

Misanthropic Tale

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The Greeting Disaster

Martin Griesgram stared at his window with the suspicion of a man who had just spotted a sniper on the rooftop opposite. For out there, beyond the safe walls of his apartment, lurked something far more dangerous than any weapon: a new neighbor. And not just any neighbor, but the worst kind—one who smiled.

It was a glorious spring day, one of those days that inspired normal people to open their windows, go for walks, and—the thought made Martin shudder—strike up spontaneous conversations with strangers. The sun shone with an almost offensive intensity from the sky, as if personally insisting that Martin leave his home and participate in what was called "life." He pulled the curtains a little further closed.

"Maybe he'll disappear again," Martin muttered hopefully into his three-day-old stubble as he peered through a narrow gap between his curtains. The new neighbor—a man in his thirties with the permanent grin of a salesman who had just reached his quarterly bonus—stood in front of the entrance, cheerfully whistling while unloading moving boxes from a rented van.

The last occupant of the apartment across the hall had been a dream—an elderly gentleman who, after a curt nod at Martin's move-in, had consistently ignored him for five years. A master of non-acknowledgment, a virtuoso of social distance, a true artist of living alongside one another without interaction. His death three weeks ago had deeply affected Martin, not for sentimental reasons, of course, but because he knew that the chance of having a like-minded neighbor was statistically as likely as finding a meaningful contribution in a Facebook comment section.

Martin looked at his watch. He had a dentist appointment, and as much as he hated the forced mouth opening and reproachful looks when asked about his use of dental floss, he hated tardiness even more. Tardiness meant attention, and attention was the natural enemy of any decent misanthrope.

With a sigh as deep as the abyss between human self-perception and reality, he put on his jacket. He had meticulously planned everything: he would leave the house exactly when the neighbor was inside, fetching more boxes. The perfect moment for an unobserved exit.

Martin opened his door a crack and peered out like a guinea pig checking the airspace for predatory

birds. The hallway was empty. Perfect. With the agility of a man who had spent years perfecting the art of becoming invisible, he slipped out of his apartment and closed the door as quietly as if he were sneaking past a sleeping dragon.

Three steps toward the stairwell. Two steps. One step...

"Helloooo! You must be my new neighbor!"

The words hit Martin like a wet towel slap in a locker room full of pubescent schoolboys—unexpected, unpleasant, and in a situation where one was particularly vulnerable. He froze mid-movement, his right foot hovering in the air for a moment before he slowly put it down and turned around with the enthusiasm of a man condemned to death.

The man beamed. He radiated with an intensity that could probably be used as an alternative energy source in some countries. In his arms, he held a box marked with thick black marker "Kitchen Stuff & Memories"—a combination that told Martin more than he ever wanted to know about this person.

"I'm Thomas! Thomas Sonnenschein!" The man balanced the box on one knee and extended his hand to Martin as if this were the most natural act

in the world and not a barbaric custom from the depths of social hell.

Thomas Sonnenschein . Of course that was his name. Martin would have also bet on "Frohsinn" or "Freudenreich." The universe was obviously having a particularly cynical day.

"Martin Griesgram," he replied tonelessly and shook the offered hand as briefly as possible, while his brain frantically searched for an excuse that would nip this conversation in the bud. "Sorry, I have an appointment."

"Oh, no problem! We have plenty of time to get to know each other. I'm just moving in." Thomas unnecessarily gestured toward the open door across the hall, as if he needed to emphasize this obvious information. "I'm from Freiburg. Moved here for work. I'm in the events industry—making people happy, so to speak!"

Martin briefly considered whether spontaneous self-combustion was a realistic escape option. Events industry. The only job title that was worse than "influencer" or "motivational trainer."

"How nice for you," Martin pressed out and took a subtle step toward the stairs. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Of course! Sorry for the hold-up! But hey—I'm planning a small housewarming party on Saturday.

Nothing big, just a few people from the neighborhood so we can all get to know each other. You're cordially invited, of course!"

Martin had experienced many terrible things in his life. He had survived tax audits, been stuck in elevators with strangers who wanted to "enjoy the day," and once accidentally noted the wrong date for a family gathering and showed up a day early, only to witness his Uncle Herbert practicing nudism in the garden. But nothing—*nothing*—was as horrific as the prospect of a housewarming party with a man named Thomas Sonnenschein from the events industry.

"I'm... unfortunately busy," Martin lied. "Family commitments."

"Oh, what a shame!" Thomas actually looked disappointed, as if he had just been told that world peace would not break out this week after all. "But perhaps another time? I quite often have small get-togethers. My friends always say I'm a natural host."

Martin had no doubt that Thomas's friends told him many things—probably mostly encouraging, positive things that in the real world were as rare as functioning printers or honest politicians.

"Perhaps," said Martin in a tone that should have discouraged even the most optimistic person. But Thomas Sonnenschein was obviously immune to subtle social cues—or even fairly obvious ones.

"Great! I'm looking forward to it! Oh, and if you ever need sugar or anything—just ring my bell! Neighborly help is the essence of harmonious coexistence, isn't it?"

Martin had never in his life asked a neighbor for sugar. He would rather have eaten his own pancreas than beg a stranger for food. But he just nodded silently, unable to muster any more social energy for this conversation.

"I really must go now," he said with a glance at his watch, which showed him he still had twenty minutes. Twenty minutes he would rather spend in silent suffering on an uncomfortable waiting room chair than another second in the presence of this human embodiment of a happiness hormone.

"Of course, of course! I don't want to keep you! Have a nice day, Mr. Griesgram! See you!"

That was exactly what Martin feared.

The dentist visit had been a welcome distraction. It said a lot about Martin's life situation that he found the high-frequency drilling noises and the smell of

fear and fluoride relaxing compared to a conversation with his new neighbor. As he turned into his street, he fervently hoped that the move would be completed, and Thomas Sonnenschein would be safely stowed away in his apartment, preferably with closed curtains and a suddenly developed sensitivity to noise.

But fate, that sadistic scriptwriter of real life, had other plans.

The van was still there, and Thomas was not alone. Next to him stood three more people—a woman with a hairstyle that looked as if it had recently attended a motivational workshop for hair, a man wearing a T-shirt that said "POSITIVE VIBES ONLY" (a slogan that Martin perceived as a direct personal attack), and an older lady who was probably Mrs. Müller from the ground floor, a notorious gossip and self-proclaimed soul of the house.

Martin briefly considered pretending to live in a different building. He could just walk on, go around the block, and come back in an hour. Or in two hours. Or he could go to a hotel and stay there until Thomas Sonnenschein found a better position in another city.

But before he could put his escape plan into action, Mrs. Müller had spotted him.

"Mr. Griesgram! Come over here! Have you met our new neighbor yet?"

Four pairs of eyes turned to him, each filled with the expectation of social interaction. Martin felt like a rabbit caught in headlights, except that rabbits in this situation had the advantage that no one expected them to make polite conversation.

With the enthusiasm of a man being led to the scaffold, Martin shuffled over to the small group.

"We've already met," he mumbled, carefully avoiding any eye contact.

"Yes, we've already had the pleasure!" Thomas beamed again as if Martin were a long-lost friend and not someone he had met for the first time a few hours ago. "Martin lives right across from me!"

"Oh, how lovely!" The woman with the motivated hairstyle actually clapped her hands as if she had just been told that Christmas would happen twice this year. "By the way, I'm Sabine, Thomas's sister. I'm just helping with the move today, but unfortunately I don't live here. A pity, really, it seems like such a nice building!"

Martin, who at that moment perceived the existence of Thomas's genetic relatives as a personal threat, just nodded silently. The thought

that there were more people out there with Sonnenschein DNA was disturbing.

"And I'm Marc, a buddy of Thomas from the event scene!" The man in the Positive-Vibes shirt extended a hand to Martin, which Martin reluctantly took. "Thomas told us you're coming to the housewarming party! It's going to be super!"

Martin gave Thomas a look that in more civilized times would have been considered a formal declaration of war.

"I said I was busy," he corrected with icy voice.

"Oh, really?" Thomas frowned, an expression that looked as out of place on his sunny face as an umbrella in the Sahara. "I thought you said 'maybe'?"

"The 'maybe' referred to future hypothetical invitations, not to Saturday's party," Martin clarified with the patience of a man explaining to a child for the fifth time why the moon is not made of cheese.

"Oh!" Thomas laughed heartily as if Martin had made a particularly good joke and wasn't just trying to wriggle out of a social obligation. "Well, we can change that! What are you doing on Saturday?"

At that moment, Martin wished for nothing more than the ability to dissolve into thin air. Or at least

the ability to tell socially acceptable lies without blushing. Unfortunately, neither was granted to him.

