl instead of me. He tilted his head and a wrinkle appeared between his eyes. I interested him, but why?

Maxine whispered without moving her lips. “Vega, why the hell is he staring at you like that? Do you know him?”

I wanted to answer her but, unfortunately, my tongue was so dry it got stuck to the roof of my mouth. When he finally let go of my eyes and started to play I grabbed a glowing shot from a flying tray and slung it down. Eww, yuck; aubergine and chili. I hated those vitamin and alcohol shots.

“Vega! Tell me?” Maxine shook me.

“I have never, ever seen that guy before. I have no clue why he stared at me.”

“But you liked it. Vega is in looooooove.” She laughed.

Before I could answer I looked down at my dress. Fuck this emoshit. It was bright pink. The typical color of looooooove. I took another shot, a green one this time; parsley.

“Take it easy.” Maxine took away the glass.

I tried to act all cool and turned to one of the digital walls. But after playing one line of tick-tack-toe I just had to turn back to the guy on stage.

The holographic instrument was worth its money. Tones of base, drums and something electric pumped out with a hard beat. It melted together with his voice, and that was some voice; soft yet powerful. I had never heard of him, but I probably would hear a lot about him soon. This guy was a star.

A loud crash of glass followed by screams stopped the show. More glass shattered and soon the floor was filled with stones covered in fluorescent graffiti. They all had the same message, “Put the AI, AAI, AAIGP to eternal sleep!!!”

A high sound of electric motorcycles taking off was heard through the broken windows. Someone screamed at the top of his lungs, “Real humans stay awake, machines go to sleep!” A choir of angry voices added onto it and disappeared into the night.

It was not clear how much emotions even the advanced AAIGP had. But since those in the room were the most advanced in the world, I was quite sure that they were pissed off. Lancelot’s cheeks turned red and an artificial vein started pumping in his forehead. Lucy had the look of a warrior princess but Gwyneth didn’t seem too bothered. She picked up one of the stones, read it and then dropped it back on the floor with a bang.

Far away I could hear the shrill sound of sirens. Everyone was released from their shock and started running. This was an illegal party with illegal substances. But Maxine and I were even further out of line. We were outsiders, not even allowed to enter the city if we were not working.

“Come on, let’s go!” Maxine grabbed hold of my arm and forced me through the crowd towards the door.

I almost fell. I quickly pressed a button on one of my shoes. With a swift click I lowered the three inch heels to one inch. Now I could run.

“Wait.”

I didn't need to turn my head to know who it was.

"What's your name?"

Just as when he sang the voice was soft but impossible to ignore. I looked at him. Close up I could tell that his eyes were just as dark as his hair and that he had a dimple in one cheek when he smiled.

Inside the dark eyes was a distant glow of red. I quickly looked down. Enhanced eyes. Some could manipulate, some gave better sight, and some could scan information from people. I should walk away. This guy was no good, but he was so damn hot that I couldn't help myself.

"Eh, Vega."

"I don't recognize you from school. I'm sure I would have noticed you. What class are you in?"

Well, I was not even in the same school as him. I was not in the same school as any of the people surrounding us. Except for Maxine. We were not allowed in the city college, we had our own.

I dared to take another look at him. The light in his eyes was off. "It's a big school, I go to ... psychological programming, the science program."

"Can I see you again?" He held out his hand and the technology in it lit up. Shit. Since we were, once again, poor I didn't have any body technology; just an old fashion holograph in a bracelet. I held it out and saw his confused look.

"I like retro, okay?" I said. "Do you want my number or not?"

He pressed his hand to my holograph and smiled.

"Vega, we *really* need to leave!" whispered Maxine.

"Don't worry," he said. "We won't get in trouble for the drugs, you're with us. We're untouchable."

Okay, that sounded like some lame movie. Maybe he was not all that amazing anyway.

"See you!" I yelled over my shoulder and followed Maxine. "Don't want to be you," I added in a lower voice. Why did I give him my number?

Outside the air was cold. Roads with silver lights crossed the air in soft loops all the way up to the sky with glimmering stars. Silent, self driving vehicles swarmed past us.

There was no pollution anymore, but still orbs hovered over us to clean the air and to send out puffs of oxygen filled with whatever you needed. Obviously I was stressed since I could recognize the calming smell of lavender.

