

Purpose beyond desolation

And then he saw the structure crashing. He winced and drew his eyes away.

At this moment, he didn't think about his flat at all. Not a single thought strayed towards his costly electronic equipment. He had assembled all these parts over years, he had built them together, he had taught himself from scrap how to do it. His heart beat certainly not for his job, not for his clients, not for the pettiness of daily life. It was beating for these parts of finely crafted electrical machinery, and for the programs he had learned to inscribe on them. Nevertheless, at this moment, he didn't feel his heart dying. Not once his flat crossed his mind. Instead, he was thinking about the boy and his pathetic games. He was thinking about the hollowness of his eyes and his words of utter resignation.

It was not necessary for him to see. All around him, screams were soaring high. They even soared higher than the bursts of the storm that came howling through the street. All these people were only bystanders to the tragedy, yet the horror hit them harder than had they been in the midsts of it.

What made Jason finally open his eyes were the incongruent voices that mingled with the screaming when it started ebbing out. He thought to have heard gasps of relief. He clung to the thought. It gave him the courage to look back at the block.

It was a huge and shabby building of anonymous flats scraping a dark evening sky. From some windows where he was looking, fire was licking out. Many buildings he had seen on his way down here had been on fire. He couldn't quite figure out how it had broken out and how it was sustained, with the dampness cloaking its coat around everything and with the better parts of the streets of this city flooded beyond recognition.

Parts of the block's front had crumbled. There was a gaping hole from which appeared the walls of the flats. Even from the distance, he thought he made out grotesque shapes of worn wallpaper and amputated furniture. Surely it was held together by strings and nails, much like he managed to keep his own chairs and table together.

Even as he was looking, a further part of the wall dashed off. The gape widened to a crater, as if a bomb nearly the size of the building itself had been shot into it. The house was sagging, it was sliding apart on its foundations. Jason knew what was happening. He had calculated similar scenarios countless times. At the moment, the building stood still, but no one could tell how long that would last. Further parts might fall off at any second – by the stroke of a single heart-beat, it could crush altogether.

He knew there needed something to be done. He had just no idea how to go about it. Every option seemed hardly better than suicide. But then, from one of the combs of flats torn open, a frame delineated itself against a background of flaming wallpaper. It made him decide he couldn't wait any longer. The frame was the frame of a figure, a human, any human – he did not know. And he wouldn't be able to help that person. But perhaps there was someone else he could drag out from there. He briefly shut the lids of his eyes and wished the Rosens had gone out. As unlikely as it was in the raging storm.

He looked around himself, at the same time exasperated and eager to act. People were standing in shock, clutching with their hands at their mouths. Others were already stumbling away, casting dizzy looks back over their shoulder at the bereaved building. Surely in their minds there was no room for all those trapped into their tiny flats of worn carpets and disintegrating furniture. Their minds were bent on their own loved ones, and their legs were falling in with the flight of their thoughts.

But Jason had no one to care about. He was free to act. He did not have the excuse of family. Perhaps all the family he now had was trapped inside there.

Mechanically he gazed around himself, on the lookout for a companion, for someone to take this struggle with him together. He found none, but he found someone he had wished he wouldn't have found here, in that place, in that posture, with her hands tearing at her hair, with moans of utter helplessness bellowing from her mouth.

It was Mrs. Rosen. The grocery bags lay tumbled on the street beside her. Cans had toppled out and the sharp wind brushed them off through the splattering pools. „This is not true,“ Jason muttered to himself. „This cannot be true.“

He was locked into a moment of terrified surprise. He heard the sirens of the ambulances shoot their frenetic calls into the dark sky. He felt how the spread of water on the street was leaking into his shoes. He saw people running in all directions, coming from nowhere and disappearing with ghastly faces into a world hung from its hinges. He felt how the remnants of the storm were tearing against his body. He heard a distant grumbling and he didn't want to know what it meant, although he could guess at it easily enough: another building falling apart onto itself. In this one instant, everything could have been lost. He could have turned his back to the staring crowd, to the dishevelled building, to the dark frames against the blaze of red tongues.

