# Blockmeat

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**p 2-7**

## Mincemeat

You can't change the world, but we're going to try again anyway. With soup.
"You ***can*** change the world," says Anja, a plump student who, from the way she wades into chopping onions, seems to draw a lot of energy from her spare body fat. "Just look at how things are now, compared to the nineteenth century."
"Cosmetics," I say. "Two seconds of civilization does nothing to change an hour of brutishness."
Our voices echo in the huge kitchen built of stainless steel and white tiles.
"You're a pessimist," Anja says, "and pessimism is conservative."
Who cares? I'm only here chopping leeks and carrots because I almost went crazy from the alternative: sitting at home with a head full of dissonants and no one to listen.
"Listen, little Anja, I quit the rat race voluntarily. Does that seem conservative to you?"
"Don't call me 'little Anja', okay?"
The vegetable soup contains flakes of meat that the supermarket calls "spine". Why don't we give them big chunks to chew on? That would make the soup a bit more substantial, I suggest.
"It's a budgetary matter," says Erik, who's the big soup boss, but who prefers to call himself the "coordinator". "There's not enough meat to cut it into chunks. You'd get one chunk in one cup, two chunks in another, and other cups would have nothing at all."
"So we believe in the basic goodness of man, but also in his manifest jealousy if he thinks some else has got more chunks in his soup."
Erik looks at me. His mouth has twisted a little, into what is almost a smile. "The little pieces allow for better distribution," he says.
Everything possible must be done to keep one person from having better luck than another. That kind of egalitarianism depresses me, mostly because I myself would much rather have better luck than someone else.
"The homeless have already had their share of bad luck," says the coordinator, who has never been homeless himself.
"But it could also be their own fault," I say. I, who have never been homeless either.
"But that's not how we look at it," says the smiling coordinator, and he actually wags his finger at me, even though it's me and not him who's crying over the onions.
When I saw Anja, I had no regrets about volunteering for this.
"Why did you volunteer for this?" was one of the first things she asked me.
"For something to do."

"So not out of a sense of conviction?"
"The conviction that the walls were closing in on me. Does that count?"
This morning the three of us sat at the table and jabbered a bit - "having a meeting," is what Erik calls it. The freezing weather of the last few days, he said, made it necessary, if not to warm the hearts of the homeless and the beggars of our city, to at least pour some hot mush down their throats. Free of charge, of course.
"But food distribution, of course," the coordinator said at last, "doesn't solve the real problem."
"Because that problem is structural," I said.
"Exactly," said Erik, who, to judge by the little change in the configuration of his eyebrows, didn't like being shot with his own popgun. "But," he continued, "we mustn't relativize our own activities, we mustn't, in other words, adopt a nonconstructive attitude. There's no reason why we shouldn't assume that we really ***are*** offering these people a little warmth. A little faith in the fact that they have not been abandoned."
A little meat from the bottom of the barrel, but I have to admit, the vegetables were very fresh. Too bad Anja had boiled them to a pudding.
"It's not what you'd call a clear broth," I said, lifting the lid and peering into a greenish murk with flakes of brown and here a there an orange-colored chunk.
"What is it?" says Erik, who's sitting at the table on the other side of the room, shuffling importantly through his paperwork.
"A murky mess," I said.
"The soup has to be run through the food mill, otherwise you can't drink it without a spoon."
"So give them a plastic spoon," I say.
"The soup is served in a big mug," Erik says. "Experience shows that that is the way to do it."
He probably plays ice-cream man in the ghetto when there's a heat wave on. What would be left for him to do in the misery-free world he hopes to achieve?