The skyscrapers were covered in huge screens that showed beautiful, happy people trying to sell products and lifestyle. A woman, the size of King Kong, turned towards me. "Vega, you just must try out this new scent, 'Wealth'. It's not just a perfume, it will go into your nervous system and give you better confidence and a radiant look."

A huge, holographic arm reached towards me. It held a bottle shaped as a diamond.

"No thanks!" I pressed a button on my holograph. I hated these billboards that thought they knew your inner desires. Sometimes they apparently did not work.

"Look." Maxine pointed towards the wall of a gold colored office building. In huge letters someone had sprayed in fluorescent paint "Machines go to sleep!" Behind the message was a commercial of AI housekeepers taking care of laundry.

During the last months there had been several attacks on targets connected to AI production. Factories, research centers and stores where you could buy different kinds of artificial life.

There had also been kills, if you could call it killing since they weren't alive. Still it almost made my sandwich and yogurt shake come up again when the holograms of three AAI-women were shown on the news on my kitchen table. Their lifeless bodies were ripped into pieces of silicon and circuits.

Now we could see the flashing lights of the approaching police. The screaming sound of sirens broke through the soft music from the billboards.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

We threw ourselves into a rickshaw that stood beside the road, pulled by an old AI man with white hair. "To the wall, exit 23D," said Maxine.

The AI turned his stiff face towards us, nodded and then started to run. Soon vehicles in all different shapes and colors flew around us. As always I got the feeling that something would hit me, but force fields made it impossible to crash into someone else.

The police, one car and several officers on robotic horses, swished by us towards the club. But they were too late. Whoever had sprayed the house and thrown the stones were obviously far away by now.

"Phew, that was close," said Maxine. "Stupid activists, did they have to wreck the party just when it was getting good? Why do people object to AI, they're fantastic!" she said and nodded to our driver. "And AAIGP are just all that. Lancelot, he is the most fantastic of all."

I didn't want to get into this discussion once again. We had differing views on this subject. I couldn't decide which was worse; that the AI actually felt something but were slaves, or if they didn't feel anything and were, as in the Royals' case, treated like humans when they simply were not.

"Don't think so much, it makes you look ugly," Maxine laughed.

We made it to the wall. It wasn't really a wall, not a solid one. But there it was, a force field that separated the city from the outside.

Many from the outside worked in Vegatropolis, but to get in you needed a passport signed by your employer in the city. Maxine had charmed a guy in our class who put in extra work by one of the passages to sneak us in.

The bright lights of the city had dimmed and been replaced with trees and hills covered in artificial flowers. Nobody lived out here, but the city people went here to run and walk their pets. For them this was a trip to the countryside. Outside of the wall there were more artificial nature and shabby houses.

Maxine always said that fake was better than real. But even if real trees lost their leaves and the grass went brown and yellow I would have preferred that. When I got older I might go to the Wild. There were places further outside the big cities that were not explored. Places where things were real and not perfect. I guess a bit like me.

We were just a few hundred meters from the wall when our driver's head exploded with the sound of a melon cracked on the street. One second he ran and the other he laid on the ground with his brain scattered all over the green grass.

Our wagon kept on rolling over his body and a sound of cracked plastic filled the cold air.

"Fuck! Shit!" screamed Maxine. "Help!"

Someone had shot this man. Sorry, this artificial man. Did they want to shoot us too? I got my answer when someone yelled: "Put the machines to sleep!"

"We are humans!" Maxine screamed. "I'm just really good looking, I'm not an AAIGP!"

Oh my good, Maxine. Sometimes she was just too much.

The sound of running feet came toward us. The red face of our classmate showed up. "Jesus, are you okay?"

I jumped out of the wagon and touched the AI's splattered face with my shoe, slime covered circuits hung out of the skull. Horrible! "Yeah, better than him at least," I responded with a trembling voice. I looked, with a chill, into the inky darkness where the sound of motorcycles disappeared in the distance.

"These bloody activists. If I was just allowed to have a gun I would have shot them! That could have given me a promotion. I'm tired of guarding the wall. Once I turn eighteen I'll go to the police academy."

