

Mass

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An extract

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It happened during one of her many nocturnal online excursions. She believed the night was the best time to surf. As if it was a different Internet at night, a shameless Internet, spreading its legs for every visitor. Websites were up that were hidden during the day. Margot often hung out for hours on this global network with its little portals into billions of living rooms, bedrooms and kids' rooms. She loved the idea that we are constantly in touch with the sleaziest, oddest and most awful images and ideas, and that we nevertheless go on functioning as human things. It even gave her a sense of comfort, this new phase in our never-ending evolution: man as a modern being capable of coming up with and at the same time resisting the most horrendous concepts.

But this Internet was no longer ours. Less than ten years into this millennium it began to demand independence; it became a virtual state parallel to ours, with its own economy. The first evidence was that websites appeared out of the blue, not created by anyone. Research showed that these sites plundered genetic material from pages around them, thus creating their own content. Nobody knew for sure how many of these self-constructed sites existed, and if they were connected one to another. Scientists could only say they were so fragile that too many visitors could be fatal. Some called this phenomenon a first sign of a new and self-regulating virtual life; others called it a defect of our unfinished system. For nights on end Margot wandered around the Internet to the rhythm of her clicks, searching for shadows in the darkness. She was never really alone; there were always others like her. She felt their presence, read their rants on flora, watched their endless videos on uncensored You Tube clones, and followed their chats about freaky fetishes, meant to get each other even hornier without touching. She was never more than an observer, though, as so many others who were all just present.

Wandering around in this new no-man's land she stumbled upon places where less than a hundred visitors had ever been, websites hidden under false URL's such as vickycatchesfish.com, where she came across dozens of photos of naked wheelchair patients with doleful faces, or howeveryhtingisprettierwhennooneislooking.net, a blog about a man and his life's work: 237 portraits of his cancer depicted as a monstrous child, with titles such as "Cancer's First School Day", and "Cancer on the Doctor's Knee".

It was almost Tuesday morning when she saw it, and she immediately closed it. But the pop-up reappeared. Unlike its porn brothers and lottery sisters, it used no bells and whistles. Just words, black on white and all in the same font, with her complete name worked into the text. Margot was always very cautious about entering her personal information. The pop-up wasn't trying to sell her anything. It asked just one question: whether she had visited a certain job site yet. This time the

pop-up disappeared automatically after a few seconds, so she had to search the name to locate the website.

It had a rather sober job list, all with unknown businesses, often abroad. Only one was located in Brussels; it was freelance work with something called Blurred Inc. Margot sent an email with her very short résumé and was invited for an interview three days later.

The interview was to take place in a mansion along a less glamorous section of Louisa Lane, far removed from the embassies and sushi restaurants. The building itself was unremarkable and lost even more of its luster in Margot's eyes when she realized Blurred Inc. only occupied the top floor. A law firm rented the rest of the building.

She rang the doorbell and heard drum roll steps coming down the stairs. A woman of exceptional beauty appeared in the doorway, a woman so fantastically perfect, it seemed she could stay that way for no more than a week before the enchantment stopped working.

"Are you Margot? Follow me."

A man in his forties awaited her upstairs; she instantly felt at ease with him.

"Don't let our limited size fool you; we're very successful."

He led the way to his office and introduced himself as the Benelux Branch manager. Then he left briefly to get coffee. So Margot could glance into the adjacent space, where the world's most beautiful woman was typing away. She wasn't alone. At another table a young man was doing the same. The guy was definitely her equal in the looks department. As if Adam and Eve were driven from paradise and straight to these desks. Two people as a blueprint for how it was intended. They also seemed to be the only employees. Their boss entered with two cups and skipped the rest of the interview procedure, as though Margot had already proved her qualifications just by showing up. Instead he tried to convince her of the company's potential. He supported his megalomaniacal statements with a very attractive offer. So attractive she didn't even have to think about it. When Margot stepped outside thirty minutes later, she was a freelancer for Blurred Inc., a company specialized in the leftovers of multinationals. Everything they didn't want to, or couldn't or wouldn't do, Blurred Inc. did, kind of like the seasonal workers of the financial world. Six months later Margot still had no idea how many people the company employed and exactly what their job description was. No colleague ever contacted her; all communication took place via emails from the Benelux Branch manager. However, she did assume she was the only one within her niche. She found it very hard to describe her job. On her Facebook profile she compared herself to theologians working for MIT, trying to instill in soulless robots a sense of God. She was expected to create beauty with as her material numbers, memos, annual reports, PowerPoint presentations and other dry stuff.

