

Prologue

Foxes are well camouflaged with coppery red fur allowing them to blend into their surroundings. With quiet steps they tread through the thicket, between shadow and light, amid the night's shades of gray. When humans see foxes, it's only because they want us to. Or because some instinct has failed them, was overtaken by another.

Even before leaving her den, the vixen smells what the wind carries in her direction—things that have happened hundreds of meters away and everything along the way. It has rained, and not for the first time that day. The last droplets fall from the trees, landing on the vixen's fur. Undeterred, she sinks her paws into the damp forest floor and moves on.

Occasionally, foxes hold their breath and play dead to lure prey. It's mostly birds that fall for this trick, as if drawn to the brilliance of that red fur. But the vixen is not hungry, and doesn't feel like hunting. Another instinct drives her to the edge of the forest where a house comes into view. The clouds above begin to crack open.

The vixen comes to a halt, gives three short barks, followed by another, barking at the house. She's trying to make contact, perhaps waiting for a sign of life. When she gets no response, she continues her path through the tall, wet grass. Her destination: a window standing open, or slightly ajar. With one quick leap, she moves from one habitat to the next.

A tuft of fur catches on the window frame. Foxes have always been forced to fear for their fur, that coveted trophy. The donning of dead animals expresses a deep-seated longing to end being human, if only for a moment. The vixen wouldn't dream of slipping into another skin, least of all a human's—why should she?

She jumps from the windowsill to the kitchen counter and pauses for a moment. For a moment, she could be mistaken for a preserved animal specimen, a masterpiece of taxidermy. From this point on, the vixen can no longer trust her sense of smell. Too many impressions are coming at her from all sides. She leaps from the counter and sneaks down the hallway to the foyer, where she stops in front of a heavy door and scratches at the metal with her claws. But it remains shut. As with yesterday. And the day before. Today, too, the door refuses to open.

/01/ irreversible physical processes

We observe irreversible physical processes every day. Spiders shed their skins in my apartment. Their webs look abandoned, as though they were vacated. They collect dust. Sometimes, they jitter eerily in the draft. Eerie too is the light seeping through the window into the room, forcing its way into the deposit bottles, where it slowly warms the last drops of beer which, taken together, might have sufficed for one final sip.

The sound of the municipal siren reminds me to water my plants. It's only the test alarm. As the sirens surge and fade, I fill the watering can and move from room to room, thinking how improbably gruesome it would be if an actual catastrophe occurred and the test alarm covered up a real alarm, because somewhere a nuclear power plant exploded or the war unexpectedly moved a few hundred meters closer—meanwhile people go on watering geraniums, hang laundry, skip to the next song on their playlists as the wind carries the radiation closer and closer, as rockets launch, as rockets strike.

My gaze falls on the refracted rays in the empty beer bottles. I remove two painkillers from the blister pack, thinking: self-care. My phone lights up, Sophia writes that she loves me. *Love you too*, I reply, lighting a cigarette. The days have started blurring together. Ever since I stopped teaching, my days have become interchangeable, though I'm not sure how I'd like them to unfold instead.

The principal was visibly relieved when I entered her office with the completed application for a leave of absence. No sooner had I sat down than the form was signed. All the best for your project, she said, shaking my hand. I had to hold on firmly so my palm wouldn't slip.

All the best for your book, Sandra said to me later, giving me a long hug. And don't miss the Christmas party! Not if I can avoid it, I replied. Sandra laughed—she knew what I was getting at. Our Christmas parties were an excuse for bad music, too much booze, and awkward dancing. The younger colleague pulls me closer to him than is appropriate, while the older one keeps asking me to go home with her. The colleague with the doll collection. Are they allowed to watch? I asked as she led us past the illuminated dolls in a display case by her bed. Admittedly, it wasn't a one and done thing. We haven't needed Christmas parties as an excuse to hook up in a long while.

Sometimes people ask me if I miss teaching. But all I miss is the ringing of the school bell at the end of class, an acoustic marker indicating you've accomplished something. That it's okay to pack up and leave. It was never easy for me to talk about my job. Few people have a concrete idea of what happens in coding class. So I came up with a standard response: The art lies in hiding the zeros and ones.

On my desk lies the letter with the diagnosis. I've folded the paper and returned it to the envelope. I'd like to put it back in the mailbox. *How are you today?* Sophia writes, *How is your dictionary?* My dictionary is, in truth, a box of index cards. I collect stories about loss on cards, and for the past few years, I've been toying with the idea of turning them into a book—a dictionary of loss. In too short a time, I told too many people about my plan. Now they think I'm working on it seriously. Sometimes, on days with a test alarm, for example, I feel the need to at least organize the cards and come up with a classification system that makes sense to more than just me.

I pull out a few cards. It's hard to decipher my own handwriting; not all entries were made sober. I put them back and sit down at the computer to check what's in my workflow today. Since I no longer teach, I've been working a few hours a week for a development studio that recently released its first video game. My tasks include communicating the latest patch notes on our website and on various forums. The others on the team are good at fixing bugs and glitches, all I need to do is find the right words. They've sent me a list of changes, and starting tomorrow, the new version is supposed to be available for download. I decide to deal with it later.

I realize I've only watered half my plants. Some days, I'm not sure if I have attention issues or just don't want to engage with this world, this life. I light a cigarette and smoke out the window. Birds have built their nest in one of the courtyard trees. Birds, one of the programmers tells me, are the hardest thing for him to handle. He doesn't know a single video game that captures them convincingly. I often think about that. And feathers sprout from the damp smoke of my cigarette.

losing the thread

I don't yet know where this text is going. Into a labyrinth, perhaps. What I wouldn't give for Ariadne's thread, a clear beginning, a distinct end.

Imagine a dating show: Ten men competing for one woman, but first they must navigate a labyrinth, kill something for her, then find their way back out. Depending on how charming and attractive she finds the men, she sends them on their way with longer or shorter pieces of thread. And if she gets it right, if her calculations are correct, her favorite survives. Or at least one she sort of likes.

The hall of mirrors is a particular kind of labyrinth. But it's not the distortions of the concave and convex mirrors that trouble us. It's the flat mirrors we can barely stand, where every beam of light reflects back at precisely the same angle, forcing us to admit: Yes, this is us.