

Prolog

Lena...

I feel lost without you, how much I miss you...!!!

Sometimes we can be a little closer to each other, and yet, she seems infinitely far away when she is on the other side of the fence, at a safe distance from me, sending me a kiss through the air, and I realize, that I will never again feel a real kiss from her on my lips.

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Aimlessly, I roam the streets of my ghetto. Ghetto, a term, that in some areas, for example in the rap scene was used graciously for one's own neighborhood. But this is a real ghetto, in the true sense of the word, a vaccination ghetto, as it is commonly called; in official government terms it is referred to as a protection zone, my protection zone, ProZo 44002, based on the zip code. The protection zone does not relate to the fact that it is not the inhabitants of the zone that are being protected, but rather the citizens of the normal world from those of the vaccination ghetto.

Here the unvaccinated live crammed together, behind walls and fences, these consist for the most part of people allergic to vaccinations and only to a small extent of vaccine-deniers or opponents of vaccination, even if it is seen the other way around outside. As if we had deliberately chosen this fate but it makes it easier for the people out there to treat us like lepers.

I am looking for a job, it's not easy here, there are almost no manufacturing businesses, for lack of sales opportunities of their virus-contaminated goods. Jobs exist only in the services sector such as in retail or hair salons and at the only doctor. Therefore, unemployment here in the ghetto has risen steadily in recent years and has only reduced purchasing power further. In the meantime, there are growing voices on the outside to cut government aid to the poor here, because, according to the general opinion, the ghetto inhabitants entered this situation voluntarily by their refusal to get vaccinated.

Announcements of new infections are making our daily headlines, confirming once again, the difference of the people here from those on the outside, where are almost no new infections, whereas here the number of new infections is constantly at a frighteningly high level.

We are only allowed to leave our ghetto through a guarded border crossing, and only with a permission slip from a destination in another protection zone; and with enough fuel in the tank to be able to reach it without having to stop for gas. Only in the confines of a car are we permitted to leave the protection zone at all.

My gaze falls on the gateway, cynically referred to as the 'gate of liberation', through which not only goods are coming in, but also waste and the bodies of the deceased are transported out of the ghetto. Both the refuse and the corpses are immediately driven to an incinerator to prevent the outside world from contamination with potential viruses.

By the gateway is the only garbage collection site of the whole ghetto. There is no trash removal service as it is common on the outside, so all residents must transport their garbage there on their own, which leads to more and more people of the areas too far removed from the gateway to drag it there all the way, to simply dispose of it in the open somewhere along the way. And once such a wild dump has arisen, it is regarded by others as an invitation to add their own garbage. In some remote areas of the ghetto, the stench is now unbearable, which makes it a paradise for rats.

The mood in the ghetto is depressing, many have come to terms with their fate, spending the day watching TV, the only window to the outside world, and playing computer games or getting drunk. The infrastructure continues to collapse as the neighboring cities, to which the ghetto once belonged, increasingly refuse to invest in these parts and instead focus on the normal areas.

Thus, over the years, a two-class society has been formed in this country, in which the vaccinated represent the upper class and we, who cannot be vaccinated, represent the legitimate succession of the proletariat.

Listlessly I kick a pebble in front of me; there are hardly any cars left on the pothole-littered roads, even pedestrians can barely be seen but then, why would they; hardly anyone has money to buy anything and leisure activities are close to zero.

At a street stand I automatically put on my N95 face mask; buy me a can of cheap beer, quality products can no longer be obtained due to the scant purchasing power in the ghetto; walk to the desolate park, sit down on a weathered bench, open the can, take a sip and let my thoughts wander.

It all started in this cursed year of 2020. The year had started quite well, the economy was in a slight but sustainable upswing, and people's political consciousness finally seemed to be shifting toward long-term sustainability.

Environmental awareness was suddenly chic, young people took to the streets to demonstrate for green energy production and CO2 reduction, and they managed to instill in many people a new awareness of their own environment. Small steps, but first steps in the right direction. However, in hindsight, society was already somewhat divided at that point, because living sustainably was only possible for those who could afford it financially.

Recently, I had met and fallen in love with Lena. I spotted her at one of the last small concerts of aspiring young artists, she was standing nearby, so I introduced myself, we had a couple of drinks, laughed and celebrated exuberantly and at the end of the evening we shared a long, passionate kiss. We were newly in love, everything around us was bright pink and we missed the first news about the outbreak. We lived in our own world, a world that consisted only of Lena and me.