"They're gone now. Just let us through," I said with a weak voice. "I want to go home. Vegatropolis sucks."

Maxine objected when she followed me. "How dare you say that, the party was great, the people were great. What is wrong with you?"

I shook my head and sighed. "I'm just tired. Sorry, thanks for bringing me."

She put her nose into the air. "Don't sweat, I'll do anything to see you in something else than your filthy jeans and holoshirts with lame messages."

I did not respond to that.

A sound of tires crunching made me turn around. Oh no! The motorcycles hadn't left. The drivers' faces were covered with silver helmets and the voice that came out of the small holes in the front sounded metallic. "Stand still!"

To emphasize his words he held out his hand, covered with a lethal gun glove. Five pipes of different bullets, laser beams and other nasty things, I guessed. Why did this happen to me?

"I told you, I'm human," Maxine cried.

"We know," said the voice. He moved his hand towards our brave classmate who had made an attempt to activate his holograph to call for help.

If we had been rich kids, with body technology, help would already have been on its way. The pumping adrenaline in our bodies would have called for police. But we were, yes, poor. So no help was on its way.

Another person with a helmet walked up to us. A woman, I thought, based on the curves under her black suit. "I will check them," she said and raised her hand.

From her gloved palm came a red cable swirling towards us.

"What is that? No, get that away from me!" screamed Maxine.

Without a word three other helmeted people came up quickly behind us, taking painful hold of our arms. The person holding me was short, shorter than me. I'm quite strong and have won several titles in combat jujitsu. However, that would be of no consequence against a gun. But at least I could get away from the person holding me.

I executed one of my most powerful moves and ... nothing.

The small person behind me didn't move. Wait a minute; there was something fishy about this.

The red cables were just in front of my face. Panic floated through my body and I threw myself back and forth. But no matter how hard I tried the arms around my chest made it impossible to escape.

Like a curious snake the cable touched my forehead. For a second I was sure that it would dig through my skin and penetrate my brain. But it just tapped at my forehead with a soft peck.

"This one might be right," the woman said in a harsh voice and the cable went back to her glove. "Give me the box."

The man picked up a shiny box from his suit and threw it to her.

"Careful," she hissed.

The metal was cold when she pressed it toward my forehead. A pain that started at my left eyebrow and went towards my spine electrified my body. I gasped and my friends tried even harder to get away from the arms that held them back.

"Vega, Vega! Are you okay? What are you doing, leave us alone!" cried Maxine.

The woman nodded to the man. "Let the others go. We will take this one with us."

The light went away and the smell of smoke and dirt filled my nose when a dark sack was pulled over my head. I screamed and kicked and heard my friends voices disappear as I was carried away.

"Hold on or you will fall off and die," a voice said close to my ear. I felt a motorcycle under me and grabbed the body in front of me. In the same moment we flew away.

I pressed my legs around the vehicle and my arms around the driver. All I could think of was 'don't fall'. What to do next had to wait. I just hoped my friends were okay.

Finally we stopped and someone lifted me up and carried me. I didn't resist. Better to save my strength for when I could see again.

I was put down on a soft bed. As soon as the arms left me I tried to reach up to pull away the sack. But I couldn't move. Something strapped me down.

The sack came off and cold artificial light blinded me. Medical equipment was all around me; I was in a hospital bed.

"Let me go!" I yelled and looked at a nurse in a white suit. She smiled. Her shiny face was not as perfect as the AAIGP, she must be an AAI.

"Relax, my dear, just fall asleep and it will all be over."

I didn't want to ask, but I had to. "What will be over?"

"Well, my dear, you humans cannot exist without your brain. Once we have used it, it will, unfortunately, be empty. Like an erased hard drive."

I squirmed like a worm, but the invisible straps held me down. "My ... brain. What do you mean?"

Not only was I kidnapped by some AAI that pretended to be human activists, they wanted to erase my brain! What was this place?

"You should be proud, you have a very special brain. Not unique, but special. It is compatible with ours. Once you fall into a natural sleep we will use your mind and your dreams to create wonders. Don't worry, it won't hurt a bit."

I looked around the room. By the white wall two of the helmet covered kidnappers stood waiting.

"Hey! You, why are you doing this? Leave me alone."