"I'm... visiting my family," he finally said, a sentence that technically wasn't a complete lie. He did indeed plan to call his sister, and telephone communication could certainly be interpreted as a form of "visiting" if one stretched the definition very, very generously.

"Family is important!" Mrs. Müller nodded wisely. "But you know what? The party will certainly go late into the night. Perhaps you could join us later?"

Martin felt like he was sinking in quicksand—the more he tried to escape the situation, the deeper he was pulled in.

"I'll see what I can do," he finally replied, a formulation he thought vague enough to later claim he had never agreed, but polite enough to finally end this conversation.

"Fantastic!" Thomas clapped his hands, a gesture that Martin had already identified as a genetic Sonnenschein trait at this point. "We start around seven. Don't bring anything except good spirits!"

Good spirits. Martin felt that he would more likely find a functioning fusion reactor in his pants pocket than good spirits for a neighborhood party.

"If you'll excuse me now," he mumbled, gesturing vaguely toward his apartment entrance. "I have... things to do."

"Of course, of course!" Thomas nodded understandingly, as if "things to do" were a completely legitimate and detailed explanation. "We'll see you on Saturday then! Or maybe earlier in the stairwell!"

Martin fled with the speed of a man who had just noticed that the last subway was leaving in two minutes. He raced up the stairs, ignoring the painful protest of his cheek still numb from the dentist visit, and reached his apartment door gasping for breath. With trembling hands, he unlocked the door, entered, and leaned against the closed door from the inside as if he had just survived a zombie attack.

In a way, he had.

Evening came, and with it the realization that Martin had a serious problem. The prospect of a housewarming party on Saturday hung over him like a sword of Damocles, except that in this case, the sword consisted of small talk, forced smiles, and the constant fear of being asked about his hobbies.

Martin had hobbies, of course he did. He enjoyed reading dark Scandinavian crime novels where the landscape was as depressing as human nature. He collected old vinyl records by bands no one knew and that mostly no longer existed. And he spent considerable time discussing the incorrect scientific assumptions in science fiction movies in internet forums. But somehow, these activities never seemed to elicit the right response at social occasions. People expected answers like "marathon running" or "volunteer work with disadvantaged youth," not "I analyze the philosophical subtexts of dystopian novels from the 1970s."

With a sigh, he opened his refrigerator and stared at the sad contents: half a jar of pickles, an opened package of Gouda that was already developing an interesting greenish hue, and a single bottle of beer he kept for emergencies. This seemed to be such an emergency.

He took the bottle, opened it, and collapsed onto his worn couch, which by now was so perfectly adapted to his body that it practically formed an extension of his skeleton.

As he took a deep swig of beer, he considered his options. He could pretend to be sick—but that would probably only lead to unwanted get-well wishes and possibly even a visit with chicken soup.

He could claim to have to make a sudden business trip—but that would be implausible since, as far as Thomas knew, he was visiting his family on the weekend. He could, of course, simply not be there and later claim he had forgotten the invitation—but that would probably only lead to another invitation.

No, there was only one way out: he would have to go. But he would need a plan. A strategic plan that would allow him to minimize his social presence while giving the impression of participating.

Martin took another sip of beer and began to devise his battle plan.

First: He would arrive late, at least an hour after the party started. This would mean that the initial excitement over each new guest would have already subsided, making it easier to remain unnoticed.

Second: He would bring a gift—something impersonal but polite. A bottle of wine, perhaps, although... no, Thomas seemed the type to enthusiastically present his wine collection and drag Martin into a conversation about vintages and terroirs. A plant might be better—nobody expected a profound conversation about a potted plant.

Third: He would prepare an escape plan. A pre-arranged call from his own landline to his mobile

could serve as a "family emergency" and enable an early departure.

As he pondered these thoughts, Martin noticed that his beer was already empty. With a resigned sigh, he placed the bottle on the coffee table. He would need to buy more beer tomorrow, a lot more beer, if he was going to survive this Saturday.

Just as he was considering whether he should still go to the nearest late-night shop, his doorbell rang. Martin froze. He had had exactly two visitors in the last three years: once the package carrier who had gotten the floor wrong, and once a Jehovah's Witness who subsequently decided that Martin's soul might already be lost.

With the caution of a bomb disposal expert, he crept to the door and peered through the peephole. There he stood, Thomas Sonnenschein, with a broad smile and something that suspiciously looked like cake.

Martin briefly considered pretending not to be home. But the light in his apartment was on, and he had the distinct feeling that Thomas was the type of person who would leave a handwritten note with a smiley face for an absent resident.

With the resignation of a condemned man, Martin opened the door a crack.

"Hello, neighbor!" Thomas's voice seemed to have the ability to ignore any decent measure of volume. "I thought I'd bring you a piece of cake—my sister baked it to celebrate the move!"

Martin stared at the offered plate. It was a piece of cheesecake, decorated with—of course—a smiley face made of fruit sauce.

"That... wasn't necessary," said Martin, which in his personal translation meant: "Why, in the name of all that is holy, are you doing this to me?"

"Oh, that's just natural! Good neighborliness begins with small gestures!" Thomas was still beaming, apparently immune to Martin's obvious discomfort. "May I come in for a moment? I also wanted to give you the official invitation for Saturday."

Official invitation? Martin had vaguely hoped that the verbal invitation was so informal that he could later dismiss it as a misunderstanding. But a written invitation made it official, binding, inescapable.

"I'm in the shower right now," Martin lied, although he was fully dressed and obviously dry as he stood before Thomas.

Thomas blinked in confusion but seemed to decide to ignore this obvious untruth. "Then I won't disturb you for long! Here's the cake." He pressed

the plate into Martin's hand. "And here's the invitation." He pulled an envelope from his pocket, pink with glittering stars. "It's a small themed party, you know? 'Neighbors Without Borders'—everyone brings something from their culture or homeland. I thought it would be a nice way to celebrate the diversity in our building!"

Martin stared at the envelope as if it were an excommunication letter from the Pope. "Themed party," he repeated tonelessly. The situation had just escalated from "unbearable" to "apocalyptic."

"Exactly! It'll be super! Mrs. Müller is bringing Swabian potato salad, Mr. Özdemir from the second floor has promised Turkish specialties, and I myself will create a Baden-style Black Forest cake according to my grandmother's recipe!" Thomas seemed so excited by this idea that Martin almost expected him to start dancing at any moment.

"I'm... not sure if I... have anything typical..." stammered Martin, who had never done or owned anything "typical" in his life and whose culinary skills were limited to heating up ready meals and the occasional cooking of spaghetti.

"Oh, don't worry! It doesn't have to be anything complicated! Maybe a special drink? Or a family tradition? Any contribution is welcome!" Thomas winked at him encouragingly, a gesture that Martin

would normally have taken as a reason to book a two-week vacation in a remote mountain hotel.

"Very well," muttered Martin, unable to find another way out. "Thank you for... all this."

"You're welcome! See you on Saturday at the latest! Enjoy the cake!" With one last radiant smile, Thomas turned to leave before turning around once more. "Oh, and if you know someone you'd like to bring—girlfriend, friend, family—feel free to bring him or her! The more, the merrier!"

With these words, Thomas finally disappeared, and Martin closed the door with the relief of a man who had just escaped from the jaws of a shark. He leaned his head against the cool wooden surface and took a deep breath.

So now he not only had a housewarming party ahead of him but a *themed* housewarming party to which he was supposed to bring something "typical." And he had a written invitation, which meant he couldn't later claim he knew nothing about the whole thing.

With the cheesecake in hand, Martin shuffled back to his couch. He examined the smiley face made of fruit sauce that grinned cheerfully at him and felt an irrational urge to destroy it. Instead, he took a fork from the kitchen and reluctantly tried a bite.

The worst part was: the cake tasted fantastic.

That, Martin decided as he took another bite, only made the whole situation more unbearable. If Thomas and his family had at least been incompetent in one thing—in cake baking, in invitation designing, in basic decency—then he could have simply dismissed them as incompetent nuisances. But no, they had to be perfect, with their perfect cakes and their perfect invitations and their perfect, repulsive friendliness.

Martin opened the glittering envelope and pulled out a card that was so cheerful and colorful that it probably violated some visual health regulations. "NEIGHBORS WITHOUT BORDERS" was written in large, colorful letters, framed by small drawn people holding hands.

Martin stared at the card and felt his stomach tighten. At that moment, he knew with absolute certainty that the coming Saturday would be the worst day of his life so far.

With a deep sigh, Martin dropped the invitation on the table and reached for the last piece of cheesecake. If he had to descend into social hell, he could at least do so on a full stomach.

The next few days were spent in a state of mental preparation that would have done a soldier proud before a dangerous mission. He searched his wardrobe for something that was both inconspicuous and respectable enough not to attract the attention of a host. He finally settled on gray pants and a dark blue shirt—the uniform of every invisible man.