But he did not. He did not turn away. Jason had long lost any belief in purpose and virtue. Nor did he regain that belief now. He just acted, on the spot. He had been wavering, but now he was bent. He was firm, he was decided. He still had no plan, there was no sudden insight - he just stopped to think about the consequences. If it was to be suicide, so it was.

With a few strides he was at Mrs. Rosen's side. She was stuffed in a heavy coat of ragged fur. The holes in the fabric were patched by mismatching colours.

„Mrs. Rosen!“ he yelled, not just against the wind, not just against the jostling crowd, but against the mindlessness of her crying. He put a hand to her shoulder and shook her.

She turned her head everywhere as if she couldn't make out where the call had been coming from. She kept tearing at her hair. Streams of tears were gushing down her cheeks. Her cheeks were covered with these strange red spots he had seen so often and that had made him flinch that often.

„Mrs. Rosen!“ he shouted right into her face.

She struggled to free herself, she tumbled back a step, then her eyes fell onto him. Suddenly, recognition dawned on her. A scream burst from her lips and she flung herself into his arms. Her wild sobs throbbed against his chest.

„Mrs. Rosen!“ he exclaimed once more. It was all he could do to recall her to reason.

„The kids, the kids!“ she croaked. Her voice rasped against the heavy clumps in her throat.

He grabbed her by the arms and pulled her away from him. „Are they inside?“ He threw the words together so violently it was impossible she could understand him. „Are they still inside?“

But she didn't need to understand him to hear what he meant. „In the flat!“ she groaned. She shot out a shuddering finger to the aching building behind them. „They're still in the flat!“ The tears drenched her eyes again. She was close to slip back into another sobbing fit.

“The keys,” Jason said, almost sternly. “Give me the keys!”

A short light flashed up on her face. Through the anguish raging inside her, she seemed to grasp what he meant to do. Nervously, she set to fumble in the pockets of her coat.

Jason was tripping from one foot to the other. He clenched his teeth. It took all his willpower not to shout at her. But at the same time, just to look at her unleashed a surge of pity inside him. Her dishevelled hair stood on all ends, her face was torn by the scratches of her finger nails. Her eyes bulged beyond all measure. They threatened to fall back again into their senseless agony at any moment.

But then, her hands went still. A sigh of relief welled up inside her and bore forth from her parched lips. She held out the small silver badge.

Immediately, he snatched it from her fingers and sped away towards the building. “My God!” he could still hear her scream behind him, with a voice drowned by the hiss of the biting breeze. It was an exclamation of painful astonishment. It sounded like the voice of someone awakened from the tomb of mindless frenzy. “My God, thank you!”

But all other words were lost, lost in the howling pressure of the air, lost against the slashing of

his feet across the wet street, lost against his mind spiralling like a wheel of fire, reaching out towards the flames inside the slouching building. It would not be hard to find a way in. The hard part would be getting out alive.

“Sorry.” He smirked and averted his gaze from the windows across the street. “I have difficulty coming to terms with what you want to express. Could you try and put it another way, so I can understand you better?”

In fact, he hadn't listened at all. Probably she hadn't told him anything he hadn't heard a hundred times yet. However, he wanted to make sure he hadn't missed something important, as unlikely it might be. After all, he had still his working morale, even if that might be all that was left tying him to this job.

“Pardon?” She looked up from her crumpled tissue. Her eyes lay in red shades. She didn't seem to have been aware of his question. Her mind had been hovering too deep in her relationship problems.

Jason coughed slightly and began: “I was asking...”

“Oh,” she opened her mouth. Apparently, his question had still registered in the back of her mind. “Yes, I want to try to put it another way. See, it's like he's never ready to take responsibility. To take his share in what we're going through. I'm trying very hard, I'm trying so hard to reach out to him...”

Again, his mind was slipping. His eyes travelled back to the offices on the other side of the street.

Since a few years now he had been watching them, with an ever increasing interest that finally turned into an obsession. A few years ago he had taken his first mathematics books from the library. In some odd moments, he liked to think it was providence they had their offices right across from him. The State Department of City Planning. He hadn't been aware of it when he had started here.