Reports of the movement towards sustainability and the accompanying demos ended abruptly when the first images of a novel infection from China spilled into the media. People quickly became infected with the virus known as Corona, and mortality rates reached heights as it had never occurred before during regular flu season. Also, the course of the disease progressed in some cases so rapidly that some had to receive intensive medical treatment or died just a few days after getting infected.

Fifty years ago, this might have been a side note on the Daily News, but today, in our globally connected world, new images and news about the wave of infection kept popping up completely unfiltered, stoking the population's fear of this invisible danger; hardly anyone could foresee how dangerous the situation would soon become, but fortunately it was still far away, all the way in China.

An increasing number of virologists spoke up, gaining a seat in consulting expert panels on the news and in talk shows but unsettling the population even further with, sometimes, contradictory expert knowledge statements.

Suddenly there were the first cases in Europe; Italy was hit hardest. Politicians were discussing to throw the European Nations' achievements overboard and to re-control or to even close their own borders completely. As if a virus had respect for physical barriers. However, when these measures were introduced, it was already too late, and in every country in Europe there were already hot spots of infected people, some of whom were not even aware that they had been infected with the coronavirus.

This, too, was the treacherous thing about this disease, while a not insignificant percentage experienced serious health problems, others did not even show any signs of symptoms and thus unconsciously acted as spreaders for the wave of infection. Every day, the news reported new, steadily increasing infection rates; sometimes just numbers without any context, which were difficult for the population to interpret. Who could make sense out of the fact that only an average of four intensive care beds were now available in hospitals without knowing the number of vacant beds in the first place, and without seeing the virus infection in comparison to that?

New measures were introduced, discarded and amended in accordance with the Pandemic Act without the consent of the political body, the half-life of these measures was only a few days and only fueled the insecurity of the population. The great, invisible danger became an ever-growing monster lurking around every corner of their neighborhoods.

These new measures led to Lena and my dealing with the pandemic for the first time. Lena, as a congenital asthma sufferer was more worried and increasingly afraid of infection. We began to avoid larger crowds, and I took care of the daily shopping mostly by myself. And yet we continued to enjoy our young love in my apartment or on long walks in less frequented parks.

Most often, however, we went out to the lake, not a huge one, but large enough to allow for a few sailboats. Here, in the calm on the water we were completely safe and undisturbed. We enjoyed the freedom, the light breeze that swept through our hair; we had long conversations or simply enjoyed the silence on the lake, which was only occasionally interrupted by the splashing sounds of the water. Of course, we missed concerts, the theatre and our visits to the gym but, as newly in love as we were, we found plenty of activities to compensate. In addition, Lena was a gifted decorator, so that my apartment became more and more our little love nest thanks to some renovations and Lena's lovingly selected accessories.

Lena and I worked almost exclusively from our home office and we enjoyed spending this much time with each other. Of course, we had our set workhours, but we were able to spend our breaks together, slept-in almost every morning and enjoyed each second of the day that we spent with one another. For us it was absolute bliss to be able to work together like this, even though we worked for different companies.

For others, it was more of a burden, and quite a few relationships ended because the partners were stuck with each other all day without any compensating diversions or distraction. For families it often was not easy either. Not only did the parents work from home, but the children also were being taught

remotely, for which many did not even have the necessary infrastructure. Moreover, it was not easy to concentrate on one's job when unoccupied kids were noisily romping around in the next room.

During the first lockdown, schools and businesses were temporarily closed, catapulting businesses into an economic crisis and causing the stock markets to crash. So, to prevent further decline, after the summer break schools remained open allowing the parents to return to work knowing that their children would be supervised. Thus, the economy was stabilized, but schools in particular turned into multi-local epicenters of the pandemic spread.

Despite all the measures taken, there was an explosive rise in infections and associated deaths towards the end of the year. The number of available intensive care beds declined rapidly, and many doctors had to decide which patients would receive these beds and ventilators. This type of triage situation, otherwise only heard of during times of war, presented many doctors with massive ethical and moral dilemmas. Some proceeded according to the principle of the order in which patients were brought in ("First Come, First Serve"), others used the age of the patients as a criterion, and some made decisions based on insurance status of patients. The least ethical criterion was that of the benefits the patient's health would have on society; so, entrepreneurs and benevolent persons were picked over patients who were on public assistance programs. Fortunately, this criterion was used very rarely.