More difficult was the question of what the hell he should bring to this absurd "Neighbors Without Borders" party. After hours of pondering that almost drove him to madness, he remembered a bottle of herbal liqueur that his aunt had given him for Christmas two years ago. He had banished it to the furthest corner of his kitchen cabinet, as he was generally suspicious of drinks whose color resembled radioactive waste. But now it appeared as the perfect solution—German enough to pass as a "cultural contribution" and high-proof enough to possibly make the evening more bearable.

On Saturday morning, Martin woke up with the vague feeling that something terrible was about to happen. For a brief, blissful moment, his mind was still empty, freed from the knowledge of the impending social catastrophe. Then the memory returned, and with it a feeling of existential despair so deep that he briefly considered pulling the

blanket over his head and staying in bed until the next decade.

Instead, he got up, showered, and spent an unusually long period examining his reflection. He looked the same as always: narrow face, permanent crease between the eyebrows, hair that stubbornly refused to take any presentable form. The face of a man who, in the great drama of life, had been given the role of the grumpy extra.

"You can do this," he told his reflection, with all the conviction of a politician telling an obvious lie. "Two hours. Maximum. You hand over the bottle, take a drink, stand in a corner for fifteen minutes, and then disappear with the excuse of a sudden migraine attack."

His reflection didn't look convinced.

The day dragged on like a visit to the tax accountant. Martin completed his usual Saturday routines—shopping (early in the morning, when the probability of encountering other people was minimal), doing laundry, reading a bit in his current Scandinavian crime novel—but everything felt like the last activities of a man condemned to death.

At 7:30 p.m., Martin finally stood in front of his apartment door, the bottle of herbal liqueur in

hand, staring at his wristwatch as if he could stop time through pure willpower. From across the hall, music and laughter were already drifting over to him. He recognized the melody—something cheerful and poppy that dominated the charts and that Martin despised on principle.

With one last, deep breath, he stepped out into the hallway and closed his door. The few steps to the apartment opposite felt like a march to the guillotine.

He knocked, although the door was already slightly ajar. It was immediately opened wide, and Thomas Sonnenschein stood before him, this time in a tropical patterned shirt so bright that it could probably have been approved by the International Aviation Authority as an emergency signal.

"MARTIN!" Thomas's face lit up as if he had just been told that Christmas would be a month early this year. "You came! I'm so happy! Come in, come in!"

Before Martin could even say "Good evening," he was grabbed by the arm and pulled into the apartment like a reluctant child at the dentist.

The apartment had exactly the same layout as his own, but that's where the similarities ended. While Martin's apartment was painted in subdued,

inconspicuous colors—mainly various shades of beige and gray that were so neutral they wouldn't have stood out in a color blindness test—Thomas had painted his walls in a rich orange. *Orange* . A color that Martin personally considered a direct attack on the human retina.

The furniture was an eclectic mix of modern IKEA pieces and what looked like flea market finds that someone had restored with far too much enthusiasm and creativity. Plants were everywhere, green, lush potted plants that reminded Martin of a small jungle. He briefly wondered if Thomas was running a secret cannabis cultivation but immediately dismissed the thought—this man was probably too positive for illegal activities.

"This is for you," Martin mumbled and handed Thomas the bottle, consciously switching to the informal "du" to at least overcome this social hurdle. "A... German herbal liqueur."

"Oh, fantastic!" Thomas took the bottle and examined it as if it were a rare work of art and not a cheap liqueur that could be bought in any supermarket for under ten euros. "I'll put it with the other drinks right away! Come, let me introduce you to the others!"

And thus began Martin's personal hell.

In the next half hour, he was introduced to no fewer than twelve people, whose names he immediately forgot, with the exception of Mrs. Müller (whom he already knew), an older gentleman named Dr. Friedmann (because 'Doctor' was pronounced too clearly to be overheard), and a young couple from the third floor whom Thomas introduced as "our artists," as if they were exotic animals in a zoo.

The apartment was getting increasingly crowded, and Martin found himself in his worst nightmare: a party where he knew no one and had no possibility of disappearing unnoticed into a corner. Thomas seemed to have a sixth sense for when Martin was about to get to safety and then magically appeared at his side to introduce him to another "absolutely fantastic person."

After an hour, three forced conversations about the weather, a detailed discussion about the advantages of balcony plants with a particularly enthusiastic elderly lady, and half a glass of the toxic green herbal liqueur (which surprisingly didn't taste as bad as it looked), Martin found himself in the kitchen, where a kind of international buffet had been set up.

It was an impressive arrangement: Swabian potato salad next to Turkish köfte, Italian bruschetta next to Russian pelmeni, Spanish tortilla next to Indian

curry. Martin stared at the variety of dishes and wondered when the hell his neighborhood had become a culinary melting pot and why no one had informed him about it.

"So, do you like it?" Thomas had appeared at his side again, with the precision of a rattlesnake, only much happier.

"It's... impressive," Martin answered cautiously and took a sip of his liqueur, which now tasted significantly better than at the beginning of the evening. Perhaps it was because he was already on his third glass.

"Isn't it? I find it wonderful how many different cultures come together in a single house! You know, that's exactly what I love about the city—this diversity, these opportunities to meet people from all over the world!" Thomas beamed as if he had personally brokered world peace and not just organized a buffet.

Martin grunted noncommittally. He had exchanged about three words with Mr. Özdemir from the second floor in the last five years, and these had consisted exclusively of "Good day" and occasional nodding in the stairwell. The idea that they were all part of a large, multicultural family seemed somewhat exaggerated to him.

"I should probably start heading home," Martin finally said, after checking his watch for the fifth time in the last ten minutes. "Early appointment tomorrow."

Thomas looked disappointed, as if he had just been told that Christmas would be canceled this year. "But the party has just begun! We haven't even cut the dessert yet!"

"Well, that's really a shame, but you know how it is..." Martin deliberately left the sentence hanging in the air, hoping that Thomas would complete it, preferably with an excuse that was better than anything Martin could come up with.

"Alright, if you really have to go..." Thomas sighed theatrically. "But before you leave, you absolutely must meet Katja!"

"Katja?" Martin frowned. That was a name Thomas hadn't mentioned before, which in itself was remarkable, since he had introduced each of his guests with an enthusiasm as if they were candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize.

"Yes, Katja! She just moved in, two floors above you. She's a biologist and works in the botanical garden. Absolutely fascinating woman!" Thomas winked in a way that deeply disturbed Martin. "And

she's also not the biggest fan of large crowds, just like you! You two surely have a lot in common."

Before Martin could protest, he was already being pulled through the living room, past laughing guests, loud music, and a particularly enthusiastic couple trying to encourage others to dance.

In a relatively quiet corner, next to the bookshelf, stood a woman about Martin's age. She had dark, short hair, wore plain black pants and a dark green blouse, and was sipping a glass of white wine while watching the dancing guests with a slightly pained expression. Something about her posture—a mixture of politeness and the desperate desire to be elsewhere—spoke to Martin on a deeper level.

"Katja! May I introduce you to Martin? He lives two floors below you and is also a big fan of... um..." Thomas paused, obviously realizing that he actually had no idea what Martin was a fan of.

"Silence," Martin added dryly.

To his surprise, Katja laughed—a genuine, not forced laugh. "Oh, me too! Silence is highly underrated in our society."

Thomas beamed as if he had just arranged a perfect chess match. "See? I knew you two would get along! I'll leave you two alone now—I have to check on the Black Forest cake!" And with a speed that Martin

wouldn't have credited him with, Thomas disappeared toward the kitchen.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, the kind that arises when two strangers are brought together by an over-enthusiastic mutual acquaintance.

"He's... quite energetic," Katja finally said and took a large sip of wine.

"That's like saying the sun is 'a bit warm,'" Martin replied and was himself surprised by his attempt at humor.

Katja smiled. "I've only been living here for a week, and he's already invited me to three different events. I think he collects people like others collect stamps."

"Or like a serial killer collects trophies," Martin mumbled before he could stop himself.

Instead of being appalled, Katja snorted in amusement. "Exactly. Every time I pass his door, I wonder if behind all that friendliness might be hiding a perfect psychopath."

Martin regarded her with new interest. Here was someone who seemed to share his dark worldview—at least partly. That was as rare as a polar bear in the Sahara.

"What brought you here, actually?" he asked, for the first time that evening genuinely interested in an answer.

"The job at the botanical garden," she replied. "I research invasive plant species—basically, plants that spread where they don't belong and disrupt the entire ecosystem."

"So basically the plant version of Thomas in this apartment building," Martin remarked.

Katja laughed again, louder this time. "That's... surprisingly accurate." She gently clinked her glass against his. "To good neighborliness?"