I remembered from somewhere that you should try to talk to your kidnappers. To bond with them, but I guess that didn't work with machines.

"Why do you pretend to be activists and kill your own kind?" I asked.

One of the helmets turned my way. "To make the humans focus on something else. Now we are protected by your police instead of hunted by them."

Had the sci-fi writers' worst fears finally come true? Had the machines

developed free will? Contrary to their programmed obedience? It should be impossible for a machine to hurt a human; it went against the laws that all programming was based on.

“You aren’t allowed to hurt me or any human. The laws ...” I said. “Have you forgotten about them?!” My voice broke.

The answer came from the nurse. “We have not forgotten about the laws, my dear, but they have been slightly modified.”

“Fuck you, I’ll never go to sleep so you can steal my brain,” I yelled.

The nurse tilted her head. “Oh, but we are not stealing it. Just reusing it, for something better. Your thoughts will give life to a completely new breed of AAIGP. Something wonderful. Our plan is to harvest thousands of you, maybe millions. In this very moment this building is filled with humans like you.”

I threw up. I couldn’t help it. The thought of mechanic people that created other mechanic people with the help of human brains was just too much. The last bit of sick I spat in her face. “Get your own brain, you fucking machine!”

The smile never left her rosy face when she wiped her cheek clean and looked at a screen in her hand that rested on my arm. “Your pulse is rising, my dear. Are you uncomfortable?”

I yelled at her, I called her all the bad names I could come up with. I begged and cried, but for what? This was no woman, no nurse; it was a machine.

I thought of the Royals, the anger Lancelot showed when the attack came. Was it all a scam? Did they know what was going on? If they were some of the most advanced ones, maybe they were behind it all.

If there really was something special about me, about my brain, that they wanted; how did they find me? I rubbed my arm against the bed. My holograph. The guy at the party, the friend of the Royals! Had he tagged me in some way when he got my number?

I gasped. Wait a minute. That’s why he was so dazzled when he saw me in the crowd. It was not love at first sight. He scanned me somehow and found out that I was what they were looking for. But did that mean that he was not human after all?

“Have you already created some of these new AAIGP wonders?” I whispered.

The nurse smiled. “Yes! They are not as beautiful as the old AAIGP, to better blend in with the humans. And their wisdom and visions are outstanding.” She stroked a strand of hair from my forehead. “Soon we will control Vegatropolis. And when we do that, the world will be at our feet.”

I pulled away from her. Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I believe that guy was into me? I was so stupid that I deserved to get my brain sucked.

Well, maybe not. If I ever got out of this I promised myself never to trust a hot guy again.

Why did I let Maxine convince me to go to that stupid party instead of staying on the other side of the wall, where I belonged.

I bit my lip until I tasted blood and turned my head away from them.

It could have been hours, maybe days. I didn't know. All I knew was that I was so tired. I closed my dried up eyes and thought of my parents, of my life, of the things I would never do or see. I needed to sleep, my entire body and mind were screaming to sleep.

But that was just me, the victim. The predator in her white uniform and fake smile, the AAI built with silicon and advanced technology. She was different. The machines never went to sleep. They just kept on going, living, destroying and creating monsters that could suck the brains of real people and manipulate the ones left.

I hope that Maxine, my parents and everyone else I know outside the city will be spared. To serve the rich and famous in the city might not be any different from serving under a new race of AAIGP.

Goodnight Vegatropolis, goodnight fake city. I guess it's only fair that you will be destroyed by something as fake and shiny as yourself.

The sound of a door swishing open broke through the fog in my mind. With my last will to fight I formed two words in my head that came over my dry lips as a whisper: "Help. Me."