Here and there, isolated movements arose, some protesting the government restrictions as being an infringement on their personal freedoms, others to express their need to catch up on their social life and to get together and party again. They accused the government of systematically collecting data on the behavior of individuals under the pretext of Corona research and of subjecting any kind of fun and entertainment to a new health hype. Justifiably so, they missed taking trips, going to the theater or the movies and attending concerts and festivals.

Even smoking in public was indirectly banned, since the mask mandate did not permit their removal for smoking in public. This pleased many politicians and health experts. The protests died down and soon dissipated by the euphoria over a vaccine and, thus, the hope of returning to normalcy.

The bleakest Christmas I have ever experienced, without glittering and fragrant Christmas markets, without brightly lit city centers and shopping malls; was followed by the dreariest New Year's Eve, without parties and fireworks. But slowly a silver lining of hope seemed to appear on the dark Corona horizon.

Pharmaceutical companies were intensively researching vaccines because drugs for the actual treatment of this disease did not yet exist. Some promising medications were approved and administered, but this too was more of a shot in the dark than scientifically sound therapy.

Finally, towards the end of this forlorn year, the first vaccines with a high efficacy were approved. The corresponding pharmaceutical companies achieved a high degree of effectiveness to protect against infection and produced, at their own risk, large doses to keep in stock until such time when approval would be granted so that vaccinations could be carried out immediately nationwide. However, it took almost all of 2021 for almost the entire population to receive their two doses of vaccination, which were necessary for full protection. In some parts, there were absurd scenes of just vaccinated people leaving the vaccination center cheering with their vaccination records held up high in the air as if it were a World Cup trophy.

Companies and government authorities took additional measures to protect their employees by administering contactless body temperature measurements upon entering a building in order to detect a possible early stage of infection and to then send people with elevated temperature home to recover. Later, increasingly cheap thermal imaging cameras were widely used in the workplace to ensure the health protection of employees throughout the workday. This led to the abuse by many supervising personnel to use the cameras to verify their employees' time sheets. Although the Unions objected, they reached an agreement with the employers for the transitional period until the completion of all vaccinations. Then they simply "forgot" to take them down.

Lena, after medical staff, first responders and the elderly, was one of the first to receive a vaccination due to her pre-existing condition. From that point on, a lot of things changed in our daily lives. Since I could not be vaccinated due to my multiple allergies, she was now doing the shopping most of the time. Now she was the person with the lower risk of infection, and I was the one withdrawing from public life more and more.

As every year, a new, much less aggressive and dangerous flu wave reached the country in the winter of 20/21; and as with every flu wave in the pre-corona era, people also died from this flu. The difference, however, was that now every infection and every death was inspected under the microscope. Before Corona, the number of flu deaths were no more than a side note on the News by the end of April; but now all virologists and physicians were called upon to comment on the possible effects of this new flu.

The new flu wave was also discussed in Congress. Many felt, for economic reasons, that this much less dangerous flu wave was not the same as the Corona pandemic and that no new measures should be

adopted for this year. However, ethicists from all middle-class parties questioned whether the people at risk this year were worth less as human beings than those during the Corona pandemic. The Basic Law places the life of the individual under special protection, so it would be ethically and morally indefensible not to take any measures simply because fewer deaths were to be expected than in 2020.

By a narrow majority it was decided to put protective measurements in place to attack this flu wave as well. Since the vote was public, politicians who voted against the measures were subsequently publicly pilloried and denounced as murderers. Based on the experience of the previous year, a catalogue of measures with long-term validity was drawn up, which largely prevented the spread of this flu. All parties rated this as a success for their policies, without considering that the virus strain brought with it extraordinarily little aggressiveness and mortality.

Lena and I also discussed this issue. I felt that it was not necessary to shut down the whole country again. I pointed out that people have always died from viruses and that we just cannot protect everyone.

Lena disagreed, she found my approach Darwinian; modern medicine must protect people from infection, and if that is not possible, other measures must be taken until a pharmaceutical solution would be found. And if this new flu wave were to be handled differently, it would be ethically unjustifiable. Unlike me, she was affected differently by the pandemic because of her family's and her own pre-existing condition. However, she exaggerated with her accusation that if taken my approach all antibiotics should be abolished because, after all, people had died of infections since the beginning of time.