The soup distribution takes place on a sidewalk close to the train station, where the heated waiting rooms will be open all evening. At one end of the long table, which serves as the counter, is the coordinator: he takes a paper cup out of a bag and a paper plate from another and hands them to the clients - the swelling crowd of derelicts has, for the occasion, been promoted to "clientele", while the benches and makeshift tables further along are "the restaurant".
Halfway down the table is Anja, stirring up and ladling out the soup, which is kept steaming in a heavy pan above the low flame of the gas burner.
"We've certainly come a long way from the nineteenth century," I say. "Back then they kept the soup warm over a wood fire."
Anja smiles and pokes me with her elbow. She stirs, to keep the soup from sticking to the bottom, and she only has to ladle twice to fill a cup. The disposable cups are deep and wide, protected on the outside by a shiny layer of insulation to keep our clientele from burning their pinkies or scorching their gloves.
The last station of the Cross is me, cutting French bread into pieces as uniformly identical as possible, for the watchword is to do a favor for dereliction in general, and not for a few individual derelicts - after which I am to place three pieces on the paper plate held out to me by the derelict in question and wish my client a ***bon appetit***.
It's a few degrees below zero. The soup steams like an old-fashioned locomotive. My hands are blue and stiff; it's impossible to cut bread with gloves on. I'm hungry, and regularly take a bite from a chunk of bread I've laid to one side.
The clientele come shuffling up, and rarely react when I wish them an enjoyable meal. They sit down at the table, and they eat. During all this there is some coughing and hacking and sniffling, but little conversation.
"Erik says for you to stop eating," Anja whispers.

"What?"
"Stop eating, Erik says."
"But I'm hungry," I say, taking another bite.
The coordinator comes and stands beside Anja. "We'll switch places now," he said. He's going to dish up the soup, while Anja passes out the paper cups and plates. I chew on a piece of the bread I'm distributing, and could easily warm my hands at the glowing irritation in Erik's eyes.
"Don't eat," he says.
"What?" says the homeless person to whom the coordinator is handing a cup.
"Excuse me, sir, I didn't mean you."
The client holds up his plate for some bread. "Enjoy," he says to me.
"You too," I say. "Here, here's an extra piece."
"Thank you very much."
The next client doesn't wish me ***bon appetit***. "Hey," he says, pointing at his predecessor. "Why's he get four and I only get three?"
"Because I don't like you," I say.
The man nods as though he's heard that before, and sits down at the table. Erik comes up and stands right next to me. I can feel his breath in my ear.
"Easy," I say. "Think of the clientele."
"Stop eating and follow procedure," he whispers. "Three pieces of bread for everyone. Not four, not two. Three."
"I've only had two myself," I say.
"If you don't like it, then get out of here," he says. "And if you put one more piece of bread in your mouth, then -"
"Hey!" shouts the client standing in front of the pan of soup. "Are we getting served here, or what?"
Erik dashes over to the pan and resumes his ladling. I walk around behind him and go up to Anja.
"Put those cups down next to the boss," I say, "and the plates beside the bread. He picks up a cup and fills it, you take a plate and put bread on it."
A third pair of hands behind this table is one pair too many - which becomes clear enough as soon as I move into line on the other side of the table.
Before long I'm standing eye-to-eye with Erik, ready to receive my soup. He's looking flushed, and it's not just from the cold.
"You're not homeless," he says.
"How would you know?"
"Yeah," says the young deadbeat behind me, "how would you know? I'm not homeless either."
"Oh yeah?" Erik says. "Then you don't get any soup either."
I look at the young man: his clothes are relatively clean. He's neatly shaven and his hair isn't greasy.
"I'm not homeless," the young man says, "but I haven't eaten since this afternoon."
"Soup," I say.
"If we don't get soup," the young man says, "then nobody here's getting any soup."
Meanwhile a couple of derelicts are waiting in line behind us. The young man pushes me aside and looks into the pan.
"What kind of gunk is this?"
"Would you please go away?" Erik says.
"No, seriously, what's in this? And what's with the three chunks of white bread? After fifteen minutes, your average homeless person will have digested this and be even hungrier than before. You ever heard of the hyperglycemic curve?"
Erik raises his eyes pleadingly to the sky.
"To render a symbolic service to all derelicts in the world," the young man says, "I hereby make this contribution to the soup."
He reaches into his pants pocket, pulls out a wrinkled hankie and drops it in

the soup. Anja gasps, puts her hand to her mouth, and looks at me as though the hankie was mine.

