

Tony Domin

OTHERWORLD

his last mission



I waited for most of my life, but no one came.

Then I went on a very, very long journey, but I found nothing.

*And I liked the idea that everything I had been waiting for
and searching for could only be found within myself ...*

*It's not how often you fall down that counts,
but how often you get up ...*

The end in the warehouse

The last rays of sunlight struggled to break through the dirty windows. The air had an indefinable scent. It was a mixture of metal, sweat, moisture and other unidentifiable odors. John clutched his left shoulder with his right hand. He knew he was hurt, but he hadn't had time to take care of it yet. He looked down at his feet to see the man, lying face down on the dirty floor. Four policemen were in the process of handcuffing the man's wrists. An audible click assured John that the job was done. Only now did his eyes slowly slide to his left shoulder. It was a deep cut and his black jacket was visibly stained with blood. John grinned mischievously and said quietly to himself:

"The next trophy."

He was just considering whether he could close the cut with superglue as he had done with previous wounds many times before when one of the police officers, tall and superior looking stood up and instructed John. "You're injured. Why don't you go to the paramedics, get treated?"

John grinned slyly again. His eyelids narrowed as if he was dazed by the sun.

"Thanks, I might do that after I've had a look at the injury myself," he replied.

The other three police officers had already pulled the attacker to his feet and were restraining him so as to impress John and convince him that they had the situation totally under control.

John suspected, for reasons of his own, that the muscle-bound man was from Eastern Europe. They stood face to face for a few seconds. John looked the man, who was almost the same height, straight in the eye. Tension built between the two men built and suddenly, the attacker began yelling what could only be bitter insults in an Eastern European sounding language and started struggling violently. The three police officers forcefully led him away in the direction of a patrol car.

The remaining police officer turned his attention once again to John. "Please come with us to the police station. According to your ID, you are John Bark and your profession is unmistakable. Do people congratulate you when you succeed?"

John's expression this time was one of amusement.

"No, they pay me for it. Even in the unusual event that I'm not successful. Due to my excellent track record, I am not short of work!"

The police officer thought for a moment and replied: "Then it's almost like us. The only difference is that we always get our money, even though we' are quite often unsuccessful."

John nodded to him and held out his hand to the experienced-looking officer. "I have to check in with my client now, I'll come to the station as soon as I can to make a statement"

After they had said goodbye, John walked through the large hall. At this point there were three patrol cars and two ambulances.

John's client was still being questioned by police officers.

In one of the ambulances was the second attacker, who was receiving medical treatment and being observed by four police officers. John had broken the man's arm. As he made his way passed the growing crowd of onlookers, he noticed that most of them were watching him. John had never found an explanation for why other people often stared at him, but he was coming to terms with the fact.

He confidently walked straight up to his client.

"Ah, John, good of you to join us. I've made my statement so we can leave in a minute."

Noticing John's bloody left shoulder, the client exclaimed "Oh no, you're injured! What happened, did that bastard hit you?"

John grinned. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it later, Mr. Cremer – I can assure you I have had worse."

Mr. Cremer was a businessman of the first order. He was not yet sixty years old, more than well off, and was always friendly to everyone.

This was the third time he had hired John, so they knew each other a little. John's client had full, gray streaked hair, always wore good suits and his slim physique portrayed a little vanity. His features looked a little gaunt, but his eyes suggested human warmth and 'joie de vivre'.

John enjoyed working for this particular client due to his higher-

than-average level of intelligence, the fact that their conversations were always quite short and to the point and because the work was always mutually beneficial.

The content of the orders was always identical.

It consisted of John accompanying Mr. Cremer for the purpose of transporting valuable items.

Mr. Cremer was on the supervisory board of a large corporation and managing director of a very successful logistics company. He had fulfilled a childhood dream by accumulating his wealth.

He had always had an affinity for jewelry and traded in very valuable pieces at auctions. The valuables were stored in three separate warehouses in specially manufactured safes and technically secured rooms until they were offered and sold at auctions.

John didn't know why Mr. Cremer chose this method of storage, as there were more secure solutions, however he did not question it. From the very beginning, he had resolved never to investigate or question the reasons for his clients' behavior. As long as the work and safety of his clients were not at risk, his policy was to stay out of everything.

"John, I'm finally finished" shouted Mr. Cremer, looking relieved.

"I'm sorry it's taken so long, but now we can finally go home."

John nodded briefly. He looked back at the ambulance and could see that the second attacker was still being treated. His guess was that this man also came from Eastern Europe although he knew that it was not important – the job was now complete.

John walked purposefully to a white Range Rover which had been parked in the large warehouse and drove up to the group of people. He was about to get out to open the door for Mr. Cremer as was the expectation, but his client was already hurrying towards the vehicle and got in through the passenger door.

John was a little irritated as Mr. Cremer had always chosen the right-hand rear seat before.

"I think we should drive straight home without further ado," Mr. Cremer claimed almost joyfully. He fastened his seatbelt and looked over at John who had not.

"I know why you never fasten your seatbelt, but it will still take me a while to get used to it.

Thank you, John, I think you've saved my life today. I'll pay you an extra bonus!" John released the parking setting and stepped on the gas a little.

"Mr. Cremer, you don't have to, it's all part of my job, my assignment and part of our contract." Mr. Cremer sighed deeply.

"John," Mr. Cremer said very calmly and firmly "we know hardly anything about each other, but I do know what you did for me today. You are injured and your suit and shirt are ruined. I also know that the contract states that you are prepared to give your life for mine if the situation demands it. Accept the bonus, please. It would make me feel better"

John remained silent. The vehicle slowly left the scene. By now, the last rays of sunlight had disappeared. It took a few seconds for the rover to drive out of the warehouse. John switched on the headlights, as it had become dark. Autumn was now in full swing and there was already frost on the ground at night.

After a moment, Mr. Cremer continued. "John, everything that happened today was a completely new experience for me. The two criminals must have been well informed. They seemed to have known the exact time I was coming here to get the jewelry. Without you, I don't think I would still be alive. I am dumbfounded by the way you took out the attackers. You were hurt and you reacted like it was nothing. Aren't you ever afraid?" This time John took a deep breath.

"Mr. Cremer, there was a time when I was terrified." John steered the vehicle onto the main road and drove towards the highway.

His interest peaked, Cremer enquired "May I know if that was an even more dangerous assignment than today's?" John grinned.