Martin, who normally engaged in social rituals as willingly as a cat would take a bath, surprisingly found himself toasting back. "To good neighborliness. At an appropriate distance."

They continued to talk, and to Martin's astonishment, the time flew by. Katja was not only refreshingly cynical, she was also intelligent, well-read, and shared Martin's aversion to most manifestations of modern society. When the conversation turned to books and she mentioned that she was currently reading a dark Scandinavian crime novel—the same one that Martin had recently finished—he was briefly tempted to believe in

higher powers that might not be completely against him after all.

"Martin! Katja!" Thomas's voice interrupted their conversation about existential despair in Northern European literature. "Come, we're cutting the cake!"

Martin glanced at his watch and realized it was already past 11 p.m. He hadn't noticed how time had passed—something that hadn't happened to him in years. Usually, he counted the minutes at social occasions like a prisoner counting the days until release.

"Shall we?" asked Katja with a slight eye roll that Martin immediately declared his new favorite facial expression.

"Alright," he sighed theatrically. "But afterward, I really have to leave. I have a limited amount of social energy, and I think I'm already in the negative."

The cake was, as Martin had feared, perfect. It looked like it had been photographed from a cookbook, with perfectly layered tiers, carefully placed cherries, and a cream topping that seemed arranged by a professional pastry chef. It was almost annoying how good it looked—as if the

universe had conspired to give him not a single reason to despise Thomas.

After the obligatory "Oooh" and "Aaah" from the guests and a collective singing—something terribly cheerful about neighborhood that Thomas had apparently composed specifically for this occasion—the cake was cut and distributed.

Martin had to reluctantly admit that it was delicious. The perfect balance of chocolate, cherries, and a hint of cherry liqueur. He would have liked to continue sulking and despising the culinary skills of the Sonnenschein family, but his palate refused to cooperate with his misanthropy.

"Good, isn't it?" whispered Katja beside him, while she consumed her own portion with obvious enjoyment.

"Unbearably good," Martin confirmed with feigned bitterness. "How is one supposed to properly hate someone who can bake such a damn good cake?"

Katja laughed quietly, and Martin found that he liked the sound. It wasn't a loud, exaggerated laugh like the ones heard elsewhere at this party, but subdued, almost conspiratorial, as if they shared a secret.

After dessert and another glass of the surprisingly drinkable herbal liqueur (which the other guests

enthusiastically described as "exotic" and "full of character," as if it weren't from the discount store), Martin decided it was really time to leave. He had more than fulfilled his social duty, and even if the conversation with Katja had been unexpectedly pleasant, his need for solitude and silence was now overwhelming.

He said goodbye to Thomas, who actually hugged him farewell—an act of physical closeness that would normally have caused Martin to immediately wash himself three times with antibacterial soap. Strangely, he didn't find it quite as terrible as expected.

"It was really nice that you came, Martin!" Thomas beamed as if Martin had personally saved his evening. "We must definitely do this again! Perhaps a barbecue on the roof when the weather gets better?"

Martin gave a noncommittal murmur that was polite enough not to be impolite, but vague enough not to enter into any concrete obligations.

"I'm leaving too," said Katja, who suddenly appeared beside him. "It was very nice, but I have to get up early tomorrow. Plants don't wait."

"Oh, what a shame!" Thomas really looked disappointed. "But I understand, of course. Perhaps

you could both leave together? Then neither of you has to go through the dark stairwell alone."

Martin had to suppress a snort. The stairwell of the six-story apartment building, which was brightly lit and equipped with motion sensors, was about as dangerous as a ball pit for toddlers.

"Good idea," said Katja before Martin could even react. She gave him a look that clearly said: "Play along, then we'll both get out of here faster."

They said goodbye to the other guests—or rather, Katja politely said goodbye, while Martin made general hand gestures into the room, hoping they would be interpreted as farewells—and finally stepped out into the hallway.

The sudden silence was like a blessing for Martin's overstimulated senses. He took a deep breath and felt the tension that he had carried around all evening slowly subsiding.

"Not as bad as expected, was it?" asked Katja as they stood in front of the apartment doors.

"I would say it was... surprisingly tolerable," Martin admitted. "Although I've probably fulfilled my social interaction quota for the next six months now."

"Only six months? Amateur," Katja teased. "After today, I'm planning not to talk to other people until at least Christmas."

Martin stood in front of his apartment door and wondered what one said in such a situation. 'Thanks for the escort'? 'Nice to meet you'? 'Welcome to the neighborhood'? All options sounded wrong and artificial in his head.

"I've read the same author too," he finally said. "When you're done with the current book, I could lend you his latest novel. If you're interested."

Katja smiled—not the broad, exaggerated smile that so many people displayed, but a small, genuine smile that reached her eyes. "I would like that. Perhaps we could even talk about it. In an appropriately quiet environment, without Thomas's enthusiasm."

"That... sounds good," said Martin and realized that he actually meant it.

They said goodbye, and Katja headed off to her apartment on the sixth floor, while Martin pulled his key from his pocket. As he opened the door to his apartment, he paused briefly and looked back at the door opposite, behind which the party was still in full swing.

He had expected this evening to be the worst of his life. A torture of forced small talk, fake smiles, and the constant, underlying fear of being labeled as the strange, unsociable neighbor that he undoubtedly was.

Instead, he had met a person who liked his books, shared his humor, and who had managed to make even the worst of all social situations—a themed neighborhood party—somewhat less unbearable.

Perhaps, thought Martin, as he closed his door and enjoyed the soothing sound of silence in his own four walls, perhaps Thomas Sonnenschein wasn't the harbinger of the social apocalypse he had taken him for. Perhaps he was just... well, sunny. And perhaps a little sunshine, in homeopathic doses and with adequate breaks in between, wasn't the worst thing that could happen to a person.

Not that he would ever admit that. After all, he had a reputation as a misanthrope to maintain.

With a quiet smile that no one could see, Martin went into his kitchen and put on a kettle. A hot tea, a good book, and absolute quiet—the perfect way to end a surprisingly non-catastrophic evening.

The Saturday Supermarket Nightmare

A week after Thomas Sonnenschein's traumatic housewarming party, Martin Griesgram stood in front of his empty refrigerator like an archaeologist at a disappointing excavation site. Instead of treasures from bygone eras, he found only a lonely piece of butter whose expiration date belonged to a long-gone epoch, three drops of milk, and a mysterious container whose contents had probably already developed their own civilization.

"Damn it," Martin cursed quietly, closing the refrigerator door with a mixture of resignation and despair.

The clock on his kitchen wall—an ugly heirloom from his grandmother, which he hated but still kept because it ticked more reliably than his life planning—mercilessly showed 10:23 a.m. Saturday. Morning. The worst of all possible times to enter a supermarket, except perhaps for Christmas Eve at 2 p.m. or the day of a World Cup match right after the final whistle.

Martin's stomach growled accusingly. The memory of his last meal—a sad ready-made dish he had forced down yesterday evening—was already fading, and his body was relentlessly demanding food. His mind, however, that faithful ally in avoiding human interaction, would have preferred to starve rather than face the inferno of Saturday shopping madness.

Martin sighed deeply. He could have sworn that his supplies would last at least until Monday. Monday, that blessed day when normal people were at work and he could stroll through empty supermarket aisles without fear of human contamination. But no, he had obviously miscalculated, and now he had to face the consequences: a supermarket visit on Saturday.

The alternative—food delivery—was out of the question. Not because he minded the extra cost, but because the idea of having to open the door to a stranger and—God forbid—possibly engaging in small talk, seemed no less traumatic than a dentist visit without anesthesia.

With the determination of a soldier preparing for a particularly dangerous mission, Martin put on his grayest jacket, grabbed his cloth bag, and put on his headphones. No music—he wouldn't play anything. The headphones merely served as a universal

symbol for "Don't talk to me, I'm in my own world," a thin barrier between him and the rest of humanity.

"You can do this," he said to himself, with the same conviction with which a politician makes campaign promises. "Go in, grab groceries, pay, get out. Twenty minutes, maximum."

In the stairwell, he encountered no one, which Martin took as a good omen. Perhaps, just perhaps, the universe would be merciful to him today. This hope lasted exactly until he opened the front door and almost ran straight into Thomas Sonnenschein, who was standing in front of the house wearing a bicycle helmet and a sports jacket so bright it was probably visible from space.

"Martin! What a happy coincidence!" Thomas's face lit up like a Christmas decoration in December, oversized and unnecessarily bright. "I was just about to go for a little bike ride. The weather is simply too beautiful to stay indoors, don't you think?"

Martin, who generally regarded the weather as a personal enemy, whether it was raining, snowing, or—as today—the sun was shining with offensive cheerfulness, mumbled something unintelligible

that could, with a lot of goodwill, be interpreted as agreement.

