

1.

“Cheap! Cheap!” the man hopped about, flashing his golden tooth. He folded back the pink protective cover across his hand and started rhythmically pushing the iPad at Robert’s abdomen.

“Cheap! New! Cheap!”

Had he needed to take his wallet from his pocket, he would have had time to think. Having only just paid for the gas and still holding his last two banknotes in his hand, he just extended his arm and the seller grabbed the orange and blue Atatürk notes. Robert clasped the edge of the hard plastic and a scampering of feet later, all that was left in the corridor between the restroom and the gas station were the rays of sun.

Robert stared in shock at the object in his hand: damaged at the corner with a dark stain on the edge. ‘It’s not new,’ was his first thought, followed by a hurricane, ‘What’s wrong with me? I’m buying stolen goods in the middle of Turkey?!?!’

He pressed the iPad against his shirt, peering worriedly around. ‘A trap? Cameras?’ The traffic roared and the sun reflected off his windshield.

He stuck the tablet under his arm and left swiftly.

In the car, he shoved it under the passenger seat as he tried to grip the key, shaking as if being shocked by electricity. He remembered scenes from a film set in a Turkish prison and felt like biting the steering wheel.

‘Calm down, calm down, calm down...’

He drove off and turned off the E-80 toward the airport at the next exit. The cold flow from the air conditioning warned him that he was soaked through.

He had dedicated his life to obeying the rules, and now, all of a sudden, complete disintegration; he had turned the final hours of his vacation into a nightmare. ‘What was I thinking? What’s wrong with me?’ he kept asking himself. ‘Is it being in a foreign country? Daring things abroad that I’d never do at home?’ When he noticed his own scared face in the rear-view mirror, he could not take his eyes off it and was only roused by the wild honking of the car in the fast lane that he was swerving toward.

He gnawed his lips with his teeth and massaged them with his tongue. His breath was bouncing off the top of his lungs like a ping-pong ball.

He did not dare lean on the counter, worried the young man at the car rental company might smell his fear. He also stayed a safe distance away during the inspection of the vehicle. The nimble employee bent over, moved back and forth, occasionally helping his eyes with his index finger, eventually establishing, "All's fine!" and handing him the release form to sign.

'Everything is fine, everything is fine, breathe!'

His eyes searched for the departures sign, his mind holding back his body in order not to attract attention by appearing to be in too much of a hurry.

He entered the building, put his luggage through the scan, and left the scent of the country outside. The universal lack of smell at airports felt comforting.

He could feel droplets of sweat on his neck and was still reassuring himself with 'Everything will be fine!' when someone grabbed his shoulder.

"Sir!"

His heart shrank and jumped.

"You forgot this!"

The young man from the rental company was handing him the iPad. Robert started shaking his head and then thought about all the lost-and-found items forms that he would have to fill in, the police...

How would he explain the pink iPad in the first place? They are probably looking for some missing teenage girl and would accuse him, a foreigner!

"Thanks!"

The young man smiled and waved, disappearing into the crowd even as Robert was considering whether he should give him a tip.

The policeman only briefly glanced at the photo in his passport and stamped it routinely.

Waiting in line to go through security triggered a new bout of sweat.

'What if I bought a bomb?'

He felt stupid; the iPad had gone through the first scan, so why should the second be a problem. 'But this one is more thorough!' squeaked a persistent little voice inside.

Pointing his finger, the security guard indicated he should open the cover.

Alone in its own tray, the device rolled into the darkness.

Robert went and sat right next to the allocated gate, superstitiously trying to avoid the hope that the purchase of the stolen object might not have any consequences.

Once again he wondered why he had been unable to restrain himself? Was he really just taken by surprise, was it a moment of weakness? A few years ago an enthusiastic colleague had brought the first iPad to the office and soon most of the people at work had one, ineptly tapping their screens at meetings. After a month or two the devices began to disappear, replaced once more with the usual laptops. The iPads were given to their children to play with.

Clearly he had bought something he did not need. He turned the cover toward the light. There were no dark patches on the plastic, signs of frequent use. The color was too girly and he wandered about the owner's true age. Perhaps she had cut herself or maybe the stain on the edge was nail varnish. He thought of smelling it but remembered where he was and restrained himself.