In other words, Margot made financial art. The first assignments were easy—a warm-up, as it were. A bit of first aid marketing for start-up companies, polishing up some websites and making speeches comprehensible for stockholders. It was like being back in school. None

of it required much effort. But after the trial period she got more challenging work—complete business strategies. At first Margot thought Blurred Inc. had mistaken the email address, but the letter was addressed to her. These immense databases, which made her computer groan, were

meant for her: page after page about currency predictions and areas of distribution, along with the simple request to make everything a little hipper and more comprehensible.

Which she did, and she got better at it every time. Whether it was an art or a science, she had it. Her first attempts were rudimentary excerpts of the source material, but she gradually developed a certain style. Although the pure facts and numbers remained as complicated to her as a foreign language with daily changing grammar rules, she managed every time to deliver something that was apparently acceptable, because it was never returned to her. Blurred Inc. and the customers seemed satisfied, yet Margot felt she was on borrowed time. She expected to be exposed as a cheat any day. And yet she couldn't suppress her pride every time her more than generous salary appeared in her bank account. Then Henry appeared, cued by an invisible stage director.

He appeared, and left her thirty-one months later. He left on a Tuesday in October—day zero, the moment after “they lived happily ever after”, where white space at the bottom of the page takes over from the story. It was a rebound relationship, with Henry holding on to her like a drowning man after a failed romance.

It all began with a terrible party. Lisa, a friend from college, had begged her to come. She was slightly panicked because she wouldn't know anyone at her younger sister's birthday party, so she asked Margot to “please, please, please” come. But when she arrived it turned out Lisa had called fourteen other people, twelve of whom showed up, so in a way it was her party, too. Henry was one of the twelve. Like Margot, he came alone, assuming incorrectly that he was going to be Lisa's savior, hoping for kisses.

So there they were, two individuals at the periphery of each other's circle of friends, with no one else to talk to. They started their own sputtering conversation, with many loose sounds like “so”, “well, well”, and that short hiccupy sound that constitutes a laugh. At least they were both equally bad at it. Two people stuck with the same unfamiliarity, putting their feelers out with careful questions. They stuck together the entire evening, staying in the same spot, not trying to start conversations with anyone else. They stood neatly side by side, a vision of the near future. Margot was charmed. She sensed he was really doing his best, not to lure her to his home, not to pry too deeply, but to see her again, somewhere less public.

Henry chose a dark, yet public location. He took her to the movie theater, though not for anything as cliché as a movie. That evening the theater was rented to a game developer, a client of the advertising agency Henry worked for. The event featured a seventeen-year-old boy who was flown

in from rural Russia to promote a popular computer game's newest downloadable content. While snacks and drinks were being set out in the lobby for the reception afterward, this teenage player had the privilege of trying out the first expansion pack, witnessed by media invitees, guests and several chosen fans, some of whom were dressed up as their favorite character.

Down below, on a small table by the big screen, the Dell Alienware computer was set up with its tail of wires. The Russian boy appeared, to loud applause, looking grungy, but with the company logo printed on his T-shirt. He bowed briefly, sat without a word, put on the headphones and had no further interest in the audience. The cheering petered out as the lights dimmed and the same logo as on his shirt appeared on the screen.

The game and the expansion pack were labeled “survival horror”. Too many monsters and not enough bullets. A game about a possible future, about a Europe covered in slums, about a sudden

and massive African migration—reason unknown. One day they're just there, at the shores of the Mediterranean, like a horde of tourists on the beach. They all enter the water, they swim to the other side, too many to stop, even though Europe bombards them as they come. Thousands die, but millions remain. At Spain's wall they crawl on top of one another to climb over, and thus enter the continent. They are shot at from bunkers and helicopters. Again, thousands die, but millions remain. They keep coming, as unstoppable as the plague. There they are, exhausted and soaked and starving, too many to manage. Some stay; the rest drags on, to all corners, searching comfort. Most go east, to Russia, then China, then Japan, all the way to the shores of the Pacific. There they are and there they wait, until their group is large enough to cross the water again. It's a game about an empty Africa—emptied, not because of hunger, but because of fear. It's about a super soldier who's dropped into the heart of this black continent, where he is confronted with mutants and mysteries.