"No, it wasn't a job, it was a woman!" he replied curtly.

"Forgive me John for my enthusiasm and constant babbling, but I'm still very excited."

John grinned again "It's the adrenaline!"

The vehicle was now on the highway. It usually took them forty minutes to get from the hall to Mr. Cremer's villa. Both men were silent for a few minutes until Mr. Cremer resumed.

"I don't want to be intrusive, but I'm interested in what happened to the woman. Was she a client who got attacked? Did she fall ill? You don't have to answer, of course."

John's eyes dropped briefly.

"I thought she was the love of my life," John shared, his voice sounding unfamiliar to Mr. Cremer.

John's voice was usually firm, clear and confident but this sentence sounded full of sadness and regret. Mr. Cremer was a little confused. He asked cautiously: "Did something happen to her that you couldn't prevent?"

John replied a little more calmly than before. "She just left. But that was many years ago." And without really meaning to, John added "She's been married for many years now."

Mr. Cremer was confused - he couldn't understand John's explanation.

"What do you mean by fear?"

John's nod was barely perceptible.

"During the almost three years I was with her, I was terrified that one day I wouldn't be able to see her again. That's why I didn't take on any dangerous jobs during that time. I realized that I couldn't protect a client one hundred percent with the fear of losing her."

Mr. Cremer was thoughtful. He felt that he had no right to ask any further questions, but his curiosity prevailed.

"One last question if you don't mind, John. Why did this woman leave? You seem to me to be an extraordinary man."

John grinned again

"I've heard that said about me before. A lot of people look for the extraordinary and when they find it, it scares them and they run away. This woman left because she needed something I couldn't give her."

Mr. Cremer looked incredulous. "But John, I'd love to know what it is that you can't give a woman?"

Without hesitation, John replied "Money. You know, Mr. Cremer, there are many people who can't find happiness in themselves and therefore look for a substitute. They think the answer lies in feeling secure. Maybe if they can afford anything they want, then they will lead a happy and secure life" John focused on the traffic again. This sentence provoked an uncomfortable silence. Was it intentional?

Mr. Cremer paused. He was very wealthy and knew only too well the attraction of money. He looked cautiously at John.

Was John referring to him? Perhaps to make some kind of point?

Mr. Cremer had briefly researched John before employing him as a matter of security. He only knew John on a professional basis including a few light conversations, but he knew nothing about his private life.

At their first meeting, he had been impressed with John's obvious high intelligence and remarkable eloquence.

Today's assignment had demonstrated the sheer effectiveness of John's professional abilities.

Only now did he realize what John was physically capable of. It was now, about three hours since the robbery that the images of what had happened started to come back to Mr. Cremer's mind. Until now, the conversation had distracted him, but now everything was playing out like a movie in front of his eyes.

They drove straight into the warehouse while it was still light. As usual, Mr. Cremer went alone into the secure room where the large safe was located. He took three valuable gold chains out of the safe while John stood behind the door as usual.

He was aware that John's technique was to act as inconspicuously as possible, to the extent that he was almost invisible.

Cremer had noticed this but had never asked why. Now it seemed logical to him. This had been an important part of the job and had probably saved his life.

He locked the safe and was about to leave the room with the cassette of jewelry. He could only make out John dimly from a distance due to the open door which cast a dark shadow over him. The distance was only a few meters and Cremer put one hand into his trouser pocket as he walked. He was just about to produce the door key when it happened.

Out of nowhere, two hooded figures appeared in front of the door. Both were dressed in black, wore balaclavas and were armed. One with a gun and the other with a knife in his right hand. With their arms outstretched, they pointed their weapons at Mr. Cremer and walked towards him very quickly.

Just before they reached the door, one of them shouted in broken German: "Give me! Hand it over"

Mr. Cremer was paralyzed. His breath hitched and his limbs twitched. He opened his eyes wide, looked to his left towards the door where John was standing, and dropped the cassette. John

emerged just as the first attacker appeared behind the door. What happened next, Cremer could barely take in.

John jumped out of the shadows. His right hand grabbed the wrist of the first attacker holding the knife. His left hand grabbed the attacker's elbow. With a hard push, he stretched his left arm forward and at the same time jerked his right arm back. A loud cracking sound echoed through the room.

John had broken the attacker's arm with tremendous force. The knife fell, and John pushed the man who was about to fall, towards the second attacker who was running only a meter behind his crony.

This quick action meant that the armed man could no longer react. The element of surprise was perfect. Due to the weight of the first attacker and his own weight, the second attacker immediately fell backwards against the wall.

John now let go of the first attacker who slumped down in pain, and at the same moment grabbed the second attacker's hand to disarm him.

Once he had the gun, John jumped back, pointed the weapon at the two men and shouted urgently "Mr. Cremer, get the knife - by the door!" The authority in John's voice broke through the terror that his client was experiencing. Mr. Cremer immediately followed John's instructions. He bent down, picked up the knife and stood still. This man clearly had never held a weapon before and had no idea what to do. John understood this and took charge of his client "Give me that thing and call the police!" Once again Mr. Cremer followed the instructions instantly.

John now had the situation under control. He slid the knife sideways behind his belt and pointed the gun at the attackers, who were lying together in front of the wall.

"Nobody move!" John said very firmly and loudly to those lying on the floor.

Everything was happening at such a breathtaking speed that neither the attackers nor Mr. Cremer could keep track. The first attacker had only just noticed that his right forearm was limp and no longer obeying his will. It seemed to be hanging by its skin. Despite the balaclava, you could clearly see how incredulously he was staring at his own arm. It started to dawn on him where the pain he had felt a few seconds ago had come from. As he slowly

realized what had happened to him, the pain quickly intensified. He felt nauseous and began to whimper.

The picture that now presented itself to John and Mr. Cremer was not only pathetic, but also comical. The men would probably both have laughed if the danger hadn't been so serious. The intruders were lying half on top of each other on the ground, not daring to move. One was mumbling unintelligible syllables that sounded very aggressive and the other was clearly in pain and feeling sorry for himself.

"The police should be here any minute, John," said the still slightly trembling Mr. Cremer. His voice had already calmed down, but his body wasn't quite playing along yet.

John nodded at him in confirmation.

They arrived at the scene surprisingly quickly and John was able to hand over responsibility. Mr. Cremer recovered quickly. After just a few minutes he began his statement.