He found the switch and pressed it.

Nothing.

Damaged goods. He could just throw it in the garbage.

Not at the airport, it would look conspicuous.

He pressed the button again and held it.

The metallic apple appeared on the screen.

He could not take his eyes off it. It faded into the darkness, then the time and date appeared and the faces of a young Arab couple covered most of the screen. The girl was wearing a headscarf and the man, a beard so full that his nose was barely visible through his bristles, had a strange sparkle in his eyes.

It occurred to him that this was not just any stolen object but probably also contained images of other people's lives. A tingle spread from the pit of his stomach. The screen flickered under his fingers. Numbers appeared on the left and he swiped them aside. The device was asking for a four-digit password.

He entered four zeros.

The screen quivered and rejected the combination.

Airport, security cameras – he must not stand out. An owner can only make a

mistake once, twice at the most.

He switched off the device and placed it on his knees.

A part of someone else's life had fallen into his hands.

He thought about a stranger finding his own laptop and couldn't decide which was more boring, work or personal mail. All they would get were photographs arranged by date, without nakedness or sex, and a neglected profile on Facebook, a concept (he found) so ludicrous he abandoned it after a couple of months.

Unsure how his train of thought had digressed, all of a sudden he was thinking about the love letters he had written as a teenager, about the girls without whom life had seemed impossible and rejections more painful than physical punches in the stomach.

Later came dangerous letters, which, in Yugoslavia of the time, could have gotten him into prison; ones about independence, secession, and about why Socialism was doomed. Letters of yearning, letters of revolt; all now so alien and unreachable, as if his own youth had been planted upon him. He had read that until the age of twenty one, neurons are far less isolated. Was this why his emotions then were stronger than ever later on?

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It was only during takeoff that he stopped thinking about the iPad, gripping the hand-rest, afraid, as always. He had reserved an aisle seat and spent a long time fiddling with the safety belt – was he able to fasten and unfasten it? He checked the vomit bag and turned around to count the rows to the emergency exit. He stuck his asthma inhaler into his shirt pocket, continuously feeling for it with the tips of his fingers, making him look as if he was blessing himself. He clenched the hand-rest as he was pushed back into his seat during takeoff. Only once the flight attendants had risen from their seats and started walking up and down the aisle did he slowly relax, still observing them carefully, waiting for the slightest sign of pretense or hiding of the truth.

In the next row along an elderly gentleman was reading a brick thick paperback. He wore a Jesus Loves Me cap and was dressed like a boy scout long past his scouting days. Diagonally in front of him a pair of teenagers, after a long diet of low-cost

airlines, had discovered that the stewardesses were bringing food and drinks without charging for them. Ecstatic, occasionally squeaking with joy, they stacked all the cans of drinks from the in-flight menu on the tray table. The flight attendant's smile remained exemplary, only the corners of her eyes twitched.

In the window seat in his row sat a businessman writing brief sentences into four squares on his laptop, without having to pause and think about them.

The seat between them was empty.

He had not dared return the ticket when his wife had had a stroke; not for the entire month and a half she lay in a coma. Not even when she lay on the bier. Only once he had received her death certificate, all the people from the funeral had left and his son had flown back to New Zealand, did he open the file with Travels written on its cover and went to the airline company's website. They had planned a year ahead, down to the last detail. "Why don't you go?" friends and family told him. "She would have wanted you to." He was not sure she would have, yet still did not cancel the trip.

Her stroke created a rift in their universe. Andrea went toward the table, said, "Here are the keys!" and adding, "The log book and the insurance..." In some other world they continued to gather all that they needed to take their car for its service. She would reach the table, put the keys down, turn around and show him the documents. But this world only existed in a part of her brain, an island about to be overrun by a tsunami of bleeding. She thought she was putting the keys on the table and handing him the papers, but she just stood there, numbed, keys clattering as they fell and documents flying all over the floor. With a kind of grunt she had also stopped talking, her eyes overcome with surprise. He leaped and caught her.

Twenty-one years of marriage, finished.

The May Day holiday extended into a week off work, a remnant of Socialism: the empty chair next to him in the dining room, the empty passenger seat in the car, the empty beach chair, airplane seat. The empty half of their bed.