Celis raises his glass of cola to the two derelicts who'd been standing behind us in line and are now sitting at another table, devouring a Big Mac menu at our expense.
"Had you already blown your nose a few times in that hankie?" I ask him.
"Blew my nose and masturbated," Celis says, chomping into a McChicken. "So why were you behind the table at first?"
"Work therapy. I stopped a while ago. With normal life, if you know what I mean."
"Of your own free will?"
"I think so."
Celis lays down his chicken burger and puts out his hand. We shake.
"You too?" I ask.
He nods, lets go of my hand and picks up his burger.
"Of your own free will?" I ask.
"Yeah," he says, so curtly it completely rules out all expansiveness about reasons why.
I suck ice water from the bottom of my cola cup.
"You're not cynical, are you?" Celis asks, as though speaking of a deadly virus.
"No. I don't think so."
"Oh, okay, because I can't stand that. Those disappointed idealists who hate everything. You want to go on living, don't you, I hope?"
"'Course."
"Not do anything in the normal circuit, just do whatever you want. Like Bob and Bobette. Not go to school, don't work, but still go on living."
"And never get any older," I say.
"That hankie, that was bullshit, but it's got something, a soup kitchen like that, at least more charm than the welfare machine. Those phantoms shuffling up in the glow of the streetlights... I'd like to organize something like that, but then completely different. I don't understand why it always has to be so Calvinistic: soup, bread, and that's it. Nothing ever happens there, except accepting food, sitting at the table, wolfing it down and getting out."
"And fifteen minutes later you're hungry again."
"With a little budget and some sucking up to the municipality, we could do it differently," Celis says. "First and foremost, for our own fun. You have anything better to do?"
How close municipal government really is to John Q. Public becomes evident when two unemployed persons are welcomed, albeit after making an appointment, into the adequately heated office of the official elected to deal with "social affairs".
"We're here to talk to you about a social affair," Celis says.
"Shoot," says the elected official, a reasonably young politician whose reputation has been built on the fact that he never wears a necktie.
"Close to the station recently, we saw something that inspired us: in the shadow of the streetlights, the less fortunate were shuffling up to received soup and bread. We viewed this scene for some time, and although the mercury was low, I must confess that it made us feel a little warm inside."
The politician nodded. "That's nice," he said.
"We would like to organize something along the same lines," Celis says.
"Meaning?"
"The same thing, actually. Food and drink for the homeless. To let them know that they haven't been abandoned."
"And the two of you would like the city to support you in this?"
"We wondered whether it was possible to do something like that. Whether the police wouldn't chase us away, for example."
"Free food for the homeless. I see nothing wrong with that. On the contrary. Okay, I'll give the two

of you a permit, and reserve two hundred and fifty euros."
"Oh," Celis says, "thank you."
"Which means," the local administration says, "that you two will be given an advance, but that you'll be expected to turn in your expenses and bills afterwards and pay back whatever is left over. I'll need a date from you, and a location. My secretary can give you a list of eligible spots. All right?"

"***For the distribution of food and beverages***," our permit says.
"It doesn't say anything about not serving alcoholic beverages," Celis says, scanning the official text for unexpected clauses.
"Barbecue wine," I suggest. "Those five-liter packs with the little tap."
"Quantity, above all. As compensation, I'll make something to eat that's actually a little nutritious."
I read back over the fine print in the permit. We have the right to obtain free plates and cups from the municipality, "intended for non-returnable use." We even have a right to tables and chairs, to be installed and removed by the municipal services.
"Wouldn't it be more fun if there were three of us?" I say. "Anja, for example? Then we'd have a real idealist in our midst."