Following this brief replaying of events, Mr. Cremer continued the conversation.

"Oh, sorry John, I must have been lost in my thoughts for a few minutes. It really was like a movie. I'm only now beginning to understand what actually happened. It's crazy! I couldn't take in exactly what you did and how you cut your arm"

John laughed "I don't even know that myself. I was probably too overzealous in my actions when I disarmed the attacker. I've already checked and it's not a big cut. I don't even think I need to treat it the way I usually do when I am injured." Mr. Cremer jerked his head back a little "What do you mean?"

John said briefly: "With superglue, or if it's deep I put in a couple of stitches!"

This time Mr. Cremer winced even more. "Are you serious?"

John laughed again.

"I am. You know, superglue dissolves in the body on its own after a short time so it's very effective. I only use stitches when it's really necessary"

Mr. Cremer shook his head in disbelief "Sounds crazy, I couldn't do that, but I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing. And not just in that respect! John, we'll be home soon. One more question... do you think the two criminals were professionals?"

John narrowed his eyes.

“I think they were semi-professional crooks at most. And I also think that the police investigation will shed a little more light on the case.

The criminals did a lot of things wrong. They certainly knew your habits and location details, otherwise they wouldn't have got into the building at the exact time that we arrived.

I think we can safely assume that you have been under surveillance. This means that they should have known that you are never alone during transportation.

Then there's the fact that only one of them had a gun and they entered the scene in an unprofessional manner.

Instead of sending one person in front to cover the other's back, they went together. That gave me my advantage and enabled me to react the way I did.

Now you see why I always stay in the background. I call it the 'Fort Alamo' principle. If they had seen us both, the situation would have presented a whole new set of problems and I would have had to react differently.

I make it a rule to not give potential attackers the opportunity to expose me immediately. That way there is at least the chance of a small element of surprise. You always have to try to have an advantage up your sleeve. Today's advantage was that I was not immediately visible. If the intruders had been true professionals, they would have known there would be a second man.

The journey back went smoothly and they only had a few meters to go before they arrived at the estate.

Like John, Mr. Cremer lived outside Frankfurt, far away from the hustle and bustle and noise. The estate was situated above a small valley, surrounded by woods and meadows. Unlike the places where his jewelry was kept, the grounds of Cremer's estate were professionally secured. John stopped in front of the iron gate. Two cameras changed position to better capture and identify the car. The gates opened and the vehicle slowly rolled up the long driveway to the main house. The building was illuminated by motion sensor-triggered lighting.

John stopped in front of the main entrance and was just about to jump out of the vehicle to open the door for Mr. Cremer when felt

a tap on the arm.

"It's all right, I'll do it on my own today, John." Mr. Cremer told John. "It's been a long and exciting day."

John nodded and confirmed in a quiet and deliberate voice: "Yes, a very long day."

The two men got out of the car and John waited for the usual farewell. They shook hands and Mr. Cremer said, "As it has been such an extraordinary day, I'd like to ask you to follow me back to my house for a short time. Not only would I appreciate it, but I think it would be appropriate."

John just nodded briefly, as he always did when he thought something was right.

Mr. Cremer who led the way, was already expected by his housekeeper and she greeted him in a friendly manner.

"Good evening Mrs. Darloff. I have brought an esteemed guest with me today. Please show him to the bathroom on the first floor and give him everything he needs. Also, please see if you can find a clean shirt for Mr. Bark. His is a bit soiled!"

The woman looked at John briefly and said "Good evening, Mr. Bark, I understand. What else do you need?"

John replied, "Iodine, cotton buds, a small compress, plasters and a lint-free cloth." He went into the bathroom while Mrs. Darloff went to get the things he needed.

Without having looked around much, John realized that the interior of house was expertly thought out and that all the furnishings and ornaments were extremely valuable.

After Mrs. Darloff had handed him everything he has asked for in the bathroom, John immediately set about cleaning and dressing his wound. By now he had had a lot of experience with this and it only took a few minutes.

The cut on his shoulder was not very deep, at least for him. His shirt and jacket were sadly ruined so he left them there. Mrs. Darloff had brought him a shirt and a polo shirt, but both were too small. He decided put on the polo shirt because of the stretchiness of the fabric. It was very tight, but at least he had something clean to wear without any blood stains.

As soon as he was clean and patched up, he left the guest bathroom satisfied. Mr. Cremer was already waiting for him a little impatiently in the large hallway. "That was quick John, I hope

you're feeling better now. Let's go to my study to sort everything else out."

He pointed a finger in the direction of a door. John could now see that the hallway of the building resembled the foyer of a hotel. The floor was completely covered in shiny marble tiles. Large rugs lent warmth to the cool-looking marble and large pillars surrounded the room. Antique display cabinets and other furniture stood unobtrusively in selected places so as not to irritate visitors' eyes. A small leather seating area gave the room a homely feel and a large marble staircase led to the upper floor. A continuous carpet lay in the middle of the steps and above everything was a huge crystal chandelier, which was installed exactly in the middle of the ceiling. John had seen a lot in his life, but he had to admit that he had never seen such a harmonious arrangement before. It was like a perfect ensemble of treasures.

Once in the study, Mr. Cremer went to a small bar and asked John if he wanted a drink. John said no and Mr. Cremer said: "Always on duty, John, but never forget that you also have a private life" John grinned. Mr. Cremer poured a whiskey into his glass. The way he did it showed skill and style. As the study was very similar in style to the entrance area, John felt very comfortable here too.

Mr. Cremer stood directly in front of John and as he raised his glass briefly, he said: "To us and to a happy ending."

John nodded briefly and Mr. Cremer took a small sip from his glass. This was the first time Mr. Cremer had seen John without his shirt, tie and jacket. Through the tight polo shirt, he could also see John's upper body properly for the first time.

John was a handsome man. He was one meter eighty-five tall and his powerful and well-trained body could never be completely concealed under his clothes. He had large, dark and watchful eyes. No one could withstand his gaze for long when John looked at them directly.

His full head of dark hair was shaved short on the sides and back of his head and surrounded his shapely head. His striking features, together with a three-day beard resembled those of an ancient Greek athlete. His well-groomed hands could have belonged to an artist. Every detail about him portrayed a high level of personal care and attention.