One day we had a heated exchange of arguments on a very emotional level, especially since we were personally involved, but we came to realize that so little would be solved at this point. When the phone rang and my mother was on the line, we changed the subject and, after hanging up, preferred to devote ourselves to our ever-growing feelings for one another.

The general perception among the population was the same as it had been the previous year. Hardly anyone could really assess how dangerous the new virus was in comparison to the Corona virus. There was general consent within the population, that the protective measurements that were in place towards the end of the Corona virus wave were to be deployed with this new flu as well; because this virus was just as dangerous as the previous one and all viruses posed an incredible and a not to be underestimated threat. Therefore, all measures for personal protection and the protection of everyone else were to remain in place.

During this time, society became noticeably more sterile and not only in terms of the ubiquitous disinfection stations. Due to the general mandate to wear facial masks, there were no more people kissing in public, even hugging was almost never observed; everyone remained at a distance from each other. Due to the high risk of droplet-transmitted infection kissing in general was frowned upon. The protective measures and their impact had been burned deeply into people's consciousness and minds.

This was especially true for protection through vaccination; a vaccine was quickly developed for the new flu wave, which could now, having learned from last year's vaccination protocol, be delivered to the population at a much faster rate.

Only after successful inoculation did people feel safe again, protected from the invisible, intangible danger. Once it was known that all members of the immediate family were inoculated, they got together again to celebrate as in pre-Corona times; greeting each other with a big hug or by other means. Occasionally, however, there were cases where relatives were deliberately not invited to meetings or celebrations when it became known that they were not vaccinated. At first, and more for fun, people would proudly show off their stamped vaccination records.

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However, in public the uncertainty was still high, no one could really know whether the person in front or behind oneself in the supermarket check-out line had been vaccinated or if a person posed a potential risk to his or her own health. For that reason, the distance of tables in gastronomic establishments remained the same as during Corona times and companies continued to rely on shared use of office space. The experience of working from home was seen as overall positive. Many companies even benefitted economically from the situation by reducing their rented office space by up to 50%.

Yet, the opinion prevailed in large parts of the population that people who did not get vaccinated were opposed to vaccinations in general, and that people who refused all vaccinations including MMR, Polio etc. gave these Infections a new chance for dissemination. This created an increasingly larger gap between those who were vaccinated and those who were not.

The fact that the majority of those who were not vaccinated were prevented from receiving them for medical reasons was either not considered or was simply dismissed. After all, those who refused vaccinations could be shut out, while someone who was not at fault for not being able to get inoculated

should have been granted a special medical status. In most cases, these people were suffering from multiple allergies and were therefore prevented from receiving the vaccine.

Soon, the terms PosiVaX for vaccinated persons and NegiVaX for unvaccinated individuals, were established worldwide.

In the first half of 2021, there were first cases of restaurant owners wanting to see proof of vaccinations from their patron upon entering their establishments. Guests who refused or could not provide their documents, were denied entry. Not only was it embarrassing to be turned away at the door of a restaurant like a check dodger, without actually being guilty of that, but suddenly uninvolved pedestrians and restaurant-goers quickly turned into an angry mob, who, being in the majority, insulted you in the worst possible way and sometimes even threw objects at you.

And since there is always someone who recognizes you, the news that you are a NegiVaX spread quickly among your personal contacts and one was stigmatized with the corresponding social distancing up to complete severing of contact. Since most of the population had the appropriate vaccination protection, the restaurateurs' reactions and measures were widely supported. The unvaccinated, protested loudly, felt discriminated against and exposed. However, since their voices were in the minority, their protest faded into nothingness.

Attempts to change the behavior of the gastronomes by means of court orders were unsuccessful, as they were able to invoke their legal right to refuse customers. In addition, many people also felt that this measure was a good one, because it increased the pressure on alleged vaccination opponents to get vaccinated in order to be able to participate in daily social life again.

This approach initially spread like wildfire in the food industry; in 2022, retail store operators followed suit and also checked vaccination passes before letting any customers enter their stores. Due to the general social acceptance of this measure, this type of inspection was extended to cinemas, theatres, gyms, airlines and public transport. This restored the feeling of normalcy for most of the population and it allowed them to move about safely.

Of course, this also affected the relationship between Lena and me. While she could eat out with friends or go to bars, concerts or the theater; our time was limited to hours together alone in my apartment or on our sailboat by the lake, which became more and more a refuge for us; a place where we could escape from the hustle and bustle, from the on-panic bordering fear, a place of peacefulness.