A whole cloud of plasticized cards have been tacked up beside the doorbell. "Joeri: 1 x short, 2 x long", "Peter: 1 x short, 1 x long, 1 x short": whenever the bell goes here, everyone must prick up their ears. I ring, two long and one short. Correctly, it seems, for a little later Anja comes to the door. Hands on her hips and shaking her head. There they are, the two bad boys, but she still lets us into her room, with newspapers, books and laundry scattered around.
"Unconscionable," she says. "A dirty handkerchief."
"But we want to make up for it," I say.
"Oh? So you've already apologized to Erik?"
"We just want to treat these derelicts to something nice," I say, "something festive."
"Derelicts?" Anja says.
"The less fortunate," Celis says.
"And we would be honored to have you help us," I say.
"You would?" says Anja. Her intonation is already stirring the soup.
"A balanced and tasty meal," Celis says. "Qualitatively and quantitatively superior in every way-"
She's frowning a little too doubtfully now, but I think I know the magic formula: "The city council is helping out. We've got subsidy."
"Okay," Anja says. "What do you want me to do?"
"They're predicting a new cold front as from Monday," Celis says. "We'd like to be out there on Tuesday evening. At the same spot, close to the station. Not as charitable preachers, but as fellow guests at the feast."
"A little gussied up," I say.
"Festive," Celis says.
"We'd really be pleased if you could help out in the kitchen that afternoon, and then be there that evening looking your very best."
"Like you were going to the wedding of a friend you wish you were getting married to yourself."
Anja smiles, but seems less convinced about that latter point. Idealists need arguments, not metaphors.
"When normal people go to an expensive restaurant," I say, "the people who are there to receive them look their best too, don't they? We want to give these homeless people the feeling that, for once, they're being received with honors. That they don't have to wolf down their food in bitterness, but that they can do so with a little bit of joy. And maybe draw a little hope and faith from our humble campaign."
It's almost more than I can stand, and Celis feels that way too, because he immediately moves to

the counterpoint.
"We would be very pleased if you would stand at that table dressed as a sexy bitch."
Anja bursts out laughing. She's eighteen or nineteen, she's probably always been a bit plump and therefore always a bit shy, and she has probably always used her social engagement as a substitute for a social life. It would come as no surprise to learn that the character of the sexy bitch is not yet a part of her repertoire.
"I wouldn't have the slightest idea how to do that," she says.
"We can help you," I say.
"Oh yeah? As long as you don't think I'm going to go sashaying around for you in a miniskirt."
"Moderately festive is okay too," Celis says.
It occurs to me that I myself don't have the clothes to look even moderately festive. I once did, but I took them all to a second-hand shop. And, just like Anja, I can't see myself as a sexy bitch or whatever equivalent there may be.
"Well, we'll see," she says, smiling at Celis.

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**p 8-14**

# Blockmeat

Whenever Celis orders half a pound of blockmeat, most butchers look at him as though he's raving. Cuttings, he explains, at which the butcher raises his eyebrows and says "ooh" or "aah". Often enough there aren't any cuttings, or at least not half a pound of them, because no one saves cuttings; after all, who the hell buys cuttings? Other butchers are able to scrape together half a pound, and one of them once asked in a loud retailer's voice whether these cuttings were meant for the dog, or for the pigs.
For the standard recipe, Celis puts a frying pan on one of the two burners of his little gas stove and turns the heat all the way up. A clump of butter melts to a brown puddle, followed by a hissing explosion when the blockmeat hits the pan. Half a teaspoon of salt, a pinch of white pepper and, by way of cheap refinement, a finely chopped onion. The mixture is then stir-fried to a uniform mass of dark brown crusts. The room fills with smoke and the smell of a slaughterhouse on fire, and with the steam from the spaghetti being boiled up on the other burner. Spaghetti is cheap and provides us with the necessary carbohydrates: meat, Celis lectures me, contains no carbohydrates.
Blockmeat. Membranes and fatty edges and knuckles of cartilage and cut-off pieces of who-knows-what-else. Here and there, by accident, a sliver of real meat. Every time we eat it I try during the first few bites to bring tongue and jaws into full play, so as to delve any possible flavor from the stubborn, hard-fried chunks. But after the second or third attempt I simply follow Celis's example and wolf it all down, almost without chewing. The point of a meal of blockmeat, after all, is to have it remain lying in your stomach for as long as possible, because the grocery money is almost finished. After eating, Celis drinks a glass of tap water with a few squirts of lemon juice. Vitamin C, he says. Meat contains iron, and iron is absorbed by the blood with the help of vitamin C, he says. The C of citrus juice, he says. I drink a glass of water with lemon juice too, but only a little one; atop the granite floor of blockmeat, it remains sloshing around in your stomach for an amazingly long time.
It seems to me that Celis is overdoing things with his blockmeat two or three times at the end of each month, pending the arrival of our welfare check.
"We're blockmeat ourselves," Celis says.
"I don't want to be blockmeat," I say.