Mr. Cremer couldn't help but be impressed.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you into my house. I admit that, at least for a moment, I want to make myself feel like we're friends, John"

When John heard the word 'friends', he gulped a little. Friends? John had often dreamed of leaving this country for good. It remained a dream, just like the dream of eternal friendship. John had lost all his friends over the years. There were many reasons for this but it was neither the right time nor the right place to deal with the past. It wasn't a priority at this time.

"I'm sure, Mr. Cremer, that you know perfectly well that there should never be a friendship between client and bodyguard. I am aware that some of my professional colleagues dare to do this balancing act, but it is strictly against my rules for safety reasons." This time Mr. Cremer grinned.

"Yes John, I know your rules and I understand them. Let's take a seat and allow me to bypass the rules just for now." Then he sat and John did the same.

Now they were sitting opposite each other. All the chairs in the room were identical. There was no difference, which reminded John of a Round Table or the Pantheon in Rome. The Round Table, like the Pantheon, embodied equality among men and among gods. John was convinced, as he got to know Mr. Cremer, that this association was certainly his intention.

Mr. Cremer continued: "I told you earlier that I believe you to be a remarkable person. I think that I could not only benefit from your work, but I also feel that I could learn a lot from you. By that I don't mean your physical abilities, but rather your intellectual and emotional insights. I hope it's ok for me to speak openly with you John?"

A familiar nod from John allowed him to continue. "I see some scars on your arms and my gut tells me that you bear many more of these. I think there are probably many invisible scars too." There was a silence, then Mr. Cremer ventured a little further.

"I realized today that we both lead very different lives. I am now of the opinion that you are capable of far greater things, John. That is the fascination I have with you.

John took a deep breath and looked Mr. Cremer directly in the eye.

He looked like a hungry tiger and Mr. Cremer realized that he had unintentionally struck a nerve with John. He trusted John, yet he now felt very awkward.

John began to speak in a very calm, deliberate tone:

“Mr. Cremer, I can’t think of anyone in my life who know the exact events of my past. A few people came close to getting the truth out of me but they drifted away, perhaps out of fear of having to recognize the depth and darkness of the places they would have to go. A house without a solid foundation is constantly in danger of cracking and breaking. It is probably thanks to my strength that I have repaired all the damage. The splendor of this house continues to this day and I have been able to do more than just protect it.” Silence fell again, but this time it was full of tension. Unexpectedly, the conversation had taken a completely different direction.

“I suspected that there was a lot more to you than you let people see, John” said Mr. Cremer, leaning back a little. “You are unusual and multi-faceted. You used the term depth I noticed. Too many people use that word for completely different things but fail to understand the meaning when it is associated with being human. Thank you for your openness, I feel that you are a person with whom I could share insights at a high level. Conversations about philosophy, theology, sociology and the human condition am I right?”

John nodded. “I’m often alone too, John. At least with my thoughts. And I believe you understand exactly what I’m talking about right now. Please tell me a little more about your personality, I’m very interested.”

“Mr. Cremer. I’ve been wondering for some time what my personality consists of. I just mentioned that it’s probably mainly based around my strength. However, if a person’s personality is based solely on strength, they are inevitably exposed to two dangers. On the one hand, the strength may dry up one day and thus destroy the person. On the other hand, the strength could perhaps reduce the ability to build up a relationship with another person and maintain it over a long period of time. I am grateful to have at least recognized what surrounds me and what I may be basing myself on, but where will it lead a person? Is there a solution to be able to redirect an existing force?”

I know that it is the person that needs to be changed. But does a person get the opportunity to build a new, second personality or is he only given the chance once at birth and throughout his initial development? If it were possible to build a new personality, what would happen to the existing one? Would it become a memorial to the wrong one?" John took a short breath and added: "I'm sorry Mr. Cremer, sometimes my thoughts fly away with me."

Mr. Cremer reassured John. "Not at all, I provoked it myself and I'm enjoying sitting opposite a man who I perceive to be at least my equal. It's great that you reflect on yourself and question yourself. That's the only way to better oneself. I also like that you present your thoughts ambiguously. It is difficult to know whether you are referring to yourself, or others. You are very gifted and I think it is unfortunate that we didn't get to know each other privately so that we could have conversations like this more often.

I would love to continue philosophizing with you about the nature of personal development, but I'm sure you want to go home now. Do you know what I think is great? A few hours ago, we had an adventure, now we're talking about much more meaningful things. Our conversation has also answered an important question I had earlier."

John's eyes opened a little, as if that might make him even more receptive. "How were you able to just shrug off your injuries as if they were nothing? Is it because you are able to focus on more immediate issues?"

John grinned "That is how I see it when I am in a dangerous setting. That's why I didn't go to the paramedic earlier. For one thing, I'm better at assessing my own injuries and can often help myself. A very good friend of mine is a surgeon and sometimes corrects my stitching attempts privately. It also ensures that I avoid possible misdiagnosis from less experienced medics. The same applies to working with the police. I know my way around the law quite well, so I only report things when I am sure that it's legally necessary."

Mr. Cremer was taken aback "Interesting, do you have an example?"

"A few weeks back, one of my clients was attacked on the street in the evening. I knocked the attacker down and he fell unconscious. I then put him in the recovery position and called for an ambulance.

I obviously need to use a pre-paid, unregistered phone. In my job, I can't wait long for emergency services or make time-consuming statements. If I have a job, then it is crucial that I stick to schedules.”

“I can hardly imagine you putting an attacker into a recovery position – it’s almost comedy. You continue to impress me John and I fear that very few people will ever be able to understand what a unique person you are”

“Unique, Mr. Cremer?” John interrupted him abruptly and replied in a very calm tone: “I am not sure about that. I hope I live up to your high praise.”

“Well, you have displayed the ability to provoke my thoughts with a single sentence. You give my imagination so much stimulation. Thank you for that.” And he added after a few seconds:

“I don't think your former girlfriend had any idea of what an incredible person you are. I'm very sorry about that, because I get the feeling that you loved that woman very much.”

John took an audible deep breath and Mr. Cremer forbade himself from speaking further on the matter. “What are your plans at the moment, John?”

“Oh, I'm flying to Rome in the next day. I have an appointment there with a new client. I'll be staying there for a few days for a short vacation. I love that city and have already been there several times”

“That sounds good. You must be also interested in history. Am I right?”