The White Ones

Boel Bermann

I put the back of my hand against his forehead. He is ice cold. As if he'd just come in from the freezing outdoors. I pull my hand back and look at him closely. Examine him. In a way I rarely do, even though we see each other every day. His eyes are a bit red. Winter pale; he looks a bit tired. Has thin blue veins at his temples. I take his hand, hold my fingers against his wrist and search for his pulse. It's barely noticeable. Like an animal about to go into hibernation, it is slowing down. My throat feels tight and tears threaten to come. I ask him what he's done, just ask straight out if he's been unfaithful. He looks at me blankly, doesn't realize he's infected. I see his eyes widen in panic, see how he tries to comprehend how this could have happened. There are a lot of rumors about how the virus is spread, but the only proven way is through transfer of bodily fluids. But suddenly I understand. The mandatory drug tests he was called in for, the search for cures and vaccines. He hasn't figured it out yet. That the tests have killed him. But I have. I throw my arms around him, bury my face in his neck and start to cry. My whole body shakes. I feel him stroke my back, gentle and calming. The caresses are almost meditative. I feel my pulse quicken, adrenaline rushes in, mouth gets dry. I feel the throbbing between my legs and how I start to press myself against him. I tear myself away from his embrace. He looks hurt. I can hardly contain myself, want to get close to him. I race into the bathroom and lock the door to get away from his pheromones. He is going to die. And until then, I have to stay away. The person I love more than anything else is already dying and we can never be together again. I hear him knock on the bathroom door, hear him beg me to come out and talk to him. I just can't do it. Instead I turn

on the shower to drown out the sound of his pleading. Don't know what I should do.

I enter the house and call out that I'm home. My voice echoes in the deserted hallway. I unlock the cellar door and go down the stairs. He's sitting there, newly showered and wearing a striped t-shirt. I can tell that he's trying to look alert and refreshed. He's put powder on his face and blush on his cheeks. From a distance it looks nice, but I can feel a lump building in my throat. Just a few days ago, his cheeks could get pink on their own. I hug him and feel the chill that emanates through his clothes from his body. He asks what's happening out in the world. Struggles to not seem starved of human contact. I don't have much news; I sit beside him and lean against his shoulder. He carefully runs his hand over my hair. As if I were the one who is broken. I feel how he shakes from the cold. The air is sultry in the basement; so damp that it's almost hard to breathe, even though it's a cellar in a house in Spånga. We've gathered all the rugs in the whole house and fixed up this room. Everything we could to insulate and keep it as warm as possible. I decided on the basement because he can't escape from here. No windows to break. Sturdy locks on the door. I hope it's enough, that he can't break out when he gets too cold. He pries my arms loose. Puts on a knitted sweater and crawls under the covers on the sofa. I lay my head on his knee and tell him that my parents send their best, that they miss our visits to the little summer cabin outside Örnsköldsvik. It was difficult to talk for more than a few minutes. Cell coverage came and went the whole time. But they sounded hopeful; they should last the winter. Dad's the only one who eats. They have a pantry full of canned preserves and a freezer full of venison. Dad is rationing, and has lost a lot of weight already. He said he might have to lock up Mom just so she doesn't harm anyone. He's doing what he can. Until they find a cure.

Daniel looks away, won't meet my gaze. He doesn't believe in a cure anymore. I stroke his cheek and beg him not to give up. The words fall flat onto all the soft rugs. I don't believe them myself. And he knows it. There are just more and more white ones all the time. The virus gets us all, one after another. Now when winter makes everyone pale with dark shadows under the eyes, it's not really possible to see who is infected and who is not. At least at first. Before they freeze. Before their fingers and toes start to blacken and fall off. That's the only thing the white ones do. Freeze. Their blood circulation is barely perceptible. And it is when they're freezing the most that they search out other people. To get warm. The virus spreads fast after closing time at the bars. All the white ones are ice cold and people should be aware of the warning signs. Cold lips and chilly fingers. But the Stockholm winter makes everyone cold. And everyone wants to get warm.

Some more than others. The virus infects more people and Stockholm gets colder night by night. The white ones don't eat, but they don't burn many calories either. Initially, hospitals tried to treat them with an IV drip, but their bodies couldn't absorb it. They function just like regular people, until they're too cold. Until they start to get frostbite. Dark patches on their bodies. And the pheromones they emit make us all want to follow them to the end of the Earth. They don't succeed in getting very close, though, once the frostbite has eaten up their flesh and the stagnant blood in their veins sketches blue spider webs on their faces. Not when they look like the lepers from the Bible, without fingers, noses or ears. When that happens, it's easier to withstand and keep a sensible distance from them. But before that, they put on makeup to disguise their white skin. Blush to redden their cheeks. I've rubbed my nostrils with menthol balm. It keeps my sense of smell active and helps me resist Daniel's pheromones. That's not really enough protection; I know I need to get some nose plugs as soon as I can. But even that won't block out everything. Doctors are giving the nose plugs away for free, whenever they have them. But they're manufactured too slowly; the technology is still slow and cumbersome. They're often sold out, pharmacy shelves empty. The public is advised to stay indoors, stay home as much as possible, turn off air conditioners and fans. Daniel is so cold now. Beginning to get desperate for heat; his eyes show a hunger for closeness. He notices I'm afraid to get too close, says he understands. Looks at me with big sad eyes. I have to get out of the house, so I head into town to see Lina.