"Well, you ***are*** blockmeat. We're cuttings. Cut off from society."
"Sometimes I'd rather be a steak," I say.
Why, for example, does Celis have to frequent the prostitutes behind their picture windows at the end of each month, when he has two good hands just like I do? I don't need whores behind windows, they disgust me, and I'd rather use that money to eliminate the blockmeat and eat steak, for example, on every third Saturday of the month.
After his transaction down in the red-light district, Celis always comes outside looking like a messenger bearing bad news.
"Is this something you do just to make sure the money's finished?" I ask.
"***Après l'amour la tristesse***," Celis says. "I just have to. Maybe I do this in order to feel normal."
"I thought that was precisely the feeling we were trying to avoid."
Normal: that's a dangerous word. Not only because we, of course, have renounced bourgeois semantics, because we consider ourselves too intelligent for it, but above all because of the practical consequences the word brings with it. Precisely in order to avoid those consequences, Celis and I are closed during business hours, we go to sleep when the sun comes up.
Sometimes, after breakfast, at around six in the evening, we sally forth to stand at the gates of the central train station and watch the commuters depart and arrive.
People who follow the pattern of working and buying houses and making babies. Whose conversations are about that, supplemented with a dose of what was on TV last night. People who, in another age, would have been fruit pickers or serfs, and who now follow the pattern, because otherwise they would be nobody at all. So Celis and I, who bowed out almost simultaneously and at the same age, like twin brothers separated at birth: are we somebody?
"Maybe they're right," I say.
"Stop talking shit," Celis says.
"Settling down at home with the loved ones. Belonging."
As an outsider, I'm not always so sure anymore. I'd have to become an insider again in order to evaluate my current status.
We spend the nighttime hours in his room, or out on the street during walks that last for hours, or, if our check has just come in, in the bars where the normal people go. We drink and Celis points out phrases he overhears and clothing and haircuts and gestures he sees and puts them all down, so that we can rise above it, and after five or six glasses that works pretty well, but then suddenly you look straight into one of the reflecting surfaces with which bars tend to be decorated and see myself: there, that's me. Is that me? An objector who smells of himself or of cheap soap, who rarely goes clean-shaven and dresses in crumpled and spotty clothes? Yeah, that's me, because when I raise my hand to my head, that seedy character in the mirror simultaneously does exactly the same thing.
"Just order a quarter of a pound," I say after Celis has once again asked the butcher for half a pound of blockmeat. "I'm not eating that shit anymore." Then, to the butcher, I say: "Make mine a steak. A hundred and fifty grams."
Celis holds up his hand as a sign to the butcher to stop what he's doing. "You have your own money?" he asks me.
"No. But I have a right to a steak. I don't frequent the whores and you do. So, by way of compensation, I demand a steak."
The butcher looks out the window and acts like he's seeing something interesting out there.
"I'm not buying any steak," Celis says. "If you want, you can take my place at the girls' this month, but I'm not buying any steak."
"I don't want a whore, I want a steak. A steak is a lot cheaper than a whore."
"You're not going to sit there eating steak while I chew on cuttings, not unless you pay for that steak yourself."
I turn around, step outside, and start walking. Almost tripping over my own hurry, that's how I