"Where are you headed? Off to enjoy nature too?" asked Thomas, apparently unable to recognize Martin's desperate attempts to keep the conversation as short as possible.

"Supermarket," Martin pressed out between clenched teeth, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the shopping street.

"Oh, shopping! On a Saturday, that's brave!" Thomas laughed as if he had just made a particularly witty joke. "I was already there at seven, when it's still pleasantly empty. You know, the early bird catches the worm!"

Of course Thomas was an early riser. He probably greeted each morning with yoga and a green smoothie while reciting mantras for a successful day. Martin, on the other hand, considered any hour before ten in the morning a personal insult and the invention of the alarm clock one of the greatest mistakes in human history, right after the discovery of fire, which ultimately led to televisions broadcasting reality shows.

"Must go now," said Martin, setting himself in motion, hoping that Thomas would understand the hint.

"Of course, of course! I don't want to hold you up! Have fun shopping! Maybe we'll see each other later, I'm having a small barbecue on the balcony tonight—you're cordially invited!"

Martin hurried away without answering, pretending not to have heard the invitation. The thought of spending another evening in Thomas's company was about as appealing as a root canal without anesthesia.

As he walked down the street, he briefly thought of Katja, the new neighbor from the top floor. The conversation with her at Thomas's party had actually been... not unpleasant. Unusual for Martin, who considered most human interactions a form of torture. They hadn't seen each other since, which was actually fine with him. Getting to know people meant expectations, obligations, the necessity to remember what you had told them the last time—all things Martin gladly did without.

The supermarket came into view, and even from the outside, Martin could see that his worst fears would come true. The parking lot was filled to the last space, and in front of the entrance stood several mothers with strollers, chatting as if there were no more suitable place for a cozy conversation than the entrance area of a supermarket on a Saturday morning.

Martin took a deep breath and activated his inner tunnel vision—an ability he had perfected over the years that allowed him to perceive other people as blurry, unimportant obstacles to be avoided. With his head down and the firm determination of a marathon runner in the final kilometers, he entered the store.

The soundscape hit him like a physical wave. Screaming children, loud announcements, the rattling of shopping carts, and the omnipresent murmur of too many people in too small a space. It was as if he had been thrown into an acoustic meat grinder.

Martin grabbed a shopping basket—carts were for people who either bought too much or were too lazy to carry their weight, and he was neither—and made his way into the depths of the supermarket. His plan was simple: bread, cheese, some cold cuts, milk, coffee, maybe a few ready-made meals for lazy evenings, and then out of here.

The first aisle, the fruit and vegetable section, was as always a minefield. People stood everywhere, testing avocados for ripeness as if it were a decision of national importance, or sniffing oranges as if they could determine through pure olfactory power whether the fruit was sweet enough for their spoiled palates. An elderly lady blocked the way to the

apples, taking each one in her hand, examining it critically, and then putting it back.

Martin decided that his vitamin needs could also be met through frozen pizza and navigated around the vegetable inspectors toward the bakery section. Upon arrival, he was confronted with a new challenge: a school class that was apparently on an excursion to explore the fascinating world of bread roll selection. About twenty elementary school children crowded around the bread stand, grabbing everything within reach with their small, presumably unhygienic hands, while their teacher—an exhausted-looking woman with a hairstyle that looked as if it had already given up the fight against despair—tried in vain to bring order to the chaos.

"Don't touch everything!" she called out in a voice already hoarse from constant admonition. "Bennie, no, your gummy bears don't belong on the bread counter!"

Martin felt his blood pressure reaching dangerous heights. He needed bread. He needed it *now*. But between him and the object of his desire stood an army of elementary school students who had obviously been sent here as part of an elaborate conspiracy to drive him, Martin Griesgram, insane.

With narrowed eyes, he searched for a gap in the wall of children. There! Between a red-haired boy

who was blowing something into his handkerchief (Martin would definitely *not* touch that bread) and a girl with pigtails who was whispering important secrets into her friend's ear, a narrow corridor opened up. With the grace of a cat and the determination of a Terminator, Martin slid through the gap, grabbed the first loaf of bread he could reach—some whole grain product that would taste like bird food, but that was secondary now—and retreated before the children could change their position.

Victorious, if slightly out of breath, he continued on his way. He generously avoided the cold cuts and cheese counter—the idea of lining up and then *speaking* with a human who would ask questions like "Would you like a little more?" was more than he could bear on this day. Instead, he reached for packaged Gouda and salami from the refrigerated section, whose quality would probably leave something to be desired, but which offered the inestimable advantage of being acquired without verbal interaction.

Next on his mental list: coffee. Coffee was not merely a preference for Martin but an existential necessity, a life elixir that made the difference between a functioning adult and a growling caveman. With new zeal, he headed toward the

appropriate section, only to find that a tasting was taking place there.

An overly enthusiastic young woman in an apron with the logo of a coffee brand stood behind a small stand, offering plastic cups with coffee samples. Around her had gathered a cluster of people who looked as if they had just been offered the solution to all the world's problems in the form of flavored caffeine.

"This one has notes of chocolate and forest berries," Martin heard the woman say as she handed a cup to an enthusiastically nodding elderly lady. "And our new premium product impresses with its full body and hints of caramel and exotic spices!"

Martin inwardly rolled his eyes. It was *coffee*, for heaven's sake, not wine from a French château. He didn't need a full body or hints of anything; he just needed something that would get him out of bed in the morning and through the day without feeling the urge to do violence to other people.

With the expression of a man who has just discovered that his favorite restaurant has been replaced by a fast-food chain, Martin crept along the coffee shelves, his gaze fixed firmly on the packages to avoid any eye contact with the promoter. He reached for his usual brand when suddenly a voice sounded directly in his ear.

"You absolutely must try our new Vanilla Caramel Dream! It's simply heavenly!"

Martin flinched as if he had been touched with an electric shocker. The coffee promoter had appeared beside him out of nowhere, with a tray full of sample cups in one hand and a package of the advertised coffee in the other. Her smile was so wide and radiant that it physically hurt to look at it.

"No, thank you," Martin pressed out, trying to take a step back, which was prevented by the shelf behind him.

"But it's free!" the woman insisted, as if the missing money and not the unwanted social interaction was the problem. "And if you buy today, you get a 20 percent discount!"

Martin felt his neck hardening with tension. He was trapped, wedged between a coffee shelf and an overzealous saleswoman whose task it apparently was to harass every customer until they either took a sample or collapsed in despair.

"I don't drink coffee," he lied, although he was literally holding a package of coffee in his hand.

The woman blinked in confusion, her gaze wandering to the coffee package in his hand and then back to his face. "But you just—"

"It's for a friend," Martin hastily interrupted her, although the term "friend" appeared in his vocabulary about as frequently as "joy" or "sociability."

"Oh, how nice of you!" The woman beamed even brighter, if that was even possible. "Then take a sample for yourself and one for your friend! Or try it right here so you know what to recommend to your friend!"

Martin felt his last bastion of politeness crumbling. With a speed that would have impressed even a sports scientist, he grabbed his usual coffee package, mumbled something that remotely sounded like "Maybe next time," and fled from the coffee section as if the devil himself were after him.

With a pounding heart and the urgent need to leave this place of torment as quickly as possible, Martin headed toward the checkout. Just milk, then he could finally pay and disappear. He turned the corner to the last aisle—and froze.

Before him stretched a sea of shopping carts, a seemingly endless line of people waiting to push their goods over the checkout conveyor belt. Every single checkout was open, but in front of each towered a line of people that looked as if one could grow old and die there before it was one's turn.

Martin felt a deep despair spreading within him. He had almost made it. He had been so close. And now this.

With his head down and the courage of desperation, he joined the shortest line—which in this case meant that only five shopping carts stood in front of him, instead of seven or eight. The man immediately in front of him pushed a cart filled to the brim with weekend supplies, as if expecting an apocalypse. Behind him, a woman with three whining children demanding sweets strategically placed next to the checkout to bring about exactly this situation.

The line moved with the speed of a glacier in the Ice Age. Martin could almost feel individual hairs on his head turning gray as he waited. Around him, the usual checkout drama unfolded: a customer searching for discount coupons that she "definitely had somewhere in her purse," a man loudly arguing that the price on the shelf had been different, and a cashier whose facial expression revealed that she was internally updating her resume.

Just as Martin was about to have his turn, the inevitable happened: The checkout beeped loudly and clearly three times, and the cashier announced with the expression of a woman who had just lost

her last spark of will to live: "Checkout conveyor belt defective. Please change to another checkout."

A collective groan rose from the line. Martin briefly closed his eyes and wondered if it would be a mitigating factor if he testified in court that he had acted under extreme supermarket-induced stress.