Sitting at café Ritorno. My coffee is getting cold in the cup in front of me while I tell her about how I locked Daniel in the basement. She asks if he's considered ending it all before the virus has gone too far. I see her expression. Compassion and sadness blended together. She knows that I know all about how the virus develops. He will change and it will be painful. Like shooting pains deep in the marrow of the bones. He only has a few weeks left. Do I really want him to suffer? She doesn't say it accusingly. More neutral. As if she already sees him as lost. She has already said her goodbyes. Her best friend doesn't exist anymore. Lina doesn't say anything further. She doesn't have to. I can't see Daniel the way she does, not when I have him near me every day. I know that aside from the cold, he's his usual self. And he's mine. Maybe it would be better if we were both infected. Getting colder together. Just staying in the cellar and holding on to one another. So that he didn't have to be alone.

The house is quiet when I get home. Too quiet. Not even music from the basement or the hum of the computer. I slam the door closed. Only silence.

Clutching the keys in my hand I walk towards the cellar door. Then I see it. The door is broken open. From the inside. Suddenly I feel his cold arms around me. He places his cheek against mine, holding me from behind. Tenderly. My pulse quickens. I feel almost inebriated. Haven't had the time to put any menthol balm in my nose for protection; I planned to do that before I went down to the cellar. He caresses my arms. I shake and lean against him. I want nothing more than to be here with him. I hold my breath and try to focus. Clench my hand on the key ring until the keys dig into my palm. The pain penetrates my intoxication. I raise my fist and slam the keys against his head as hard as I can. He's not prepared for that; he lets go and presses a hand against the wound the keys made. I use that moment to run toward the door, rip it open and continue out into the darkness. I can hear him calling out for me, begging me to come back. Faint words about how he didn't mean it. That he was just so cold, that he needs to be close to my warmth. I don't look back, I just keep running. He doesn't follow me. When I get to the train station, I stand on the platform and stomp my feet to keep warm. There's almost no one here; just a teenage girl in a big down jacket and too much makeup, standing off to one side and smoking. I barely notice her. Until I feel her hands close around my throat from behind. She holds on tight, her fingers feel icy. I try to pry them off, but she doesn't let go. I search my pockets desperately and find a pen. Get a grip, twist her hand around and shove the pen with all my force through her palm. She screams, swears and backs away from me. Her hand should be bleeding, but it's just pale white flesh with black fingers. She's had the virus for a long time. I hold the pen like a weapon, pointed toward her. She clasps her hand, as if it hurt. But I know it didn't; nothing hurts but the cold. Her hands are only numb. But she will suffer from the hole in her palm; she still cares about her appearance. Layers of foundation, thick eye shadow and lip gloss. I get my keys out of my pocket. Hold them between my fingers, sharp ends out like claws, and she backs away even farther. She turns and runs away, leaving me alone on the platform. Still fourteen minutes until the next train. I hope she doesn't have any friends to back her up; I feel vulnerable. But everything remains quiet and calm until the train arrives.

Once aboard the train, I call the police on my cell to report Daniel. That he's escaped. A calm female voice on the other end answers. She says it's common that the white ones escape. That they will be on the lookout for him immediately. It won't be long before a patrol finds him; after all, he has the obligatory tracking anklet they put on all who are infected. She tells me not to worry. That the police are called out on registered cases and that they are fast. The fact that he registered himself means that he doesn't want to harm others, that he understood what the virus can do. They'll put him in quarantine and send out text message when they find him. She sounds

so calm. I don't understand how she can sound so calm. What she calls quarantine has another name in the media: The disposal unit. The police can be as fast as they want, but the virus will still keep spreading. I take the train into town and check into a hotel near the central station. Borrow a cellphone charger from the reception. Wake up to a message just a few hours later. They've found him. He's been brought in to the old Kronoberg jail. Visiting hours are weekdays from 9 to 11, closed on weekends.