walk, for two hours, three hours, propelled by detailed visions in which I wound, mutilate and murder Celis and grind him into a stinking pile of cuttings. My own money, how could I have my own goddamn money - no, no, wait a minute, he's right: I need my own money.
As soon as it gets dark, I go back and look up at his window. No light, Celis isn't home, that means I can go in. Exhausted from my long march, I lie down on the sofa and try to think. Priority number one: I have to look for a place of my own. And after that...
Around three in the morning I wake up and, as though I've been thinking about it for a long time, I know what I have to do. I wash, shave and put on my last set of clean clothes. I wait for him for a little while - let him come in, I can handle it, he doesn't have anyone but me anyway. Where is he? Yesterday was blockmeat day, so he's not supposed to have any money left. Maybe he saw the light was on and was afraid to come in. I turn off the light. I hope he doesn't show up, but I still wait, to keep from having to call myself a coward.
He doesn't show up. Six-thirty, I'm out of here.
The weather outside is brisk and dry, and I walk through neighborhoods where I'm sure not to run into him. I still have a little money left, not enough for a steak, but enough for a cup of coffee in an early-morning café and a so-called fresh pastry that tastes sweet at one bite and salty the next. It's not much, but for the time being it's enough to make me feel fit and able to get down to business.
Office hours have started. I enter a building that serves exclusively to handle the administration of the army of do-nothings who, for reasons not up for discussion, are kept alive with unemployment benefits. Resigned to a long sit in the waiting room, I'm amazed after fifteen minutes to find that it's my turn, and a shapeless, ageless woman leads me into a cubicle which the sign on the door says is a "consultation room". It contains a table and three chairs.
Without glancing at me, she shakes my hand, tells me to sit down and explains that she is a social worker. She wants to see my ID card, and asks me to tell her what I want.
"I want to apply for benefits."
"Do you live alone?"
"Not yet."
"Are you registered as being unemployed?"
"I've been deregistered."
"Why?"
"Because I refused to take some stupid course."
"What kind of course?"
"Computers. Information technology."
"And why didn't you want to take that course?"
"Ugh, computers... I like typewriters a lot more."
"But you're still living with someone who has an income?"
"Unemployment benefits, yeah."
"And you're looking for work?"
"There ***is*** no work for someone like me."
"Do you have a diploma?"
"Not any more."
"Not any more. You mean you lost it?"
I didn't lose it, no, not that. In my head an old movie is playing, one in which Celis takes me to a walled yard behind the rubble of a demolished house. He sweeps together a little pile of rubble with his foot, squats down and lays his rolled-up diploma on top of the pile. He pulls his lighter out of his pocket. "Now you have to prove that you mean it," he says. I lay my diploma on the pile too. Celis lights the paper and stands up. What he doesn't know is that, in my gym bag, back in my room, is a folder containing five photocopies.
The social lady looks as though she's suddenly been struck blind.
"So you mean you burned your diploma..." she says. She leaves a few moments of silence,