As a result, we saw each other less often, which on the one hand made me sad, but on the other hand I could understand how much Lena enjoyed her regained freedom; how much I would have loved to

be out there with her. Sometimes I imagined how her best friend, who for whatever reason was always hostile towards me, could put continued pressure on Lena for being with a NegiVaX and convince her one day to separate from me. I was relieved that Lena always assured and showed me that she loved me above all else.

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Towards the end of that year, companies and firms began to demand a certified copy of a comprehensive vaccination record as part of the application process for new hires. The justification for the protection of co-workers outshined any objection of discrimination and so the unemployment rate under the NegiVaXs skyrocketed. This trend encouraged other co-workers, first in manufacturing- and then in office jobs to refuse cooperation with employees who could not show comprehensive proof of vaccination.

In response company management placed such employees in their own office wings and denied them access to the PosiVaXs' working space. In manufacturing jobs, special shifts for NegiVaXs were established, but that was short-lived, as the PosiVaXs refused to work on the same machines as the shift before them without extensive sanitizing of all equipment. The NegiVaXs were placed on provisional posts, isolated from the others and feeling without purpose, so that they gradually left the companies in frustration and the problem seemed to slowly go away.

Life in schools was also becoming increasingly problematic. Parents associations protested the coeducation of PosiVaX and NegiVaX students. These discussions were conducted passionately, as were all discussions involving the well-being and health of their children. As a result, NegiVaX students were centered in their own schools, grouped together, and taught by NegiVaX teachers. However, since NegiVaX teachers could not cover the entire spectrum of subjects, in many cases the children were basically just supervised rather than educated and quickly fell behind the PosiVaX children in their level of education. But this was mainly accepted by the population, as the social danger they posed was more than their intellectual benefit.

During this time, a parallel society began to evolve. Isolated supermarkets opened exclusively to NegiVaX customers, so that this part of the population could also take care of their daily needs. There were also the first pubs and restaurants for NegiVaXs, which were opened scattered around the inner cities. However, most of them were forced to close after a short period of time, because angry parts of the population impulsively smeared their walls with savage insults or shattered the windows of their establishments.

In areas where supermarkets first opened for NegiVaXs, gradually also restaurants and bars followed suit; and in order to be near the stores and establishments that catered to their daily needs, more and more NegiVaXs moved into these suburbs, while the PosiVaXs hastily fled these areas. This trend was aided by the fact that it was almost impossible for a NegiVaX to move into a new apartment in the general residential areas, as these were only rented or sold to persons with comprehensive vaccination records.

Many also moved away because of the continuous bullying; in my neighborhood as well, doors were smeared with graffiti, cars were vandalized, or one was mopped in the middle of the street as soon as it became known that he or she was a NegiVaX; sooner or later these types of aggression would no longer be preventable. Some even demanded that NegiVaXs wear some sort of clearly visible sign on their clothes to warn the rest of the population. Fortunately, however, this measure was not adopted. Nevertheless, one was ostracized within a short period of time if hanging out in a PosiVaX neighborhood as a NegiVaX.

I as well lost my apartment in the hip part of town and began looking for something in the NegiVaX area. I was initially worried that this might put a strain on our love relationship, but Lena's place was now actually closer than ever before. However, it still proved difficult to do something together. I was prevented from entering the PosiVaX stores, and into the NegiVaX stores I did not want to risk taking her.

The winter flu season of 22/23 passed comparatively less severe; the news now increasingly differentiated between infection- and mortality rates among vaccinated and unvaccinated people. Rates diverged scissor-like, which was generally credited to the effectiveness of the protective measures and the protection through vaccinations, and the government celebrated itself as the savior of society.

Among the population, the ruling politicians saw never seen before validation and won re-election by a land slide, thus, further weakening the opposition in the country, which repeatedly insisted that decisions that interfered with the daily lives of their citizens must be made by congress and must not consist of state-of-emergency decisions. However, a pandemic law was passed by an overwhelming majority that gave the government long-term freedom to fight the pandemic without having to consult the democratic political bodies.

Thus, the division within the society continued to grow. This was streamlined by the development of a cell phone app that managed and stored the vaccination status of each individual. This made the painstaking inspection of the old vaccination records upon entering a restaurant or supermarket

obsolete; a scanner at the entrance accessed the data on mobile phones and granted or refused the person entry.