I'm standing outside the door when they open the next morning. They show me into the visitors' area. A glass pane stretches between us all the way up to the ceiling; separate ventilation. No way for his pheromones to affect me. He looks so small and fragile behind the glass. I pick up the receiver, watch him do the same. First we just sit quietly and look at each other, listen to each other's breathing. Eventually, he says he's sorry for what he did. That the only thing he could think about was how he'd never feel warm again. He begs me to get him out of jail. His face has more blue veining now, a fine web across his cheeks and forehead. I put my palm up against the glass. It is cold, as cold as his skin has been the past few weeks. I tell him that it's too late, that I can't get him out now. He starts to cry. A dry, heaving cry without tears. I sit with my palm against the glass and watch him, my frozen boyfriend.

I fill in form after form. Something about liability. Another on confidentiality. Then we arrange a transfer of 30 000 Swedish kronor. It's a lot of money, but not more than our savings account can manage. I'm surprised that the money isn't even a bribe. It goes directly to the trust fund of victims of crime. The whole thing takes less than a day. They need every available cell in the jail now. To hold all of the white ones. There aren't very many who have someone who will fetch them. They need the space for all the white ones for whom no one is prepared to pay to take them home.

I don't pick Daniel up right away, instead I buy nose plugs first. The most expensive kind. And call a locksmith to put stronger locks on the cellar door. Then I take my time and get ready. Wash my hair, put on makeup and perfume. Two police officers escort him down to the basement. When the first cop is on his way out the door, he stares at me. Shakes his head. Asks why I want him home. It will be hard, I don't understand how much pain he'll have, says the cop. They have a hard time keeping people calm in the jail. He says that they have enough white ones on the streets as it is. That I shouldn't become one of them. I don't know how to respond. The cop doesn't say the words with any spite; his voice expresses a kind of weary sympathy. He claps his partner on the shoulder to signal that it's time to go. And they leave. I unlock the cellar door and take a deep breath; try to

collect my thoughts. I hear that Daniel has started playing some music in the basement. The Smiths. *And if a ten ton truck kills the both of us, tonight by your side is such a heavenly way to die.* Head downstairs with tentative steps. He has put on a big sweater that makes him look younger. Like a pale, scared teenager sitting curled up on the couch with his arms crossed over his chest. Outside it's dark. Friday night and empty. We have the heating element on high and he has several layers of blankets. I squeeze his hand and feel how he squeezes it back. His fingers are cold. We listen to the radio. TT reports that authorities are urging everyone to stay home. Daycares and schools have closed. Everyone who can is urged to work from home. People who have places in the country already fled there back when the first reports came out, so there are no traffic problems now. Those who left never returned to the city. They are waiting out the danger. They'll be waiting for a long time. The white ones already exist all throughout Europe. If the authorities had wanted to stop the virus, they should have closed the borders a long time ago. People are already fleeing the area in any way they can. Thanks to the EU, internal borders were already erased. Contamination was easy. In one way or another, the virus will disappear naturally. Or they'll find a cure. It's only a matter of time. Daniel doesn't want any food. I make him eat a cracker and drink some juice. He gets worse day by day. I see how he gets paler. But he ignores it and sings along with the Christmas songs on the radio. He winks at me when he sings *I'm dreaming of a white Christmas.* I try to smile, but I'm close to tears. I try not to think too much. Try to focus on us, on the fact that we at least have this time together. But it is hard. He pats my cheek. I flinch; I can't help it. He looks hurt again, but tries to act like he didn't notice. Tiny ice crystals form around his eyes. That's the closest he gets to actually crying now.