apparently to give me a chance to come back on my story. I don't say a thing.
"You can only receive benefits if you live alone or with someone who has no income."
"But first I have to have money to pay for a room, don't I? How can I live on my own without -"
"You can't receive benefits as long as you are living with someone who already receives benefits. It's the law, not my idea, sir."
I walk outside and have to squint against the spring sunlight, as though I've been sitting in the dark for a long time. I start walking and don't look back at that worker and her social services. I got off scot-free this time, it occurs to me all of a sudden. I've been released without parole. Benefits my ass - I'm the Happy Wanderer and Minnie the Moocher, all rolled up into one.
And then, suddenly, I no longer feel so free. Not a penny to my name, and money buys you freedom, as all the famous people say in interviews. I'm hungry.
Close to the train station a young panhandler is sitting with his back against a hovel. I walk over and look in the bowl at his feet. Coins. He just sits there, and every once in a while a passer-by gives him a coin. He's not doing anything.
"You got a problem?" he says.
I step back. A little further along I see an ideal spot, against the front of a building that used to house the branch office of a bank.
I cross the square to a garbage can and pull out a cardboard cup from a burger restaurant. Back to my ideal spot - well, ideal spot, why did I think this was such an ideal spot? It's not really even a spot, just a combination of paving stones in the pavement, and you could see any combination of paving stones in this pavement as an ideal spot. In any case, it seems far enough away from the other panhandler, far enough at least not to infringe on his business. That, at least, is my mistaken supposition, for as soon as I sit down with my back against the wall he shouts: "Get lost, dipshit!" Does he have some begging permit that I don't have? He shouts and curses for a little while, until someone walks right past his bowl and he suddenly falls silent - probably in the realization that a shouter and a curser doesn't seem pathetic enough, and will therefore miss revenue. Down on that pavement with your back against a rough property front, it doesn't sit very nicely. Derelicts have callus on their butt. I stare straight ahead and see the legs of passers-by, and suddenly I notice that I've crushed my cup. I let go of it and it resumes its old shape again, with a few creases as scars. I put it down at my feet. The front of the building is hurting my back, I slide up a little and sit cross-legged. A breath of wind comes along and I'm just able to grab my empty, feathery cup before it blows away. I decided to hold it in my hand, but don't dare to hold it out. I stare straight ahead and think: maybe I'd be better off getting those copies of my diploma. But what could I do with them if I did?
I don't dare to look up or to move my head. I don't dare to be a real panhandler. Not a single passer-by throws anything into my cup. Even though some of them are wearing some very expensive shoes. I probably still look too good. I haven't been hungry long enough to appear starved, and besides, I shaved and washed myself, which is not what a beggar is supposed to do. My neck is getting stiff from staring straight ahead, I turn my head, and fifty meters further along I see two policemen climbing out of a squad car. They're coming towards me. Maybe they'll throw me in a cell for the day and I'll get something to eat.
I look straight ahead again, and wait until I see the four calves in navy-blue uniform trousers come by. It takes a long time, but they finally do come by. I watch them pass, and they walk just as casually past the other panhandler. And suddenly there's a shadow, a hand above my cup, the clack of an object on the bottom. It's a woman in jeans, and she's gone so quickly again that I didn't even see her face. My first coin.
I look at the other panhandler - yes, that first coin has brought about a change: I'm not afraid to look around now, and I suddenly feel how tense my back has been all this time. My colleague is being spoken to by a young woman in a shiny outfit, shades of black. She's bending over him in a way that, it seems to me, a dyed-in-the-wool panhandler would have to regard as slightly

condescending. In any case, the beggar makes one gesture of dismissal after the other, and once he's turned his face so far away from her that he's actually looking over his shoulder, she gives up and walks on. To me. Not just in my direction, but to me. She immediately applies what she has just learned and doesn't bend over when she talks to me.
"Hello. Could I ask you something? I'm making a movie about people like you, and I'd like you to help me. You'll receive some money for it, of course."
"People like me?"
"It's not actually a movie," she says, "it's a TV show. I'd like to follow you around with a camera for a day, during your normal activities. You'll be given the chance to say what you want, give your opinions on life, tell your story..."
The way she talks reminds me of an old teacher I had who made no bones about the fact that he hated teaching. I take the coin out of my cup and stand up. I'm a head taller than she is.
"Pleased to meet you," I say.
"Likewise," she says. "My name's Linda."
"Don't you have researchers who do this kind of thing for you?"
"What makes you think I'm not a researcher?"
"You have a TV face. I mean, you look good enough to present your own show."
"Thank you," she says, "but I also do some of the research. With our budget..."
I show her my coin. "This is my budget," I say. Success. She laughs.
"Would you like to help out?"
"Maybe."
"Shall we go get a drink and talk about it?"
"A drink? I'm hungry."
The daily special at the nearby café is steak with cream-and-pepper sauce, salad and fries. We sit across from each other at a little table by the window. After taking our order, the waiter tells us we'll have to wait for half an hour, it's still too early to start serving the daily special. While we wait, she drinks sparkling water and I have a glass of chocolate milk. Maybe I should have ordered something alcoholic, to keep up my trampish image. Or don't I really have to be a tramp for this program of hers? Would a simple wandering deadbeat be okay too?
"Well, I'm not really sure," she says. "It has to be a program about someone who has missed the boat."
"So what about someone who jumped overboard?"
"Excuse me?"
"Someone who says fuck the boat? Bon voyage, I'm staying here? That's a lot more interesting, don't you think?"