With the resignation of a man who had just been informed that his flight had been delayed by 12 hours, he joined a new line, this time behind an elderly lady who was engaging the cashier in a conversation about her hip operation while fishing coins from a tiny purse with excruciating slowness.

After what felt like an eternity, it was finally Martin's turn. He placed his few items on the belt and avoided any eye contact with the cashier, hoping that this would clearly convey the nonverbal message "I don't want to talk, I just want to pay and leave."

"Do you collect loyalty points?" asked the cashier, a young man with tired eyes and a name tag identifying him as "Kevin."

"No," Martin replied tersely.

"Would you like to participate in our sweepstakes? The main prize is a trip to—"

"No."

"Do you have a customer card?"

"No."

"Would you like a—"

"No," Martin interrupted him before he could finish the sentence. His tone was by now so sharp that one could probably have cut bread with it.

Kevin shrugged and scanned the rest of the goods in silence. Martin paid, grabbed his bag, and turned to leave when Kevin suddenly said: "Have a nice weekend! And remember: A smile costs nothing!"

Martin stared at him, unable to formulate a response that wouldn't have led to immediate arrest. With clenched teeth, he nodded briefly and fled toward the exit.

Freedom was within reach. Only a few meters separated him from the door, from fresh air, from the relative quiet of the street. He quickened his steps, his gaze fixed firmly on the exit...

"Martin? Martin Griesgram? Is that you?"

Martin froze mid-movement. That voice. He knew that voice. It belonged to a person from a past he had carefully buried and marked with mental warning signs: "Do not dig here. Never."

Slowly, with the enthusiasm of a man going to the dentist to learn that he needs eight root canals, he turned around.

Before him stood Sandra Fröhlich, his ex-girlfriend from university days. Sandra, with whom he had been together for three years before they broke up because she—according to her farewell speech—needed "more joy in life and less chronic misanthropy." Sandra, who looked as if she had found a fountain of youth in the five years since their breakup, while he looked as if he had spent the same period in a cave.

"Sandra," he pressed out, forming a grimace on his face that distantly resembled a smile. "What a... surprise."

"Oh my God, it really is you!" Sandra beamed as if she had just found a long-lost friend, and not an ex-boyfriend whose last contact consisted of a hours-long, tearful argument about his emotional inaccessibility. "How are you? You look... good!"

The lie was so obvious that Martin almost laughed. He looked like a man who had just experienced the Saturday supermarket madness: sweaty, tense, and with the tortured look of a war veteran.

"Thank you," he mumbled. "You too."

That wasn't a lie. Sandra had always looked good, with her blonde hair and her shamelessly cheerful face. Now she wore a summery dress that accentuated her figure and radiated a kind of joy for life that Martin had always found slightly suspicious.

"What are you up to? Still working at that IT company?" she asked, apparently determined to have a conversation that went beyond the exchange of courtesy phrases.

"Yes," answered Martin, although he had been working at a different company for three years. The idea of summarizing his life story of the last five years here, between the deli counter and the exit of an overcrowded supermarket on a Saturday morning, was so absurd that he didn't even try.

"Great! I opened my own yoga studio two years ago," said Sandra with an enthusiasm that suggested she regularly used this sentence to start conversations with strangers. "It's really going great! You should come by sometime, I now offer special classes for beginners, ideal for stress relief!"

Martin, whose idea of stress relief consisted of sitting alone in his apartment, reading a book and enjoying absolute silence, smiled thinly. The idea of donning sportswear in a room full of sweating

strangers to "let energy flow" sounded to him less like relaxation and more like a particularly refined form of torture.

"Sounds... interesting," he lied, while his gaze involuntarily wandered to the exit. So close and yet so far.

"Oh, and guess what!" Sandra lowered her voice to an excited whisper, as if revealing a state secret. "I'm engaged!"

She held up her left hand, on which a ring sported a diamond large enough to be used as a projectile. Martin blinked in surprise. Not because Sandra was engaged—she had always been the type of person who sought traditional relationship stability—but because he now found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to react with appropriate enthusiasm.

"Congratulations," he said, hoping his tone sounded convincing enough. "That's... great."

"Thank you!" Sandra beamed even more, if that was even possible. "Markus is simply wonderful. He's an architect and so creative and full of life! We met at a charity run—I know, totally cliché, right?—and it was love at first sight!"

Martin, who had never felt anything at first sight except perhaps distrust or mild nausea, nodded

politely. Of course her fiancé was named Markus and was an architect, and of course they had met at a charity run. It sounded like the plot of a particularly uninspired romantic comedy.

"And you? Is there someone special in your life?" asked Sandra with a look that was simultaneously curious and pitying, as if she expected no positive answer.

For a brief, absurd moment, Martin thought of Katja from the top floor, with her sardonic humor and their shared love of dark Scandinavian crime novels. But of course, she wasn't "someone special in his life." She was a neighbor with whom he had had a single pleasant conversation.

"No," he said simply. "I'm content with my life as it is."

Another lie, but better than the truth: that he spent most days in quiet desperation, surrounded by idiots who only confirmed his misanthropic worldview.

"Oh," said Sandra, and in that one word lay so much pity that Martin would have preferred to sink into the ground. "Well, sometimes it just takes time to find the right person. Or maybe you're just one of those people who are happier alone! That's completely okay too!"

Her tone suggested that it was absolutely NOT okay and that Martin would probably die as a lonely, bitter man, surrounded by ready-meal packaging and unread books.

"Anyway," said Martin, taking an imperceptible step toward the exit. "I really must go now. It was... nice to see you."

"Oh, of course!" Sandra suddenly seemed to realize she was holding him up. "But hey, let's go for coffee sometime! I'd love to know what you've been up to! Here, take my card."

Before Martin could protest, she had pulled a pastel-colored business card from her purse and pressed it into his hand. "SANDRA FRÖHLICH - YOGA FOR BODY AND SOUL" was written on it in flowing script, framed by stylized lotus blossoms. Below, a phone number, an email address, and the slogan "Find your inner smile!"

Martin, whose inner smile had gone into hibernation around 1998, muttered something noncommittal, put the card in his pocket, and took the opportunity to finally say goodbye. With a last, stiff nod, he turned away and fled through the automatic doors into the relative freedom of the street.

Outside, he took a deep breath, as if he had just completed a dive in a particularly polluted lake. The encounter with Sandra had exhausted him more than the entire shopping trip. It was the special kind of tiredness that arose only through social interactions for which one was not emotionally equipped—a mixture of tension, slight paranoia, and the feeling that one had somehow failed by not being the radiant, successful person that others wanted to see.

With his head down and the firm intention of not looking anyone he might know in the eye on the way home, Martin set off. The cloth bag with his purchases cut uncomfortably into his fingers, but the physical discomfort was almost welcome as a distraction from his thoughts.

He had loved Sandra, at least as much as someone with his limited emotional range could love. Their three years together had not been unhappy—she had accepted his peculiarities, his preference for silence, his aversion to large groups of people. But in the end, his fundamental misanthropy had exhausted her patience. She had wanted more: more friends, more activities, more life. He had been unable or unwilling to offer any of that.

And now she was engaged to an architect named Markus, ran a yoga studio, and radiated joy for life,

while he... what exactly was he doing? He existed. He worked. He read books. He avoided people. It was a life, but whether it was a life worth living was something he had thought about more often than he wanted to admit.

So lost in thought, Martin noticed too late the figure standing on the sidewalk in front of him, waving wildly with his arms. Too late, he recognized Thomas Sonnenschein, who had apparently returned from his bike tour and was now, with reddened cheeks and a sweat-soaked face, waiting for him like an overeager Labrador for its owner.

"Martin! There you are! How was your shopping?" called Thomas, as if visiting a supermarket was an epic journey that needed to be discussed in detail.

Martin suppressed a groan. Could this day get any worse? Was it too much to ask to simply come home, put away his groceries, and spend the rest of the day in well-deserved solitude?

"Normal," he replied tersely and continued on his way, hoping that Thomas would understand the hint and leave him alone.

Of course, he did not. Instead, he fell into step beside Martin as if they were old friends on a joint walk.

"I just got back from a fantastic tour! Went all the way to the lake, you know, the small one in the city park? Nature is simply glorious today! Have you ever considered cycling? It's so liberating!"

Martin, whose idea of liberation consisted of NOT sitting on a narrow saddle while being almost run over by cars and scolded by pedestrians, silently shook his head.

"You should really try it sometime! I could lend you my old bike if you'd like. It's still in great condition; I take good care of my things, you know?" Thomas continued talking without pause as they approached their apartment building. "Oh, and about tonight—the barbecue starts at seven. Just bring whatever you feel like; I have enough for everyone! It won't be big, just a few people from the building, very relaxed!"

They reached the front door, and Martin rummaged for his key while desperately searching for an excuse that was polite enough not to seem impolite but clear enough to leave no room for misunderstandings.