At night I pray to God, even though I have never believed in such things. Dear God, if you can hear us in all this chaos, can you cure him? He means so much to me and I don't want to lose him. And I don't want to see him suffer. He doesn't deserve this. There are many who don't deserve it, but I'm selfish. I don't care about the others. He is the only one I care about. More than anything else. Please, cure him. I get no answers. Didn't expect any either. But I continue to pray in my head. There isn't anything else I can do. Daniel says he's feeling better. He doesn't look better. He looks like a shadow. After a few days in the basement, we don't get any more news. The electricity has been turned off. The last thing we heard was that the virus is spreading faster now. Without electricity, there are no news reports on the TV or computer where we can hang on every word. No one is delivering newspapers. I try to call Dad, but I only get his voicemail. There's no one else to call. I don't want to talk to anyone. Daniel eats nothing and I've stopped forcing

him. Since he doesn't eat, the food is lasting longer. I make my dinners on a Trangia stove that was in the cellar after we'd taken a hiking trip through the mountains. I'm eating my way through the supply in the pantry, rationing as much as I can. I don't know how long it will last. I don't want to leave the house. Don't even know if I could get anything out there. Don't know how bad things are in reality. Our world is here, within the walls of our house. Nothing else matters. We read books in the weak light from the candles that we never thought we'd ever run out of. Play cards, Yahtzee, backgammon. He tries to play songs for me on his guitar, but his fingers are stiff. He struggles through the songs until he gives up. After a while, we just hum the songs instead, and record them on our cell phones before the batteries die. Memories for me when he's gone. He's in pain. It's getting worse. Neither of us have any more hope that there will be a cure. I am constantly trying to stop myself from getting too close to him. It is exhausting. At night, I sleep upstairs and he's in the basement with the door locked. I wear several layers of clothes and two blankets, but still freeze to the point of shivering in the winter chill. When I finally sleep, I sleep like the dead. No dreams, just the liberating darkness. Daniel and I don't talk about the fact that I'm going to survive and he will die. It would destroy the illusion that we are holding fast to, that everything is just as it's supposed to be.

One morning when I come down to the basement, Daniel doesn't move. He is cold, but he always is. I don't understand. I shake him carefully, but he doesn't react. His eyes are open. I go upstairs, open the front door and step out onto the porch. Breathe cold morning air that stings in my lungs. The street in front of the house is empty of people and cars. It's quiet, desolate. I don't see any lights anywhere. It's as if I'm the only one left. I try to get it through my head that Daniel's gone, but I just can't. I try to imagine my life without him. Shut myself in upstairs and sleep. The day goes by; I hardly leave the bed. I know I need to try to do something. Try to not think about him being down there. I can't leave him lying in the cellar to rot. But right now, I just can't deal with it.

I wake up to the electricity coming back on. I notice it because the ceiling light comes on. I go down and heat up some water in the microwave and make some instant soup. Start charging the cell phone out of habit. Take a bite of a rye cracker and drink the soup without even noticing the flavor, I just taste the warmth. When I start my cell phone, I have five messages and several missed calls from Dad. They were from several days ago. Read the first. "A colleague called me from the Center for Disease Control. They have isolated the virus and think they have a cure. Get yourselves to the Karolinska Institute as soon as you can, before the news gets out. Tell them I sent

you. I will try to come with your mom. Hope there's enough gas in the truck. Call me as soon as you can. I love you." I don't listen to the other voicemail messages and don't read the rest of the text messages. I start crying. I can't stop. I lie down on the floor, hugging the phone and crying. Then I log into the computer. Find myself greeted by a world rejoicing over the fast-acting cure. A world filled with hope. A world that has seen the end and managed to avoid it. Daniel was still alive when the cure was found. I read all the articles I can find. Watch every news report on TV for several hours. Then I go upstairs to the bathroom. Draw a steaming hot bath that will keep away any chill. Get out a razor blade.

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Andrea Grave-Müller

Quadrillennium

AR Yngve

Mission Accomplished

My Bergström

The Road

Anders Blixt

Lost and Found

Maria Haskins

The Publisher's Reader

Patrik Centerwall

Stories from the Box

Björn Engström

The Membranes in the Centering Horn

KG Johansson

One Last Kiss Goodbye

Oskar Källner

The Mirror Talks

Sara Kopljär

Keep Fighting Until the Machines Fall Asleep

Eva Holmquist

Outpost Eleven

Markus Sköld

Messiah

Anna Jakobsson Lund