After an hour of headshots—which were received with cheers—and deleted scenes, the screen was black again and the lights came on. But the boy continued playing, unaware that the audience could no longer share his pleasure. As the audience exited the large theater, Margot saw someone tap him on the shoulder, almost tenderly awakening him from his trance. She wondered how long he had been on his way already, from screen to screen.

She didn't feel like staying for the reception, but Henry couldn't leave right away. He had been working for the advertising agency for two years, and as its representative he needed to say hello to a few people. He was chosen and spirited away from his third year at college to specialize in the agency's finances. Henry was one of those young boys and girls who were just right in this desperate time for the marketing world. The sector realized clients had become allergic to advertising, like the viewer has become immune to weeping people in reality shows. They were resistant after decennia of extreme exposure. New means

were necessary to convince people that happiness was attainable through a financial transaction.

So they came up with undercover marketing techniques such as night shop chic, new soda and candy brands that were exclusively for sale in night stores. The target audience were the cool kids, better known as alpha consumers. The cool kids no longer shopped in regular grocery stores, even though they were open all day, every day. The cool kids made their purchases late at night, when they alone were still up, they and a few Pakistanis who also went to the day stores. The cool kids who weren't convinced by television commercials or bus stop posters, who loved this new niche and—most importantly—their devastating impression on the wannabes, also known as beta consumers, also known as everyone else. According to internal calculations, one well-chosen cool kid was worth as much as 253 wannabes, particularly in secondary schools. So thirteen-year-old girls were sent designer clothing for free in the mail, so they could parade around the school grounds and generate new customers.

Within three years faith in conventional advertising had eroded to the absolute minimum. Until it was barely enough to serve as a tax deduction, because every penny of profit a company invested in advertising was tax-free. Outdated advertising tricks—branding, merchandising and the lie that cool people at cool parties prefer drinking Fanta—had lost their luster and it was up to people like Henry to relieve the old guard. Budgets for traditional campaigns were cut in half, supposedly because of the global economic crisis, but that was a ruse. There were still billions to be spent, though not by the ancien regime. The previous generation of marketers was permitted to stay on, but only to keep up the façade. Some had twenty years' experience, yet they were speedily reduced to a diversionary tactic.

It was now up to Henry and the like to use all that money on new toys. On things like that viral video on the Internet, the one with five minutes of handheld footage of a big-ass pile-up involving thirty-eight cars, of which only one was more or less unscathed. Sure, it had a few dents, to keep it believable. No expense was spared to make it as realistic as possible. And the result was indeed astonishing, as were the profits for that particular car company. Graffiti artists were hired to leave purportedly illegal stencils on walls, with codes that referred to purportedly uncensored yet sponsored websites. Streets and public places, both real and virtual, were thus in the corporations' pockets. This time not with enormous billboards or pop-up banners, but with false tourists asking if you could take their picture with their newest smart phone, or with fake pub visitors asking those nearest the bar if they could order this new drink for them. We lost our reality within one generation, but no one seemed to find this disconcerting.

During their relationship, Harry sometimes spoke of these practices, especially to point out her own naiveté. She shouldn't assume she was safe from the various forms of guerrilla marketing. And that was why,

long after their relationship ended, Margot still preferred to stay indoors—so she wouldn't constantly feel like a consumer. There were thousands like her in Brussels, capable people with money, hidden away in apartments, some out of fear, some for comfort, some busy, some not, some for a long time, some just starting, some alone, some very lonely.

When Henry had shaken enough hands and kissed enough cheeks, they continued their date. Without too many mistakes. Just two adults playing a teasing game of attraction. But not with the predictable ending, because Margot didn't feel like the inevitable morning after and everything that would follow. Not yet. Maybe it was his presumptuousness when he walked her up to her door uninvited. Maybe it was her self-esteem that told her not to make it that easy. Maybe it was the passersby, who looked a little too long, to witness the unavoidable. Whatever it was, Margot is sure she confused him with that goodbye, sure he saw through her excuse of being tired at eleven in the evening