After he had left school, he had gone for the Social Sciences for the simple reason so many turned towards them: he was scared of numbers. He had been dragging himself through his studies without real interest, but he had never missed a single deadline. After he had obtained his first degree, he had decided for a practical turn and had taken another course in Counselling. That course passed, strange quips of luck had it that he found a job as soon as he turned his back to the uni. He had started here, a big and rather renowned counselling practice for all sorts of common and uncommon social and psychological problems. And he had stayed here. Because he had nowhere else to go.

His mind slid back to his client. Yvonne she was called. Not that it mattered. He no longer saw more in them than replaceable names. Never any of them had anything to tell that contained the least bit of information. It was a perpetual circling around the very same set of problems.

“Sometimes I think he will never grow up. But I want him to help me build... a home of my own. I want him to grow the man he is. I want...”

It was no use. His thoughts trailed off again. She just repeated her same old story, over and over. In listening to clients, he often felt the same as when he had been sitting over his social sciences' texts. The authors managed to fling down whole pages of verbosity and yet they didn't do more than express a single thought. He had become sick of it quickly enough. But it seems that some steps cannot be retraced, that some decisions cannot be revoked. After his first degree he had been tempted by the idea to do something entirely different. But first, he had run out of money, and besides, he didn't want to make his years of study go for naught.

Now, a couple of years later, he didn't have such qualms any longer.

His look concentrated on the back of the clerks, as they were typing away in front of their computer screens. From where he was sitting, he even got a hazy picture of some of the graphics appearing on their screens. He made some guesses at what they meant. With the years he had been working here, his guesses had grown ever better informed.

All had started with an article he had read in one of the so-called independent magazines – which, supposedly, weren't backed up by the big media companies. The article had been a sweeping indictment of the poor building structure of the less popular parts of the city. Now, judging from the appearance of the building where he lived, that hadn't come quite as a revelation. But the claims of the article were sustained by some series of calculations he hadn't got to terms with at the time, but that had left him deeply impressed. Even a spokesperson of the City Planning, a construction

engineer, had admitted to the journalist that City Planning had been working for years on a scheme to renew the rotten infrastructure and building structure of the 'disadvantageous' quarters. But so far lack of funding had impeded any progress in that direction.

First, it had been no more than a fancy. Then, Jason had sat down seriously to plough his way through the calculations. He had been amazed by how little it would actually take to shatter the tattered structure of the very building he lived in. That was when he first began to make his search through the library. A year later, he had taken to computer electronics. Another year and he had made his first forays into programming. Whatever he had build up and written in computer language, it had been done to shed further light on the intricate issues of construction engineering. Of course it would have been easier, and incomparably cheaper, just to buy the equipment and the software ready-made. But he had wanted to start from zero. He felt he had to redo all the way he had never traced in school. He wanted to invent the topic on his own, for his own, simply to understand it.

And now he almost felt confident enough to take up another set of studies. He wished to think that, if he took a course in Construction Engineering now, he would find his way through it without difficulties, he would deal with the mathematics and physics with a smile on his face. Sometimes he caught up with the irony that someone who preached self-confidence to others should himself be in such dramatic need of it.

But, what was the more, now he had the money. At his job he was paid a misery, but in keeping his living standards down to survival mode, he had accrued some savings. Now – he wished badly he could do it. Only a few months more and the semester would start.

“He doesn't seem to realise that there is a time when you have to stop play children's games,” Yvonne complained, her fingers clutched tightly around the lump of the tissues. “I feel that I've grown an adult, that I'm finally getting serious, but he just doesn't...”

“Zero,” Jason thought to himself. “A constant stream of zeros. The utter absence of information. At least computers have a one, for a change.” He didn't quite notice how time passed by.

But suddenly she exclaimed, “Oh my Goodness! My time's already up!” And she looked at the silent clock on the wall. She pulled herself onto her feet and picked up her purse. She gave him one of her little, soft smiles. “I feel I'm taking advantage of you,” she said. “You've been such a support lately. I couldn't tell. I really couldn't thank you.” A slight slur crept into her voice. Her eyes started shimmering again.