I have to drag myself up the stairs, tired and full as I feel, not only from the steak but also from all the things I've been telling Miss Linda.
Celis is lying on the sofa, picking his toes. He glances up, no big deal.
"I had a steak," I say by way of greeting.
"My heartfelt congratulations."
"I met a woman."
"Sure you did."
"Her name is Linda."
"Describe her to me."
"Fuck you. A sweet thing, okay? Works for TV. She's make a program, human interest. And I'm starring in it."
"You? What is it, a test pattern?"
"It's about the voluntary outcast, and the things he thinks about."
"I wouldn't do it."

"I would, and I'm going to. And one other thing: from now on, I'm going back to living by day."
"Why?"
"Because. To get your goat. In ten minutes she's coming by, to look at the room."
"Who?"
"Linda, from the TV. So go take a walk."
"Forget it. This is my room. And I want to take a look at this sweet thing."
"No way."
"Just a little look. Just shake her hand, then I'm gone."
Miss Linda arrives exactly on time. Celis remains stretched out on the sofa.
"Hi," he says to Linda.
"Hi."
"This is my roommate," I say.
"He stays at my place," Celis says.
"Weren't you just leaving?" I say.
"Wait a minute," Linda says. First she wants to know whether Mr. Celis maintains the same dismissive attitude towards what she calls "the treadmill of society".
"I am dismissive from head to toe," he says. "I think he's a little less dismissive. Don't you agree?"
Two pairs of eyes look at me.
"On the contrary," I say, "on the contrary..."
I have to search for a moment for what comes after that contrary. "He, for example, has never begged out on the street," I say, just in the nick of time.
"I certainly haven't," Celis says. "Begging is a form of surrender, begging is defeat. I receive unemployment benefits, I use the system. I use the system to hold to a lifestyle that rejects the entire system outright. A more pronouncedly dismissive attitude is barely imaginable."
Miss Linda nods at all this nonsense, and even pulls out a little notebook.
"You don't have to write this down, young lady," Celis says. "I am able to perfectly express my dismissal, my conscious refusal to step onto the treadmill of society, at any moment you see fit."
Miss Linda suggests to Celis that she make a program about him and me, the two of us.
"I'd like to follow the two of you around with a camera for a day, during your normal activities. You'll be given the chance to say what you want, your opinions about whatever, to tell your story..."
"I have a wonderful story," Celis says. "And extremely outspoken opinions on any subject you care to discuss. In addition, my fascinating activities take place solely at night. That will produce some fantastic footage, young lady. And I have no trouble expressing myself."
"So I hear, yes. Did you go to college?"
"Yes, indeed. I had a university diploma. I burned it. He was a witness to that act."
"I burned mine too," I say.
"But he kept copies of his," Celis says.
If that isn't a stab in my back, it's at least a thumbtack in my butt. I try to scorch him with my eyes.
"I needed to borrow a clean towel," Celis says to me. "I accidentally saw that folder with the copies in it."
Miss Linda is writing something down.
"But it will be difficult to make a documentary about the two of us at the same time," Celis says. "I live by night, you see, and he's started living during the day again, like everyone else."