With incomplete vaccination record, a loud alarm signal sounded, and a bright spotlight engulfed the person in question. Although some, especially of the political opposition, described this as too public of a display, most of the population felt this to be an additionally safeguard. This was mainly, because anyone who found him-or herself too close to the rejected person, was then able to immediately practice social distancing and to avoid any contact with the person being forced to leave the store or restaurant.

At that time intermingling between NegiVaXs and PosiVaXs was only possible outdoors. NegiVaXs were denied access to public transportation, to all areas of daily life, work and leisure activities. Sports clubs had long since stopped accepting NegiVaXs and had cancelled existing memberships of those who were not vaccinated; only clubs with verified 100% PosiVaXs athletes were admitted to competitions.

During this time, it became more and more difficult for Lena and me to appear in public together. There was always a risk that I could be identified as being a NegiVaX; there were several cases of such mixed couples where passers-by forcibly pulled the PosiVaX away from the NegiVaX to get him or her out of the danger zone. It was as if everyone suddenly regarded themselves as a watchdog and potential savior of the PosiVaXs from the ominous NegiVaXs.

Although most NegiVaXs were now living more or less voluntarily in their own residential areas, the call for complete segregation of the NegiVaXs became louder, after all, intermingling in pedestrian zones or in recreation areas was still a possibility. If a NegiVaX was identified in a common area, the furious mob immediately assaulted him or her, chased them away while shouting hideous insults and throwing rocks at them; occasionally even shots were fired. Yet, physical violence was avoided for fear of infection.

After another innocuous flu wave in 2023/24, the first protection zones were established in the south of the country. As the excavators approached, protests broke out among the NegiVaXs, but they quickly ran out of steam as the general public was behind the new measure. Officially, these protection zones were established to prevent the NegiVaXs from accidentally leaving their neighborhoods and encountering potentially aggressive PosiVaXs. Unofficially, however, it was clear to everyone that a deliberate segregation of the NegiVaXs was being carried out here, in order to starve them to death in their ghetto.

Wherever possible, two protective fences were put up at a distance of 6 feet to each other to prevent any NegiVaX from getting too close to any PosiVaX. People who were close to each other, like family

members, friends and lovers like Lena and I, would still meet at the fence, but with a single-layer fence, it was difficult to maintain the required minimum distance of 6 feet. In areas where it was not feasible to build two fences, 16-foot-high walls topped with barbed wire were erected, thus making any type of contact impossible.

The final separation from her broke my heart; just before all NegiVaXs had to settle in their protection zones, we secretly got together for one last time at our favorite lake. Longingly I glanced at the sailboat, which I had sold by now, we would not be able to use it anymore, that much was clear to us.

Our eyes filled with tears which began running down our cheeks as the time for our final farewell drew closer. We held hands, could barely break free of each other's embrace and last kisses until it was time; I got up from our beloved bench, where we had sat so often after our sailing trips, gave her one last kiss and trotted, head lowered and quietly weeping, to the protection zone.

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Basically, it was impossible to enter or leave the protection zone at all. Although it was permitted to enter the ProZo with comprehensive vaccination documents, no one, except the occasional visiting relative of a few residents, had the desire to do so. Even these visits declined in the course of 2024, as the documents required for entry meant crossing numerous bureaucratic hurdles; furthermore, the protection zone's visual appearance started to decline due to a lack of maintenance of their infrastructure and an increasing waste management problem.

Also, rumors started to circulate, that the crime rate in the protection zone was rising at an explosive rate and that no one should be out on the streets after dark. There was talk of marauding gangs dividing the protection zone among themselves and raiding, beating and robbing any intruder. This, of course, was nonsense, but many of the citizens, who had no relatives or any connection to the NegiVaXs, upheld and spread these rumors.

As often as I could, I met Lena at the fence surrounding my protection zone; of course, she would have been allowed to enter, but because of her pre-existing condition, I did not want this; if for some reason her vaccination did not fully protect her, I would be putting her life in danger. Each time it was a dreadful experience to only being able to see her, unable to take her into my arms or to kiss her; even our words had to be yelled over the distance so that they lost all intimacy; also, one was seldom alone at the fence; on either side pedestrians strolled by, those from the inside who longingly stared to the outside and those who glared across with derogatory facial expressions while shouting hideous insults.