Quickly, he gently took her elbow and guided her towards the door. He didn't want her to slide back into her stream of repetitions. “Never mind. That's what I'm here for.” He hoped he wouldn't be here for much longer.

With the door already ajar, she still said: “Oh, and do take care on your way home. You know, they've been announcing this terrible storm since days.”

He suppressed the puzzled frown that was itching against his forehead. Storm? What storm was she talking about? But it wasn't surprising he shouldn't have heard about it. Especially these last few weeks he had been living like a hermit.

“I promise.” He conjured up a warm smile back at her. “And take care of yourself. We'll pass that storm – this one – and the one in your life you're dealing with now.”

It was one of the many hilarious phrases he was forced to utter each day. And it had been an utter lie. Because how bad this storm would hit, he wouldn't have dared to imagine. And the forecasts, though sombre, hadn't been close to the truth either. On his very way home, it had set in with full force. The world seemed to break apart under the sheer weight of its onslaught. The sea around the city was raging and spilling over. Houses collapsed and families were driven apart. People were buried. A few hours earlier they had still been thriving with all the freshness of life.

The emergency teams had been set off immediately, but they were ill-prepared to the proportion of the disaster. He had been picked up by one of these teams, he had been hauled into one of the barracks that had been cleared for the purpose and shunned up hastily. There he had huddled crowded in with other refugees who had been surprised by the storm on their different ways around

town. One of them had managed to get a radio channel through. They had listened to how all the experts had been wrong – with, of course, the exception of the elected few who had seen it coming all the time but who had been ridiculed by their scientific companions. They had sat through the storm. The roof and walls with all the fortifications had been clattering and jostling like building bricks shaken in a box. Finally, after a time far too long to bear, they had remarked how the attacks of wind and wave were decreasing in force. The commentators on the radio had told us much. As soon as they were able to leave the barracks, they left, despair etched on their faces.

The dying fragments of the storm continued to blow in from everywhere, wisps of wild air whipping against skin and clothes. It had been a long and laborious way for Jason before he arrived at the apartment building. He had toiled his way through a devastated city. And when he had come to where he lived he had seen all he could call home fall apart on its troubled foundations.

His chest flared up for breath. The dust was coating his nostrils. The smoke clouded his vision, burning hot into his eyes. Often he groped his way with outstretched hands. It was tangible in the air how the pressure in the corridors was mounting. Every particle seemed to grow thicker. An image flashed across his mind: how everything would end up in a final blast. Not just the slumbering falling in on itself, but a tremendous bang shooting glowing debris into the night sky and all over the quarter. The one possibility seemed as likely as the other.

Now there was just one possibility that slipped farther and farther away from reality: the possibility that he could actually save the kids - save Michael - and save himself.

The problem was hypercomplex and he didn't waste a moment to split his brain on it. The physical conditions were impossible to ascertain, too many variables remained unmarked. Though everything would pass by the natural laws of physics, Jason found himself in a game of luck.

He spurred on through the corridors. Some passages were blocked, some stairs impossible to use. It took him far too long to finally get to the door for which he had been heading all along. He felt he had been running for ages. And there was something else he had noticed as he had advanced towards this part of the building: the floor had given in towards a slight decline. This part of the building – the part where he lived - was sagging away. When he had realised that, his heart had given another jolt, but that was all. He hadn't fought his way through walls of smoke to be stopped by this detail now. The small detail that, just as his running feet were pounding against it, the floor was making tiny shifts to topple down and crush onto a street in a far distance below.

He reached the door. The flat number shone on a copper plate rubbed clean from grease and rust. He did not even try the bell. With his fists he banged against the scorched wood. “Michael!” he shouted. And: “Sarah! Cindy!” The three kids of Mrs. Rosen, the widow, the relentless mother, the diseased figure, a spectre in the city like so many others.

The badge was sweaty in his palm. He rubbed it against his trousers and then held it against the small lock of the scanner. A green light popped on the scanner and the lock unclicked. He yanked the door open.