But, then ... He could lie across the entire mattress and nobody woke him up with snoring.

He cleaned his hands with antiseptic gel, ate, and once more began thinking about the iPad. He kept the cover flap vertical and stared at the young faces for a long time.

Mostly the girl; not a particularly pretty face, somewhat kind, perhaps because of the corners of her mouth that seemed promising ground for growing laughter lines. Her scarf suited her, Robert found it exotic. He noticed a metal object between the faces and he had to look carefully before recognizing it as the barrel of a gun. Quickly he closed the cover.

Splinters of news he had heard before traveling arose from his memory. About the Islamic caliphate, extremists traveling to Istanbul and then crossing the Syrian border. Among the young men many a failed rapper who had decided to put into practice the violence praised in their songs. He remembered the faces of girls who had gone to bear the children of fighters, their teenage zeal and soft features, yet to be coarsened by experience.

He had difficulties swallowing his saliva and realized his shirt had stuck against the seat when he moved. What if he had a device full of secrets and there would be khanjar-bearing spies waiting for him at the airport in Ljubljana? He felt silly, but the fear remained. 'Nobody knows,' he kept reassuring himself. 'The thief is unlikely to talk.' Even if he did, Robert's looks did not make him stand out and anyway, it had all happened so quickly.

Once more he attempted to guess the code, starting by tapping all the vertical combinations.

"I also keep forgetting these passwords," the businessman next to him said without looking away from the large chart.

Robert blushed, mumbled in acknowledgement, cleared his throat, repeated more clearly his agreement and quickly switched off the tablet.

They landed on time and the plane was filled with the beeping of mobile phones returning to life. The businessman immediately called his secretary, the teenagers their mothers, and Jesus Loves Me closed his eyes, probably communicating telepathically. Robert sent a message to his home water heating system to switch itself on.

He started unpacking in his usual order. The maps of Turkey went on the shelf with all the other maps of the countries he had visited. Clothes went into the laundry

basket, regardless of whether he had worn them or not. Finally he spent a long time thoroughly soaping his hands. Remembering the one incongruous item, he spread paper towels on his writing desk, placed the iPad on them and sprayed it with disinfectant. He took a shower, put on the kettle and switched on the TV. Bare legs sticking from the bushes, followed by a shot of rounded metal and an open suitcase. Someone was poking at it with the tip of their boot, moving a T-shirt to reveal the cover of a Lonely Planet guide to Turkey.

Robert stood and stared.

They were showing the bony face of a man who at first glance looked as if he had only just woken up but was probably just in shock. His mouth opened and subtitles appeared on the screen. The translator had tried to catch the rhythm of what the man was saying by using dot-dot-dots.

“Some of them... fell like angels. Everything was torn off them. They were left naked... but without any visible injuries.”

Robert realized the sound was switched off and tried to find the right button on the remote.

A map with Istanbul written on it appeared on screen and a cartoon-like red and yellow star flashed on the green background.

The newsreader spoke of a plane crash that had happened earlier in the day, at half past eleven...

The crackling sound of static made Robert move his face away from the screen that he had almost crawled into.

A field on the outskirts of Istanbul...

He remembered a family trip to the seaside quite a number of years ago when their son was still a little boy. They went by train. “An adventure!” his wife had said. In the seat next to them sat a man with a moustache who never stopped talking, so, without really being interested, they still found out all about him. Among other things, he told them about being a driver in the army in 1963, driving trucks that took troops to help with the rescue operation after the earthquake in Skopje. Robert noted with fascination how the man’s eyes widened when he talked about the thieves that had descended like scavenging locusts onto the ruined town. And about soldiers who shot

them, and some unfortunate sod, caught with pocketfuls of gold jewelry that he insisted was his, but who was still put in front of a firing squad.

Fortunately, their son had fallen asleep and when the man had gone to the toilet Andrea whispered, "I don't like him. He can't be clean either! In circumstances like those, he too must have either stolen or shot! You can't resist the crowd!"

Locusts.

Robert did not have the patience to switch on the computer. He found an old school atlas and quickly ascertained the location of the accident, then Istanbul, the road that was probably where the modern highway was built – the map confirmed what he had already figured out in his head: it was possible.