John smiled “I am and I've managed to acquire a lot of knowledge over the years”

“My respect, John. Rome has so much history and I would love to hear about your experiences there sometime. Now sadly, I think we are both tired and should call it a day. It's been a very long time since I've had such an interesting conversation.”

“I agree. I still have to drop off the Rover and then I have the journey home ahead of me.”

“One more thing, John,” and Mr. Cremer pushed an envelope that was already on the desk towards John. “I don't want a bill this time please accept this.”

“I hope not to find a bonus because I ...”

Mr. Cremer interrupted him “Take it, please allow me this

pleasure.”

John hesitated for a moment and then nodded. As he stood up, he calmly took the envelope. “I’ll see you to the door,” and both men walked silently to the large front door.

They shook hands once more and Mr. Cremer said quietly, “What an unusual day we’ve had. I wish you a safe journey and I hope to see you again.”

Without suspecting that he would not see Mr. Cremer again, John replied “My thanks to you and yes, see you next time.” He turned and walked to the car. They both raised their hands almost simultaneously to say goodbye. After a few seconds, the Rover disappeared into the night.

At the window

John stood at the window for a long time. His eyes scanned the small view of the open countryside. His thoughts and feelings worked in an uncoordinated manner. He wanted to understand and feel what he saw at the same time as his heart and soul. For as long as he could remember, he had been reluctant to face this inconsistency logically. *It's too much at once*, he said to himself. This wasn't the right moment to work through it all so he turned around, left his window seat and sat back down in his chair. The chair that had been very familiar to him for years.

This chair had seen many rooms and apartments over the years, but not as many as John had seen before him. There was the age difference. The chair was only eight years old and John was in his mid-forties yet John was sure that they had both experienced a lot together. They had seen a lot and survived many a storm. After a few minutes of contemplation, John realized the absurdity of his thoughts and quickly dismissed them.

It had been a long day and he already missed talking to Mr. Cremer. He loved long, interesting conversations. But he preferred philosophizing with other people.

The job had been completed satisfactorily, he had received his money and so he could concentrate on the planned trip to Rome. His potential client had already sent him the ticket and everything was now organized.

Once again, he turned his thoughts to Mr. Cremer. He was a very pleasant fellow in John's eyes and also showed John a personal interest. John was not surprised. It had become the rule in recent years that people who met John often sought his friendship or his closeness. And they all showered him with kind words at first. People attested to his attributes of uniqueness, unusualness or even more profane synonyms. He was described as incredible, intelligent or even attractive and sexy. But where were all these people who apparently considered him so important?

And he had noticed something else significant.

Without exception, he was asked by everyone why he didn't have a woman by his side or why women had turned their backs on him. The same routine and the same questions over and over again.

And no matter what he did or said, nothing changed and he remained alone. That must have been what happened to Bill Murray as Phil Connors in the movie "Groundhog Day". Nothing wanted to change!

John had become tired of being asked practically the same questions and having almost the same conversations for many years. He didn't consider himself arrogant, but if the other people were right, why didn't anyone ever stay with him? And of all these many people, no one knew when his birthday was, what he did on public holidays or even at Christmas time.

He had been looking at the computer screen for many minutes, enthroned before him on the top of his desk like a king. *It has power*, John told himself. The strange box with the colorful pixels in it had power over him and certainly over many other fellow sufferers. This new thought scared him. Was he about to go mad, or even become addicted to wires, chips and transistors? He shouted at the top of his voice: "No, I'm not going to check my emails or anything else today!" He rose angrily from his chair, not forgetting to at least switch off the screen.

That must never happen, that I myself would degenerate into a plaything of the inventors of human misery. No one but myself may seize power over me.

John sensed that he was once again talking to himself. In recent years, this habit had become more regular. His clammy hands bore witness to his inner fear. Am I on the way down or am I already on the precipice? He searched for an answer and finally decided, as he had so often done recently, to answer this important question at a later date.

His game to distract himself took its usual course. He lit a cigarette and went to his oversized sound system. The station was pre-programmed and all he had to do was press the power button. As if on command, large speakers filled the cold space of his living room with chill music which permeated every single corner. However, even the music couldn't warm up the dreary-looking room.

John was aware that most people would be able to appreciate the high quality of the furniture. To the same extent, most people would also feel the coldness emanating from these objects. Was he cold

himself, or did he have to feel the coldness to be able to move between these pieces of furniture? As had become a progressively more common feature of John's thought processes, many questions began to assail him. There were hardly any people, events or even feelings that he could simply accept without raising many new questions in his soul. The concept of fate did not exist for him. There were only coincidences or facts.

If there really was fate, he told himself, it must have punished him severely by condemning him to constantly question himself or overthink everything. A healthy superficiality, he realized, was the privilege of normal people. Since he considered himself to be somewhat unusual, this circumstance of permanent questioning had to be a logical consequence of being different. He lit another cigarette in the hope that enjoying it would distract him from his thoughts. In his estimation, he smoked a lot. He dismissed it as a justifiable weakness, because to his relief or justification he could at least claim that alcohol could not harm him, as he lived in almost complete abstinence. Nevertheless, he admitted to himself that he had often wished he could clear his head with something. But these things did not include alcohol, drugs or pills. For him, consuming them would be a sign of weakness and surrender. And none of these attributes should burden him or make him vulnerable.

He had had to learn that people in society were aware of weaknesses and admitted them publicly, but the reality was different. The people around him were always happy when they found weaknesses in John. Then they could criticize him, expose him, insult him and try to put him down. For the first few years, John couldn't understand what made people look for his weaknesses so that they could one day use them against him. It was only much later that he understood that the cause was closely linked to himself. In public, he was known as a rhetorical master with no rough edges who rigorously pursued his goals. Many considered him untouchable, some considered him arrogant, others described him as calculating and others even as egotistical.

He had not ascribed any of these qualities to himself. He had had a tough past and subsequently built up successful defenses over the years to deal with the worst society can offer. He admitted that he was completely different from many of his peers. He wasn't

particularly proud or happy about this realization, rather it made him lonely.