Time and again I heard her sobs during our long phone conversations, which almost broke my heart; how many times had I contemplated breaking off contact with her in order to give her back the freedom of her young life. But I just could not do it, even if I fully intended to do so. As soon as I heard her voice, the intense feelings flowed back through my heart and all I could do was try to comfort her as best as I could. It became more and more difficult for me to talk her out of visiting me in the ghetto; although I had no symptoms, there was always a risk that she would come into contact with others and possibly become infected with the virus.

The attempt to meet up at a highway rest stop also failed. Although I had all the necessary documents with me when I left and my car had sufficient gas, we had not considered that with the introduction of the protection zones and the corresponding exit regulations, the access roads on highway rest stops were equipped with a system that communicated with the vaccination-phone app. At the entrance, an alarm was automatically sounded, and I was immediately directed to a cordoned-off area from which I could neither reach nor see Lena. Disappointed I turned back; our evening phone call was even more depressing and despondent than before.

The media continued to report on the number of infections but differentiated between the number of infections within the protection zones and those on the outside. They celebrated the fact that there were virtually no more infections in the normal areas, while the number of infections and deaths in the protected areas continued to increase. Again, this was seen as validation that the establishment of the protection zones was a big success.

Measures to contain the pandemic were still officially maintained. With broad public approval the two-class society-system was further perfected. Even for a trip to another protection zone, the bureaucratic hurdle was gradually raised. For instance, one had to prove before a planned departure that he or she would quarantine for 2 weeks upon arrival in the next protection zone, even within shared living quarters. This type of isolation was hardly taken on by anyone, so that the gap between the parallel societies became ever wider; no one entered the protection zone, no one left it.

Occasionally, actual vaccine-opponents gave up their resistance, due to the unbearable conditions in their protective zones. They were taken to so-called 'resocialization' camps, where they were given full vaccination protection within four weeks. As they left the camps, the enlightened were celebrated like heroes by the media and seen as additional proof of the correctness of the measures. In short, they had their 5 minutes of fame only to disappear into oblivion just as quickly. It was important to the media that they admitted to being wrong about vaccination and to publicly proclaimed that they were misled, but that from now on they were doing everything they could to combat the pandemic as well.

Now, in the year 2025, there seem to be no further measures taken; very rarely an isolated vaccine refuser is committed to the protection zone; otherwise, I live here from day to day, trying to stay away from other residents and maintaining a certain daily routine.

The phone calls with Lena help me survive; maybe that is one reason why I could never suggest letting her go, as much as I want to set her free. If she were no longer my focus in life, I would not even know what to exist for; perhaps I would let myself go to the point of complete neglect like the bum that just walked past me who cannot turn his gaze away from the beer can that is virtually empty.

Damn, I think I am already starting to hallucinate. Are they already mixing active ingredients into the beer that lets you see the world through pink glasses? There have been many rumors that the goods delivered to the protection zones are mixed with substances that have a calming effect in order to prevent an uprising from happening. Those out there, fear nothing more than a breakout from the ProZo that would suddenly send thousands of NegiVaXs through the streets and bring the deadly virus back into their own population.

I rub my eyes, is that Lena over there sitting on the ram shackle bench? I finish my can and carelessly toss it on the ground with the other garbage, but I remember not wanting to become like many others here in the ghetto, picked it up and stuffed it into my backpack. Again, I look at the bench, the young woman is gone, did I imagine it all? Was there something mixed in with my beer? After all, I did only have one can.

My gaze wanders along the path; the young woman slowly walks along the overgrown path towards the housing developments. A little confused I follow her, she is pulling a little suitcase on wheels behind her, I catch up to her, faster and faster, it is Lena, now I am quite sure, I am starting to run, calling her name, she is turning around, it's her, another 50 feet, another 5, she's dropping the suitcase and is running towards me and we're sinking into a tearful hug.

"What are you doing here? Are you crazy?"

"I couldn't stand it anymore, I missed you so much, I missed you so incredibly much."

I kiss her gently on the lips and then her forehead.

"It's far too dangerous for you here, you have to leave the ProZo immediately!"

Nevertheless, I cannot help but kiss her repeatedly. How long have I not kissed her? I do not know, I can barely remember, but I do remember how wonderful it feels from the moment our lips first touch.

"I have a week off and have decided to spend it here with you."

"I don't know what to say, I'm so excited to be holding you in my arms again, but on the other hand I'm afraid that something might happen to you over here. What if the vaccine doesn't protect you 100%?"

"But you don't have any symptoms, so it can't be that bad."

"There was a period a few months ago where I felt that I was coming down with something but after being exhausted for a couple of days I got over it; maybe I was infected, but my immune system handled it well; for most it luckily doesn't become disastrous."