"I'm afraid I have other plans," he said finally, as he unlocked the door. "Need to... work."

"On a Saturday?" Thomas's face took on an expression of pitying dismay, as if Martin had just

confessed to suffering from an incurable disease. "That's terrible! What do you do for a living that you have to work on the weekend?"

Martin, who worked as a software developer in a medium-sized company and whose work was so routine that he could probably do it in his sleep, mumbled something about "deadlines" and "important projects."

"That sounds stressful," said Thomas sympathetically. "All the more important that you take a break sometimes! How about coming by after work? Fresh air and good company are the best recovery!"

Martin felt his last bastion of politeness beginning to crumble. With compressed lips and the firm intention of ending this conversation as quickly as possible, he said: "I'll see what I can do."

It was the same phrase he had already used at the invitation to the housewarming party—vague enough to later claim he had never agreed, but polite enough to finally end this conversation.

"Great!" Thomas beamed as if he had just received a binding commitment. "I look forward to it! And you know what? Katja is coming too!"

Martin, who was just about to take the first step on the stairs, paused. Katja? The botanist from the top

floor, with whom he had had the only pleasant conversation of the evening at Thomas's party? The woman who read dark Scandinavian crime novels and whose sarcastic remarks had even made him smile?

"Is that so?" he said, trying to hide his sudden curiosity.

"Yes! I ran into her earlier as she was coming from work. She said she would stop by when she's done with her paperwork. Apparently, she has to finish some research reports." Thomas winked as if sharing a secret. "You two seem to get along well! You had such an intense conversation at the party!"

Martin felt a blush rising to his face. The idea that Thomas—or worse, other party guests—had observed his conversation with Katja and perhaps even interpreted it was uncomfortable. As if his social life had suddenly become a matter of public interest.

"We were just talking about books," he mumbled and turned back to the stairs.

"Of course, of course!" Thomas's tone suggested he was thinking of a completely different kind of conversation. "Anyway, if you manage to come by after your work—we'll be on the balcony, you can't miss us!"

With a last, beaming smile, Thomas disappeared into his apartment, and Martin continued his way upstairs, the shopping bag in one hand, a growing knot of confusion and irritation in the other.

Arriving at his apartment, he placed the groceries on the kitchen counter and collapsed into his favorite chair, a worn reading armchair that was so perfectly adapted to his body that it could probably have been deducted as a medical aid.

The day had been a complete disaster: an overcrowded supermarket on Saturday, an unexpected encounter with his ex-girlfriend, and now this new invitation from Thomas, which he actually wanted to decline, but...

But Katja would be there.

Martin rubbed his forehead as if he could physically drive away the confusing thought. What did he care if Katja was at Thomas's barbecue party or not? She was a neighbor with whom he had had a pleasant conversation—nothing more and nothing less. The fact that she shared his preference for dark literature and had a refreshingly cynical view of the world didn't make her a... a what? A friend? A potential partner? The thought was so absurd that Martin almost laughed out loud.

He was happy with his life as it was. Quiet. Orderly. Predictable. People like Thomas Sonnenschein, with their constant invitations and their boundless energy, disturbed this carefully constructed balance. And women like Katja... well, women like Katja were dangerous because they made him question his own carefully constructed shell.

With a determined sigh, Martin got up and began to put away his groceries. He would not go to Thomas's barbecue party. He would spend a quiet evening at home, with a good book and a glass of wine. Perhaps he would even start the new Scandinavian crime novel he had bought last week—the same one Katja was currently reading and about which they might have been able to talk, if...

No. No "ifs." He had made his decision. Social events were the natural enemy of any misanthrope, and he was not prepared to abandon his principles for a pair of intelligent eyes and a shared preference for morbid literature.

He would not go. Definitely not.

At 7:43 p.m., Martin stood in front of Thomas's door, a bottle of red wine in his hand and the distinct impression on his face that he might be making a serious mistake. He wore a fresh shirt and

had even tried to bring his unruly hair into a somewhat acceptable form—an undertaking about as successful as trying to squeeze an octopus into a suit.

He didn't know exactly how it had happened. After shopping, he had actually worked a little on a project, then showered, eaten something, and picked up a book. But his thoughts had kept drifting, to Thomas's invitation, to Katja, to the possibility that she might be there, with her sardonic smile and her clever remarks.

And at some point, between the third unsuccessful attempt to read the same page and the fourth glance out the window toward Thomas's balcony, he had decided that he could at least stop by briefly. Out of pure politeness. Because it would be impolite to decline an invitation after already having attended the housewarming party. It had nothing to do with Katja. Absolutely nothing.

With this mantra in his head, he had taken a bottle of wine from his modest stock (a gift from a colleague who believed Martin had taste), changed clothes, and was now here, at Thomas's door, with the queasy feeling that he was making a mistake that would join the long list of his social errors.

He knocked, twice, not too loudly, in the irrational hope that perhaps no one would hear and he could leave with a clear conscience.

Of course, Thomas opened the door immediately, as if he had been waiting behind it the whole time. He wore a barbecue apron with the inscription "KISS THE COOK" and held a grill tong in his hand like a royal scepter.

"Martin! You came!" Thomas's face lit up as if he had just been informed that Christmas would take place twice this year. "Come in, come in! We're all on the balcony! Oh, and you brought wine, how nice!"

Before Martin could even say "Good evening," he was pulled into the apartment and directed through the living room toward the balcony. The air was filled with the scent of grilled meat and the soft hum of conversations.

The balcony was larger than Martin had expected and surprisingly comfortably furnished, with small lanterns spreading a warm light, comfortable-looking garden chairs, and even some potted plants strategically placed to create a kind of green oasis. Thomas had not exaggerated when he said it was a small gathering—Martin counted only four other guests: an elderly couple he vaguely knew from the

stairwell, a young woman with colorful hair whom he had never seen before, and...

Katja.

She sat in a corner of the balcony, a glass of white wine in her hand, talking to the colorful-haired woman. When she saw Martin, she raised her eyebrows slightly in surprise before a small smile stole across her face.

"Look who I found!" announced Thomas proudly, as if he had personally picked Martin up from the street. "He managed to finish his work after all!"

Martin, whose "work" had consisted of staring at the same document for an hour while debating with himself whether he should go to this party or not, smiled thinly.

"You already know the others," Thomas continued, pointing to the elderly couple. "Mr. and Mrs. Weber from the first floor. And this is Lisa, my cousin, she's visiting me for a few days. And Katja, of course, you already know!"

Martin nodded politely to the group while Thomas took his wine bottle and immediately opened it, as if alcohol was exactly what this gathering needed right now.

"Sit, sit!" Thomas pointed to an empty chair—coincidentally directly next to Katja. "The meat is

almost ready, and I also have vegetarian skewers for Lisa and Katja! Oh, and various salads, and baguette, and..."

Martin listened with only half an ear as he carefully sat down on the offered chair. From the corner of his eye, he saw Katja nod to him, a silent welcome that expressed more than Thomas's exuberant greeting.

"Also a workaholic?" she asked quietly, with a hint of irony in her voice.

"Absolutely," Martin replied dryly. "Nothing is more fun than work on a Saturday evening."

Katja laughed softly, that muted, almost conspiratorial laugh that he had already liked at the party. "I know what you mean. My research reports have a magical ability to multiply as soon as I think I'm done."

"Just like bugs in my code," Martin replied, surprised at his own attempt at a joke.

Thomas returned with a glass of wine for Martin and placed it in front of him. "Here you go! From your own bottle, so to speak. And what would you like from the grill? I have sausages, steaks, chicken skewers..."

Martin, who at that moment became aware that he was actually hungry—his hasty dinner had

consisted more of nervousness than of food—mumbled something about "A steak would be nice" and took a large sip of wine.

The next half hour passed in a strange state of social suspension. Martin sat between Katja and Lisa, Thomas's colorful-haired cousin, who proved to be a surprisingly pleasant conversation partner. She was a graphic designer, had a sarcastic humor, and seemed to know exactly when to talk and when to be silent—a quality Martin particularly appreciated in people.

The food was, as Martin had feared, excellent. Thomas proved to be a talented grill master, and even the salads—normally a necessary evil for Martin that one had to endure to get to the meaty part of a meal—were tasty and original.

"You look surprised," Katja remarked as she observed Martin's facial expression after the first bite.

"I was hoping it would be bad," Martin confessed quietly. "It would confirm my worldview."

Katja laughed again, this time a bit louder. "The worldview that friendly, energetic people like Thomas can't do anything right?"

"Exactly."

"I'm afraid we both need to reconsider our theories," she said, raising her glass to him. "Thomas is irritatingly competent in everything he does. It's almost offensive."