Many people, especially women, thought he was interesting. But he didn't think anything of it. On the contrary, he knew all too well that no one could stand being around him for long. After a short time, most people found him too exhausting and too abstract. Far too many mismatched facets made it difficult to deal with him as a person. However, his wife at the time, Corinna, seemed to be able to, even though she wasn't always good to him. After the divorce she had confessed to him that she had cheated on him several times during the marriage. He could still remember the conversation well. He took the news emotionlessly at the time. The reason for his lack of emotion was not only that he had known for many years. He had been able to feel it back then without ever having any visible evidence. He had also known for a long time that Corinna only regarded him as a desirable object and not as a person for whom a home with feelings, honesty and loyalty was a vital elixir.

His infallible intuition had accompanied him all his life. He was able to feel and sense things, sometimes positive events or sensations but most, sadly, were negative. These caught up with him again and again.

He was used to harsh self-criticism. It was not one of his characteristics to always see others as the guilty party. He was convinced that he alone was responsible for everything, even when he knew it wasn't true.

Without realizing it, he had already lit a new cigarette and the ashtray was in danger of flying the white flag, it was already so full. John only noticed when the ashes fell onto the table, so he had to empty the ashtray.

John was a very clean and sometimes meticulous landlord. The fact that he attached great importance to order and cleanliness was one of his many, often annoying peculiarities, which he literally celebrated. Nevertheless, one could concede that these little "tics" had slowly diminished over the years, so that his current behavior had dwindled to a humane level of tolerability.

When he had emptied the ashtray, he turned back to the window. Even as a child, he had taken every opportunity that nature offered him to reflect on himself and his life in its presence. The window

where he stood could only offer him an unsatisfactory impression of his connection with nature. He stared at the crystalline white surface of the first frost. It was already just before two o'clock. Some trees that had recently been planted were trying to brave the cold.

They took up their fight against the unwanted transplant. John knew that trees had a hard time being uprooted from their familiar surroundings, only to find happiness in an unfamiliar soil in a cold season. John didn't even realize how much attention he was paying to these trees. Perhaps he felt himself at that moment as if he were one of them. John had lived in many shelters, apartments and houses throughout his life, but had never felt at home in any of them. For him, a home did not consist of a roof, windows and heating. It had to be much more than that. But he had not yet come to know a real home, or perhaps had not recognized it at a time when he might even have had one.

The desire for a home had become like an addiction for him in recent years. His inner restlessness and inability to settle in one place was driven by this need. He searched everywhere and sometimes felt like one of the gold seekers of the Klondike that Jack London once described in his novel. John was constantly on the move, much to the chagrin of those around him.

Although he radiated an inherent calmness to others, his behavior was completely contrary. If he heard a word he didn't know, he would jump up and pull a book from the shelf to look it up. If he discovered a mistake, a discrepancy, he would fetch tools to fix it on the ceiling, the wall or the floor. The time of day never mattered to him. It was not uncommon for him to fetch a paintbrush at three o'clock in the morning and touch up the paint on the ceiling.

There were many who claimed that he had the qualities of a politician, a writer, a philosopher, even a prophet. Yes, in some respects he agreed with them. He had many of the attributes they attributed to him, and yet he felt that he was not yet complete. His many facets made him interesting to others. For him personally, it meant loneliness, as it were. The facets that made him interesting to others, for him, only offered loneliness and isolation.

John was also aware that he possessed rhetorical skills. He could render others speechless, offend or even destroy them with just a few words or a single sentence. But he carried the oath of a

samurai deep in his heart. He only used this ability to defend himself and never to attack. He even informed others before using this tool. For him, it was really just a tool. Craftsmen also had tools, the rich had money and soldiers had weapons. So why shouldn't he use this skill as a tool, as a means of purchase or even as a weapon?

Lost in thought, he didn't even notice that his cigarette, which he had put down immediately after lighting it, had long since breathed its last in the ashtray. As luck would have it, the cigarette did not fall onto the floor or the window sill, but remained wedged in the recess provided. It was the unpleasant smell emanating from a singed cigarette filter that signaled to John that it was time to light a new one.

Without even looking, John reached for the packet like clockwork, pulled out a Lucky and reached for the lighter with his free hand with the same precision. With well-rehearsed automatism, he lit the lighter at the same time as the cigarette took its place between his full lips. As a rule, men tended to place the cigarette sideways between their lips, in contrast to women, who preferred to place the cigarette in the middle of their lips. John was a man, at least on the outside, and so he did it the way all men did. It always looked a little casual and yet, as with every man, the puff on his cigarette betrayed a little of his character traits.

His vanity forbade him to be careless with himself and his surroundings. He always wore smart clothes in almost every situation. His hair was cut short, which earned him the nickname "Marine" among his acquaintances. In the past, he had sometimes pretended to be an American Marine for his friends in order to arouse the admiration of women, either for himself or simply to make his friends seem more interesting because they had an American friend.

John could speak English very well and it was easy for him to imitate the typical American slang. They had a lot of fun back then and John was often the center of attention. Whether in discos or bars, the act with the American Marine always worked, and many women lost their hearts when he had to go home again.

John felt that for the first time in a long time he was thinking about himself, he was preoccupied with himself, indeed, for the first time in his life he was putting himself in the foreground. Not because he

considered himself important, no, because it was time to make another new start. He had the strength, the courage and also the indestructible will to once again rise far above his abilities and possibilities. He sometimes felt like a balloon that dreamed of nothing else but rising towards the sun, towards the light, towards being. But the heavy ballast of his past, the prisoner of himself, constantly dragged him back down.

He was aware that something had to change. It was also absolutely clear to him that he had to expect setbacks.

In his moments of self-criticism, images from Ground hog Day kept popping up in his mind. He had to admit to himself that his life consisted of repetition. He fulfilled tasks or missions and was celebrated by people. He was showered with honors and praise, but in the end, he led a lonely life.

He had to get out of this mill and finally be able to participate in real life. He just wanted to live and be with people who not only admired him, but who really wanted him. He was ready to take up the fight and it was going to be the fight of his life. The stars were aligned this time and the time had come for everything to change.

The invisible house

The alarm clock buzzed relentlessly and two small, delicate fingers fumbled towards the source of the noise. The alarm was now on its fourth cycle and was in danger of being pushed off the bedside table. The little fingers were finding it a challenge to press the off button. After the fifth attempt, clock fell to the soft carpet without the humming sound being tamed.