Locusts are the first on the site of disaster. They grab, they run and sell on as fast as possible.

"Cheap! Cheap!"

He turned around and stood at the desk. The pink case was lying on paper towels. He could not take his eyes off the red stain on the edge and the damaged corner it lead to.

## 2.

It took him three days to find the right code. At first he searched for a magical solution on the Internet, found all sorts of stuff on YouTube, from an Indian with his back turned to the camera, boasting of his successes, to a young guy pressing buttons that did not exist on the iPad Robert had. He then resorted to desperate reading of far too-technical articles. The one thing that appeared most logical was the information that people chose passwords based on their name, information he could not use. The sheer volume of advice had already taken up more of his time than it promised to save, so, furious with himself, he said out loud what he had figured out right away, "Ten thousand combinations, let's say two seconds for each one: manageable."

He could have continued guessing night and day, engrossed and maybe even obsessed, but he made himself stop when he realized that the device had taken over his entire life. He set up a map of tasks: ten minutes of guessing the combination before work, half an hour after his afternoon nap, an hour before bed. He found a



notebook and started slowly filling its pages with series of numbers tried.

On Wednesday evening, a few minutes before the end of his session, the lock screen background disappeared and app icons lined up on the desktop. He was expecting Arabic and was relieved to find the names in English.

He picked up his pen and circled the right combination 3672.

He gulped with unease and felt his fingers tremble and his Adam's apple drop hesitantly.

Excitement: where should he start?

He knew, of course – the photos.

Yes, a young girl.

He did not want to rush. He started with the most recent ones. The last shots were taken on the third of May and showed the airplane. He feared seeing her face, but without any sense of composition, she had taken a shot of the headrest, the heads of passengers and an approaching flight attendant.

'I'm looking at dead people!' he shuddered.

He scrolled down the screen, faster and faster, countless shots of the same face in hundreds of different poses. It started on the nineteenth of January. Robert wasn't good at guessing ages and usually avoided doing so in order not to hurt anyone's feelings or cause resentment but to him the girl looked around twenty. She was bending over the camera in the first shot, – dark hair falling across the shoulders, carefully shaped eyebrows arching above her green eyes, an earring glistening at the side. On her left hand she wore a silicone wristband with a message. He had to look at a number of photos before he could reconstruct it to read, "Life's a bitch". In the first set of photos she looked a little sleepy and, judging by her collar, had taken the shots whilst still in her pajamas. In the next set she was already dressed in a pink T-shirt, pouting her lips. This was followed by a long selection of emotions and expressions: the young girl looking sad, happy, angry, excited, tired, flirtatious... as if she was trying out all her face was capable of.

She returned to her iPad the following day and discovered special effects.

Technology distorted, skewed, twirled, rendered, stretched and pinched her face; Robert remembered his fear during takeoff and the accident; his stomach almost

churned up his dinner.

After that, the joy of taking snapshots wore off and she had only returned to it on one other occasion, the sixth of February. It began with her face, wrapped in black cloth, a pair of wide eyes staring at the camera. 'Is she really an Arab girl?' Robert wondered, the pale face of the previous shots not really pointing to a Middle Eastern connection.

A young bearded man with a white keffiyeh appeared at her side. They took a series with the self-timer. The man first held a knife, then an axe and finally a gun that looked like a hunting rifle – it was the cropped version of one of these images that adorned the home screen. Then the girl was standing up, her hand on her belly, the young man with his arm around her. These were followed by humorous shots of the girl pulling out a sofa cushion from under her dress and replacing it with a larger pillow from the bed in order to create a woman in the later stages of pregnancy. Finally, the young family, armed with various home weapons, the baby in their arms, all wrapped up. The serious faces burst out laughing and started throwing the plastic doll in the air, making it little more than a blur.

Then there were close-ups of the girl crying and a shot of the man standing next to her, shouting, his hands raised and his mouth barely visible through his beard. In the final shots were laughing and looking lovingly at each other.

The following day she photographed some kind of posters, and that was all.