Martin clinked his glass against hers, a silent agreement between two people who viewed the world through a similarly tinted lens. It was a strange feeling—not unpleasant, but definitely unfamiliar. As if he suddenly had an ally in a war he didn't even know he was fighting.

The conversation flowed surprisingly easily. Martin, who normally regarded social events as a kind of endurance test, found that time passed without him constantly checking his watch. Katja talked about her work in the botanical garden, about invasive plant species and the quirky characters she met there. Lisa reported on absurd customer requests and impossible deadlines. Even the elderly couple proved to be surprisingly entertaining, with stories from their time as world travelers before they retired.

And Thomas... well, Thomas was Thomas. Energetic, friendly, always eager to include everyone, always ready to refill drinks or offer seconds. But to Martin's surprise, he no longer found the eternal optimist's presence quite as exhausting as he had a week ago. Perhaps it was the

wine, perhaps it was Katja's sardonic comments that helped him take the situation with humor, but somehow the evening was... bearable. More than that: It was actually pleasant.

When the clock showed 10:30 p.m., Martin realized that he had spent three hours in the company of other people without feeling the urgent desire to flee. A personal record that confused more than pleased him.

"I should be going," he said finally, more out of habit than actual desire. "It was... nice."

The word "nice" felt strange on his tongue, like a foreign word he was pronouncing for the first time. But it was true—the evening had actually been nice.

"Oh, already?" Thomas looked almost disappointed. "But we were just about to serve dessert! Lisa made tiramisu!"

Martin, whose weakness for tiramisu was surpassed only by his weakness for absolutely undisturbed solitude, hesitated. "Maybe just a small piece," he heard himself say, as if someone else had taken control of his vocal cords.

Thomas beamed as if he had just resolved a particularly difficult diplomatic crisis. "Wonderful! I'll get it right away!"

He disappeared into the apartment, followed by Lisa, who offered to help, and the Weber couple, who had decided to "stretch their legs a bit" before dessert.

Suddenly, Martin and Katja were alone on the balcony, surrounded by the flickering lanterns and the soft rustling of the summer night.

"Amazing, isn't it?" said Katja after a moment of silence.

"What?"

"How Thomas manages to get you to do things you didn't actually want to do, and then actually enjoy them." She smiled crookedly. "I swear, I just wanted to lie on the couch with a book tonight, and here I am, enjoying grilled vegetables and looking forward to tiramisu."

Martin snorted softly. "I think that's his superpower. The ability to lure people out of their comfort zone without them immediately perceiving it as torture."

"A dangerous ability," Katja nodded seriously. "Someone should monitor him before he creates an army of happy, social people."

Martin laughed—a genuine, not forced laugh, the feeling so unfamiliar that it was almost irritating. "I

volunteer for the monitoring. Out of pure responsibility for society, you understand."

"Very noble of you." Katja raised her glass to him. "I'll provide moral support. We can take turns and exchange reports on his suspiciously good mood and his disturbing ability to grill perfect steaks."

"An excellent plan." Martin raised his glass. "To the monitoring of excessively happy people."

They clinked glasses, and for a moment, a pleasant silence prevailed between them. Martin couldn't remember the last time he had shared a silence with someone that wasn't uncomfortable or tense. It was a strange, almost forgotten feeling—this kind of familiarity that needed no words.

Thomas returned, balancing a tray of tiramisu portions, followed by the others. The moment of silence was over, but somehow Martin didn't feel disturbed by it.

"Here you go!" Thomas placed a bowl in front of Martin, the portion at least twice as large as he would have served himself. "Lisa's specialty! With real mascarpone and a hint of amaretto!"

Martin tried a bite and had to reluctantly admit that it was delicious. "Compliments to the chef," he said to Lisa, who nodded with a smile.

"Thank you! The recipe is from my grandmother. She would turn in her grave if I used ready-made mascarpone."

The conversation turned to recipes, family traditions, and culinary catastrophes, and to his own surprise, Martin found himself contributing a story from his student days when he had tried to cook spaghetti and nearly set his apartment on fire.

Only when the clock struck midnight did he realize how late it had gotten. He had spent five hours in company without making escape plans or regarding the evening as lost life time. A miracle that he would have to analyze in peace later.

"I really should go now," he said, this time with more determination. "Thank you for the evening. It was... surprisingly pleasant."

Thomas beamed as if Martin had just paid him the greatest compliment of his life—which, considering Martin's usual standards for social events, might actually have been the case.

"I was so glad you came! We absolutely must do this again!" Thomas stood up to accompany Martin to the door. "Maybe next week? I was thinking of a game night! Or we could have a movie night? What do you think?"

Martin, whose tolerance for social activities was still limited despite the unexpected success of this evening, mumbled something noncommittal about "busy schedules" and "we'll see."

To his relief, Katja said: "I'm leaving too. Early workday tomorrow; the plants don't wait."

They said goodbye to the others, and Thomas insisted on accompanying them both to the door, as if they were important state guests leaving his palace.

"Good night, you two! Sleep well! And thanks for coming!" With a last beaming smile, he closed the door, and Martin and Katja stood alone in the hallway.

"His enthusiasm is almost physically exhausting," Katja remarked as they climbed the stairs together. "I'm pretty sure his good mood could be tapped as a renewable energy source."

Martin snorted in amusement. "If we could convert his groundless cheerfulness into electricity, the energy crisis would be solved. No nuclear power plant in the world produces as much energy as a Thomas Sonnenschein on Monday morning."

They reached the fourth floor, where Martin's apartment was located. As with their first encounter, a brief moment of indecision arose, a

social vacuum that wanted to be filled with the right words.

"I've almost finished the book," Martin said finally. "You know, the Scandinavian crime novel we talked about."

"Oh?" Katja actually seemed interested. "And, does the murderer have a deeply traumatic childhood and collect strange trophies from his victims?"

"How do you know that?" Martin raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Have you read it already?"

"No," Katja laughed. "But all my previous Scandinavian crime novels followed roughly this pattern. Either that, or the detective is an alcohol-dependent loner with relationship problems who somehow remains sympathetic."

"Well, in this case, both apply," Martin replied with a slight smile. "But it's still well written. If you'd like... I could lend it to you when I'm done. Probably tomorrow or the day after."

He was surprised at his own offer. Lending books meant revealing a piece of his privacy, creating a connection that went beyond casual neighborhood contact. It was a commitment, small but significant.

"I would like that," said Katja after a brief hesitation. "We could even talk about it. Over coffee

or something. In an appropriately quiet environment, of course."

Martin felt his heartbeat imperceptibly accelerate. Was this an invitation? A polite phrase? A suggestion for a... meeting? The terrain was so unfamiliar that he felt like an archaeologist suddenly encountering a completely unknown civilization.

"That sounds... good," he finally said, choosing the word carefully to appear neither too enthusiastic nor too reserved. "I know a café that's not too crowded and not too loud. They make decent espresso and don't ask for your name to write on the cup."

"Perfect," nodded Katja. "That's one of my main criteria for good cafés—no forced naming. As if the barista wanted to get to know me just to serve my latte."

They stood a moment longer, in a silence that was strangely not uncomfortable. Then Katja said: "Well then, good night, Martin. It was... surprisingly nice."

"Yes," he replied and realized that he meant it. "Surprisingly nice."

She continued her way upstairs while Martin pulled out his key. As he opened the door to his

apartment, he paused and looked back at the empty landing. A strange feeling spread in his chest, warm and unfamiliar. It took a moment for him to identify it: It was contentment. Not the quiet contentment he felt when sitting alone in his apartment, reading a book, and blocking out the world outside. But a different, more vibrant variant—the contentment that can arise from human interaction when it's not painful and exhausting.

With a slight shake of his head at his own sentimental tendency, he entered his apartment and closed the door behind him. The day had been a roller coaster: from the supermarket horror to the unexpected encounter with Sandra to the surprisingly pleasant evening at Thomas's.

Martin Griesgram, the notorious misanthrope, had not only survived a day full of human interactions but had actually enjoyed moments of it. The world seemed to have come unhinged, the laws of nature turned upside down.

He went to his bedroom, changed clothes, and lay down in bed, a book in hand—the Scandinavian crime novel he had promised Katja. As he read, he found his thoughts drifting repeatedly to the conversation on the balcony, to Katja's sardonic smile, to the arranged coffee.

With a sigh, he closed the book. The Saturday supermarket madness was over, but it had triggered something much more disturbing: The quiet, nagging suspicion that his carefully constructed misanthropic worldview might not be as unshakable as he had thought.

A dangerous realization for a man who had built his lifestyle on the premise that human interaction was, in the vast majority of cases, a torment to be avoided.

But as terrible as this realization might be—the thought of coffee with Katja brought a slight smile to his face as he finally turned off the light and fell into a surprisingly peaceful sleep.