It was just as he had feared. Michael was standing in front of him. He had approached the door when he had heard the banging. His terrified little sisters clutched at his hip and shoulders. Even at such a moment like that, Jason remarked that not a single tear was rolling on their cheeks. Their eyes were blank, hollow and utterly dry. They were confused and terrified. It was a picture of shock. On Michael's brow hung all the heavy resignation that had always been hanging there, that Jason had vainly tried to dispel in the past two years. It had impeded his every movement. Behind them, Jason saw unto the panorama of devastation the storm had left behind. The outer wall had gone as a whole, only half of the living room was left. Flashing lights streamed all over the darkness that had settled in over the city. Jason looked outside into the growing night, past Michael's shoulders, as if he were looking down from a precipice that was beginning to slide under his feet.

He had no time to loose. With a jump he was by the kids. He pushed them, he almost threw them out into the corridor. He screamed into their ears, he tore at their cold limbs frigid with shock. “Go! Go! Go!” With every word, needles scratched against his throat from within. He felt painfully reminded of the agonised apathy of Mrs. Rosen. He was fighting against no less than the habitus of

helplessness of these kids. He was fighting against their firm belief, articulated or unconscious, that the world was set against them and there was nothing they could do about it. "Go!" Now tears began to well up in his eyes. "Follow me! Follow me!" He waved with his arm, he waved his whole body. He waved so hard he felt his arm might rip off.

From the moment he had banged open the door, Michael had held his gaze fixed onto his face. Now that he saw how the tears were spreading out on Jason's cheeks, there happened a stir and a change in his remote expression. His legs fumbled into action. First insecurely, haltingly, as if with every step he had to learn afresh how to walk. His sisters, clasping at his clothes, made him almost trip. Then, however, he regained the firmness of his young pace. For the first time now he looked at Jason with plain recognition, and with a question coming to throb in his eyes.

Jason nodded, he banged his head up and down. "Yes, yes!" he screamed against the cracking of wood and rubble and the screams form all over the building. "Yes, we can make it!" The needles thrust into the soft coating of his throat. "We can make it!" he rasped. "If we run!" And he turned to lead the way.

He was hauling himself up the last piece of railing. He could have taken the elevator all along, but his way forth and back from work was the only exercise he allowed himself to indulge in and he took advantage of every bit of that way. But thus, as he arrived on the landing, he was panting. He struggled along to his door through the half-lit passage and put his badge lazily against the slid of the scanner. He thought he had heard some rustling from somewhere behind in the corridor, but he didn't further remark on that. Right after he went in through the door, he chipped the central electricity on. Then he pressed the start buttons of his several pieces of filigree computer equipment. He was still in his coat, yet he already looked down on the screens with almost paternal pride. Now it was time to set to work. And he would keep working and studying every minute up late into the night, as he always did.

While the programs were loading, he looked around himself rather absently, and he remarked he had left the door standing open. He sighed and took a stride towards it, but, suddenly, a head popped up from behind it. Wide, hazel eyes appeared. They stared in wonder at the intricate pieces of machinery everywhere assorted in the room. The boy's mouth gaped open, but then his eyes flickered towards Jason and a sudden terror made his lids flutter. He was about to draw away when Jason called out: "Hey, you! Stay where you are!"

To his wonder, the boy really did. Before the kid could have second thoughts about it, Jason was at him with a jump. He pulled him in and threw the door shut behind him.

"This is a mess," he thought to himself. He had drawn on so many crazy means of secretiveness not to let anybody know what he was storing away behind the feeble door of his flat. Everyone in this building was poor. Jason had always striven even to keep his working place a mystery from his neighbours. He had achieved that by simply avoiding all sorts of contact with them, not a hard job in a huge, anonymous building block with many inhabitants of dodgy outlook. You were safe in this place if you were a poor amongst other poor people. If there was only scrap to get from you, no one would bother to break into your room. At least the solidarity among the occupants of this place went this far. But Jason had a regular job well enough, and while parts of his savings were safely stored with the local bank, the other half had gone into his equipment. Now the existence of this equipment had been discovered. Probably, now, it would only be a question of time before some juvenile robbers would wrench open his door. And this dismal boy would go in their very lead.