Robert found the sharpest photograph of the young man and zoomed in. The beard was obviously fake, covering most of his face apart from the eyes and the nose. After fearing he was going to come across Islamic State terrorists, confidential information and beheadings, Robert now wondered, 'What is all this? Planning a future life together or even just a costume party?' He felt relief, frustration with his own fears and disappointment.

He tried to open the Facebook page that demanded a password, as did the 'Messages' app. E-mail was not even set up.

Once more he flicked through the photos and shook his head, infuriated by the stupidity of youth and the strangeness of foreigners.

He went to wash his hands and wondered what to do with the tablet. The easiest

thing would be to just sell it on, but he remembered recent talk of inspectors posing as buyers and demanding receipts and proof. He would never risk getting caught by the mechanisms of the state over such a triviality. Colleagues and acquaintances knew his unfavorable attitude to flashy devices like this and would, were he to offer it to them, ask more questions than he could afford the answers to.

He finally satisfied the iPad's request for connecting to a wireless network and searched the web for news about the plane crash. There were no reports of thieves. After work he would lie down on the sofa and take a twenty-minute nap but this time he knew he would not sleep. Almost immediately he pulled the iPad out of its case; nothing, there was no hidden document or anything. He threw the pink plastic into the recycling bin and, for the first time, the metal left in his hand felt neutral enough for him to forget its provenance and adopt it as his own.

Sixteen minutes left. He lay down again.

He would need to delete all these photos. He found the settings menu and was about to press the icon that would delete all content.

He stopped.

One more peek.

Whoever she was, she is dead. He zoomed into her picture until all that filled the screen were her eyes. As if they were wavering between coldness and a smile. He could get used to them. His wife's eyes were dark green, though he did not consciously know this until three years into their marriage when it became the topic of conversation in the company of friends. Though all but one of the men at the table got it wrong, Andrea resented him for never noticing.

He took another look at the young man. Bushy beard looked as if someone had stuck a broom under his nose. Were they really getting ready for a costume party? Was there no secret behind these photographs? He was surprised at the disappointment he felt.

He found a shot in which the man was stretching his hand toward the iPad. Clearly something had not worked with the self-timer program and his hand turned into a blurred smudge. Robert always deleted imperfect shots, even if keeping them no longer meant paying for having the photographs developed. Young people with all

this technology that only encourages waste annoyed him. They don't even need to get ready to take a photograph, take their time, focus the lens, hold their breath and push the shutter release. Bursts of consumption that end up on ever larger drives, digital fossils that will never be unearthed.

Delete, it all needs to be deleted.

What about the shots of the posters?

They were taken under a different light, probably in a different place. The first was a picture of a man stuck on a plank of wood, entirely pierced with darts that stuck out from his cheek. The second appeared like a paper collage, roughly cut out of photographs and he had to look at it a number of times before he understood its meaning: the face of a woman, 'middle-aged' as they call those clearly expected to live into their nineties, that had something dark stuck in the middle of her forehead. Zooming in he saw it was hairy. A vagina, he realized with disgust and lifted his fingers so the image shrunk again.

Heart pounding, he went to drink a glass of water.

He searched for images that showed more of the surroundings. He found two, one of the selfies, the other in what he was already calling the Arab series. The place looked like a home and not a hotel room. The curtain was drawn across the window to the left, partially allowing the light into the room, but affording him no view. A bed and some colorful sheets protruded into the right corner of the picture. There was a second light switched on out of the shot, perhaps on a writing desk. Something was mounted on the wall in the background. A poster? No, it was a calendar with some lettering under the photograph.

He tried to zoom in order to decipher the lettering but the iPad refused to go further.

He went to the shop and bought a cable. Had he known cost, he would have stayed at home, he kept telling himself while transferring the image to his computer.

It was indeed a calendar.

The lettering under the photograph read Hlebnik Car Dealers and had the SQ Slovenian Quality logo next to it.

He felt as if something heavy had jumped onto him from a great height. For as long as the secret was Turkish or French or in any way foreign, it hovered far above him

and he was able to probe and scrutinize it; but the moment he realized that he lived in the same country, he could feel the control over his own life slipping through his hands. He reread the news about the accident and the statement from Foreign Ministry that no Slovenian citizens were on board. But ... How?