“Oh boy,” the words echoed energetically but in a sweet voice through the bedroom. Despite the darkness, the clock was rescued and the alarm was finally silenced. With a high-pitched sigh a graceful figure slumped back into the pillows

Following a click, what seemed to be a kind of mobile wall began slowly sliding upwards. With each centimeter, more rays of light flooded the large bedroom like a morning mist and illuminated the carpeted floor. Gradually, beautiful pieces of furniture began to take shape and slowly appeared with elegant contours.

Noemi loved being woken up by the sun. She was lying in a large white bed framed by a gilded, baroque-style back. She lay as if on an altar, surrounded by lots of pillows and situated halfway under the covers. One long, slender leg was exposed so that the side of her bottom and back were also visible. The view of her beautiful body could only be distracted by her frizzy black hair. Small, pretty, dainty feet peeked out from under the comforter but immediately sought the protection of the warm blanket when a little fresh air streamed through the tilted window.

Slender hands pulled the blanket a little higher to protect her back from the cool air. The room in which this beauty lay was an oasis that is difficult to describe using normal words.

This place was like an angel's castle. White silky, transparent curtains hung from the ceiling and the slightly yellowish painted walls like a canopy. A large stucco ceiling was illuminated by a strange light. Expensive pieces of furniture, both modern and antique-looking, were well arranged on a marble-tiled floor. The curtains moved slightly in the draught like a dancing fairy. Even Mark Antony would have suspected Cleopatra at this sight, had it not been for the sound of engines from outside that disturbed the peace and quiet of the unique oasis.

A soft rustling of the comforter was the harbinger of the inner battle that had to be fought to decide whether she should get up or stay in bed a little longer. After a few minutes, the enemy called tiredness lost the battle. The victor was called zest for action and the large comforter grew to an impressive height. Noemi was underneath and as part of the blanket slid gently down, she revealed her face.

Much of her hair stood on end and a large pout of defiance bore witness to her youth. You could almost get the impression that Noemi was still a child. But the moment she opened her eyes and blinked slightly to orient herself, the woman became visible. Her face lit up the room so much so that it would be comparable to a goddess. Indeed, nature had bestowed this woman with many gifts. Her flawless body was the epitome of beauty. What other women had to work hard to achieve or have corrected was available to her in an abundance that would have captivated any photographer or poet and held them captive forever.

Noemi turned her body slightly to the side and lifted her legs. Her small feet touched the tiles, which were pleasantly warm thanks to the underfloor heating. Then she straightened up and walked towards the bathroom, still swaying slightly from tiredness. As if on velvet paws, her feet still moved a little unsteadily but gracefully over the marble tiles and her small brown feet looked a little bigger thanks to her delicately painted nails.

Near the bathroom, Noemi snapped her fingers. The sound not only lit up the room automatically, but a radio immediately started playing. Noemi's bedroom was about thirty square meters in size, but the bathroom was a little bigger. In the middle of the room there was a huge round bathtub set into the floor. Around it stood three voluminous palm trees, which were illuminated from below with a slightly green light. Across the full width of the room, there was a frosted glass window through which filtered daylight could enter. Most striking however were the four marble columns that seemed to support the ceiling. They surrounded the round pool symmetrically. The other three sides of the room were brought to life by oriental ornamental tiles. This fantastic room resembled a hall or an antique bathhouse. The warmth and harmony of the details, which had been lovingly staged, gave off a relaxing and inviting appeal to anyone who happened to find themselves in

there.

Noemi had long since become accustomed to this sight, so she devoted her main interest to her usual morning routine. As she stood in the small hallway, she heard a beeping sound. It was the coffee machine which was set to seven o'clock. Noemi had everything timed perfectly. She removed her clothes from her walk-in wardrobe which was accessible through a glass door.

The choice of outfit depended on the day's activities. Due to the fact that she was to be working in the store that day, her choice was the usual dark grey ensemble.

She got dressed quickly, then chose some black, mid-height pumps to accessorise with. She knew that the height of the heels was very important to her customers. Too low meant that her younger clientele might think she was boring, too high meant that her older clientele might think she was too young or rebellious. For this reason, Noemi had bought herself a considerable arsenal of shoes for all occasions. In fact, she owned over one hundred and fifty pairs including around fifty pairs for her store alone. Most of them had a heel height of six centimeters which was for her generally socially tolerated and accepted.

She left her bedroom and walked down the long corridor towards the office which was functionally furnished.

Apart from a large glass table with a computer and printer on, there was an office chair and a number of metal shelves against the wall. This room did not radiate any particularly warm feelings. Everything was neat and tidy and showed that the room was for professional use only.

Continuing her morning routine, she checked her emails, marked them all and had them printed out. Then she took the half-dozen sheets of paper in her right hand and hurried into the kitchen feeling a little stressed. It was time to get down to business.

The coffee had been percolating and there was a pleasant smell permeating around her.

The kitchen was accessed via two steps leading up from the living room, the open plan area covering around eighty square meters. The design of the kitchen was in typical Spanish style.

In the center was a large rectangular kitchen island surrounded by bar stools. Noemi sat down on one of the bar stools, crossed her right leg over her left, poured herself some coffee with milk and

sugar and read her emails.

A quick skim of the messages was enough for her to make a few necessary actions or phone calls. A glance at her gold wristwatch told her that she had to go. She hurriedly picked up her things, put them in a black leather bag and left via the alarmed front door. As soon as the door was locked, she tapped her date of birth on a keypad activating the alarm system. She had been meaning to change the combination for several months as she was aware that a date of birth is an easy passcode for an intruder to find out, but the thought quickly vanished when she glanced at her watch again. She walked down the three steps of the staircase. The building she lived in looked completely ordinary from the outside and Noemi always made sure to keep it that way to discourage any unwanted interest.

The building was located near a main road and could be reached via a long driveway. The property was large and it was clearly an ex-commercial building. It would have given the impression that no one actually lived here although everything had been laid out very neatly.

The property was surrounded by paving stones and there were high evergreen trees and bushes around the perimeter to obscure public view.

Noemi picked up her car keys and as usual checked the letterbox on the fence facing the street first. The external letterbox was there to prevent anyone having to come near the property on a regular basis and her doorbell would only be used for private mail deliveries. Pressing the button on the key set an automatic shutter door in motion on the rear left side of the building.

Noemi didn't wait until the gate was fully open but ducked under to access her vehicle.

There were two cars in the garage. A black BMW convertible and a black American Jeep that seemed to scream adventure with its shiny chrome bars.