Jason sighed in exasperation. He looked closer at the boy, who wildly flicked his gaze around himself like a trapped animal. Suddenly, recognition broke on Jason's mind.

"Hey, I know you," he said with precision.

The boy cringed, as if this was the very reaction he had feared Jason would show. "Aren't you the boy of Mrs. Rosen's?"

The child dared to give a slight nod.

Hope sprang up in Jason, if rational or irrational it was impossible to tell. Mrs. Rosen was a sickly creature he sometimes saw shuffling through the corridor. Each morning, she left the building at

around the same time as he did. It was not often that someone around here had regular working hours. Besides, he hadn't missed to remark the the passage in front of her door always looked cleanly swept, and that her clothes, although ragged and patched, never showed so much as a spot of dust. If she had managed to pass on the same dignified mindset to her kids, perhaps this boy, after all, wouldn't assemble a robber gang within the next twenty-four hours.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Jason bluntly.

The boy gulped, then he said: "They say you're a psychiatrist. And that, the night, you work with computers." He was silent a second. But with the crushing honesty of kids he blurted out: "They call you the mad scientist." At this, his eyes arrested themselves once more on the blinking screens.

Jason was startled. "Who says that?" he almost barked.

The boy shrugged. "Everyone around here."

This time it was for Jason's mouth to fall open. He was quite speechless. So much for his complicated attempts at secretiveness. He shook his head and sighed. As it seemed, he had been grossly unaware of what his neighbours really knew about him.

"Well, I'm not a psychiatrist," he grunted. "I'm a counsellor. And God knows if I'll ever be a scientist."

With that he opened the door by a single gesture and shuffled the boy out. However, he found he was pushing against some resistance – the boy had stiffened his body.

"Sir," he said, "I'm Michael."

"Wonderful, Michael," Jason groaned and was about to close the door.

But before he did so, the boy reiterated: "Sir!" His voice had taken on a pleading tone. "Sir! Could I have a look at your computers, please?"

Jason stopped in his movement. He looked down and the eager eyes of the boy looked up at him. He remembered when he had first come across the boy in the hallway, he had been surprised by the resignedness of his expression. "How can a child be so hopeless," he had mouthed to himself. But now something new seemed to struggle its way into the fresh face of the boy: a sense of adventure and of purpose.

Jason felt rooted to the spot. And this moment of hesitation decided everything. It was the moment when their friendship began.

"By God!" Mrs. Rosen cried. She squeezed her children against her trembling body. Then, with a passionate embrace, she turned to Jason.

He quickly freed himself and was beckoning farther down the street. He was short of breath and he murmured: "Farther away, we need to get farther away." He locked his arm into Mrs. Rosen's and pulled her along.

She was overjoyed, she was ecstatic with joy, and she sped along by his side like young deer. Even her coughing had ceased.

Already in the building Michael had fully returned to his wits and had half-carried, half dragged his two sisters along. Now he did the same, and they rushed further and further away from the shaky building. They dodged the people who where screaming in pain or in helplessness, they dodged the emergency teams that came flocking in, daring to brace the danger, they dodged the huge parts of the building that already covered the street and had fallen into other houses, breaking walls, hitting through roofs.

They ran on and on, mindlessly, and yet, freely. To Jason, as to the others, it felt almost as if they were flying. They had scratched their own triumph from the torn remnants of universal tragedy.

He stopped when he got out of breath. He stopped when, by his side, Mrs. Rosen was thrown into a violent fit of coughing. Behind his back there rose a sudden devastating noise. Then there passed an eerie silence, which was finally broken by the emergency sirens springing into life again.

Jason did not turn to look. He knew that, where his own flat had been, where Mrs. Rosen's flat had been, now there was another gaping hole caving into the parts of the building that were still left standing.

Suddenly, he was jerked forward because someone bounced against his back. Arms were grabbing

around him like they never wanted to leave him again. "You've made it!" Mrs. Rosen cried out. Her children chimed in, into what he felt was the first success he had achieved in his life.