Noemi always drove to her store in the convertible and The Adventurer, as she always called the Jeep, was only used at the weekend or in the evening.

She started the convertible and the beautiful, powerful sound of a six-cylinder engine made the garage vibrate a little. She closed the

automatic door behind her and was annoyed, as always at having to activate another remote control to open the gate at the end of the property.

At last, she was on the move and could resume the game of normal life and escape her self-imposed seclusion.

Noemi's home was on the outskirts of a small community of perhaps two thousand inhabitants. To reach her store in Darmstadt, she had to drive through a wooded, hilly landscape, which would have taken any normal driver at least three quarters of an hour. She usually made it in just under half an hour.

She enjoyed the beautiful drive through the countryside at any time of year. Especially in summer, when she could open the roof of the convertible and breathe in the wonderful scent of the trees and grasses.

Now winter was approaching and tendrils of frost were slowly making their way through the forests and meadows. Noemi saw the futile struggle of the sun's gentle rays against the mighty harbingers of winter. A few days ago, the morning frost had been so strong it resembled full ice formation, which had already conquered large areas of the meadows. Younger trees bowed slightly, like reverent servants, under the still bearable weight of the frost coat.

Although the convertible's air conditioning worked reliably, Noemi could smell the charming scent of cold air coming in from outside. The car pulled gently but firmly through the bends.

The traffic became heavier and the forest slowly disappeared in Noemi's rear-view mirror. Darmstadt was a metropolis for the people from the suburbs. Comparing it to other cities or large towns would be presumptuous, and yet the charm of this city gave its inhabitants a feeling of warmth and security. Noemi had never given this fact much thought. Intuitively, however, she sensed that these feelings had kept her close to this city for many years. Nevertheless, city life was a different world for Noemi.

The speed of the cities gave her a certain adrenaline rush and at the same time made her feel inexplicably uneasy. Anyone could hide in crowds, except her, because she always stood out. Cities allowed other people to have free time and fun. For Noemi, these things were pleasant, but not as important as for many others.

From time to time, Noemi did go into the city just for fun, and sometimes bars and nightclubs weren't open long enough for her. However, she was able to get back to reality quickly after these heady hours and found her personal realm of security in her home. Noemi was a fast driver and had arrived at her store on time. She usually opened her exclusive antiques and furniture store at nine o'clock sharp. But as a businesswoman she tended to be over-punctual, so she was usually in the store between eight and eight-thirty.

The store was located in the heart of the old town and was four hundred square meters in size.

A few years ago, she had discovered this, the first floor of an old half-timbered town house, and had it converted so that she could display and sell very old antiques and unusual pieces of furniture. The mixture of extravagant and modern furniture was wonderfully paired with valuable works of art. In a way, this interesting mixture was part of who she was.

Many customers traveled from far and wide to be inspired by this splendor and uniqueness, this wonderful mixture. Both men and women appreciated the loving and attentiveness of Noemi's advice. And many a customer, whether man or woman, fell under the charm, grace and beauty of the store owner, who worked a kind of spiritual magic on people.

So far, Noemi had been able to skillfully deflect the desires of many men and women without having to fear any negative business or personal consequences.

Admittedly, since she lived alone, it was not always possible to suppress temptation on her part, but she stuck to her own established principle of not entering into a relationship until she was absolutely sure she had found the right partner. Ultimately, she was not a dreamer, as she initially considered her dream partner to be sexless. Despite her young age, she had long been aware that the dazzling prince on the white horse did not exist. She could never share the fantasies of young girls and so she continued to rely on her instincts when it came to relationships.

After parking her convertible in the parking lot in front of the store, which had space for another ten vehicles, she went to the side entrance, unlocked the door and entered a small anteroom with a

door leading to the office. The opposite door led to the toilet and the middle door led to the sales area. Like the side door, this door had a secure alarm system.

Noemi did not tolerate any carelessness, either privately or professionally. Her morning work place ritual consisted of making coffee, checking faxes and emails and opening the windows. This order was as steadfast as the Rocks of Gibraltar. Once everything was done, her two employees appeared.

Claudia and Iris usually travelled to work together, as they had been good friends for many years. Despite the age difference of eleven years, their friendship had never been seriously tested. Claudia, the younger one, was thirty-two, single, attractive and showed a certain intellect. Iris was very self-confident and possessed the fire that only a confident middle-aged woman can have. Iris was a little fiery, very vain and took care of her appearance as if she were a work of art herself. She did this not with exaggerated ambition, but with a kind of dignified style. Despite her maturity and charisma, she never felt threatened by Noemi's superiority which came with her position as owner of the business.

Since the company was founded, Iris's role with suppliers and customers was clear and undisputed. Her authority and competence were considered untouchable.

Iris was also deeply impressed by the fascination she had with Noemi since their first meeting. However, her feelings about Noemi consisted mainly of reverence, devotion and a little bit of a special kind of love that she felt for her.

However, as soon as these emotions arose in her, she was able to suppress them. These feelings led to confusion in Iris's heart. It was unacceptable for a woman to have beautiful feelings for a person of the same sex, especially as Iris had not only been married for many years, but also had two children. She had never developed these kinds of feelings for a woman before, only for Noemi.

Her confusion was not based on the fact that she could feel something for a woman, but that it only applied to this one woman. She had never felt a tingle for women, neither in dreams or imaginations nor in her emotional environment. The fixation on this one woman frightened her. She was never sure whether it could

be attributed to a desire for freedom in general, or whether it perhaps stemmed from a desire deep inside her for the same sex. Iris was absolutely certain that Noemi was unaware of her feelings. She held it together well, even when their hands sometimes touched at work. In these moments, Iris always lost her breath and her heart seemed to beat a lot faster, but she was confident that her feelings were completely disguised from Noemi and others.

Claudia was blissfully ignorant of any tension that may have arisen due to Iris' feelings towards Noemi. She was far too preoccupied with herself and her own relationships to notice anything else either in work or outside of it. Claudia maintained a level of superficiality that limited her world to a confined bubble. Her nonchalance protected her from insults from customers, friends and even from her lovers. Her naivety enabled her to lead a happy, relatively carefree life. This simplicity, coupled with her beauty, opened up worlds to her that remained closed to many others. She was a person you could never be angry with, and for many she was simply a good friend with whom you could spend fun times together.

This trio of dissimilar women guaranteed the success of the small company.