"Then you should be immune now?"

"I don't know, there have been cases of multiple infections, so even after proven infection, you are not considered protected and still not permitted to leave the protection zone; people only trust pharmaceuticals."

Lena laughs. "Yes, for some people it takes on an almost religious character if you see the fanaticism with which they pursue this virus."

"Enough now of all the crap, tell me how you're doing, what's life like out there, what's changed?"

We walk down the street to my apartment; I make sure no one comes too close to Lena; several times we switch to the other side of the street because the sidewalk is too narrow to keep ample distance.

Lena chats about her friends and acquaintances, it seems that after years of uncertainty and deprivation there is an immense need to catch up on social contacts and events. There is an incredible euphoria in the air now that the cities and streets are clear of the ... she hesitates... the virus. Like a big, joint victory, perhaps to be compared to winning the world cup in soccer, only that now everyone is involved, it affects every single person, and the jubilation does not just fade away a few days after the winning match.

Also, people suddenly seem to be much more aware of their health and the environment, and there has been a real shift towards sustainability and climate protection, without politicians having to pressure or encourage them. Many seem to have realized how fragile the system of mankind really is.

It is interesting for me to hear what Lena is telling me; everyone seems to have changed their view; the world seems to have, despite the, in the meantime increased regional demarcation, moved closer together through the pandemic. Even the US and China have already signed a climate change agreement that is far more ambitious than any agreement before.

"And how is it here in the protection zone?"

"You mean in the ghetto? In the vaccination ghetto? The NegiVaX ghetto? It is exactly the opposite, we are the yang of society, somehow everything in the universe must be balanced.

The mood is depressing, there is hardly anything to do, barely any work, many have simply given up hope. For a while, the residents were still looking for things to do, maintaining their homes and gardens, as well as the parks and the rest of the infrastructure. But the more people relinquished hope, the less they kept being involved in the upkeep of their neighborhoods; at that point, the mountains of trash grew so quickly that no one could keep up, causing another wave of resignation."

"But you didn't give up?"

"No, even though if I'm quite honest, there were very black days for me as well. But my love for you, to hear your voice on the phone, to meet you at the fence and to talk to you, all this has given me the courage to go on."

9

She kisses me gently on the lips. We reach my apartment; fortunately, it is one of my morning rituals to whip the apartment in tip-top shape, not that I have visitors very often, but it is a nice feeling to live in a clean place and at the same time it helps to maintain a daily routine.

Suddenly all the negative thoughts are drifting away, laughing and squealing with joy we tumble over the threshold; some neighbors peak their heads out of their front door, they have not seen anybody that cheerful and happy here in a long time. Lena pulls out a bottle of champagne, tosses her roller case aside, looks around briefly and drags me into the bedroom, where we make up for months of physical yearning.

The rest of the day and the following night we spend in bed; I only get up several times to make us a few snacks and to get some more champagne, then we continue celebrating the ecstasy of our reunion.

I wake up in the morning with a sore throat and feeling a little worn-out, but no wonder after that night; I make coffee, bring Lena a cup to bed, kiss her forehead, sleepily she opens her eyes, then looks at me happy and grateful. I would circle the world for that look on her face, my heart leaps with happiness as we enjoy our coffee, at times contentedly in silence, other times giggling foolishly.

In the bathroom I throw back a couple of aspirin, my head is throbbing, I have not had champagne in a long time. Nevertheless, it is the perfect drink to celebrate a special occasion, of which there are not many in the ghetto. I am glad Lena thought of this.

"Take me for a walk around your protection zone and show me what you're doing all day." As I get back to the bedroom Lena greets me in a short, bright red dress and knee-high black boots with high heels.

"You look amazing, Lena, I could take you right here and now, you look gorgeous and that dress, and the boots look perfect on you!"

Admiringly I look her over from head to toe, I can hardly believe my luck, but I pause briefly.

"What is it?" she asks. "Is there something wrong?"

"Please don't get me wrong, but put on something more casual, you couldn't know this, but prostitutes are available here at every corner, for many women and families the only way to make money; there are no special pick-up spots here or anything like that, but the boots could be seen as a clear sign for men that you are for sale. There aren't many occasions here in the ghetto to dress up a little sexy; I'm sorry, I'm sure you just wanted to make me happy."

Lena drops her gaze.

"I bought these especially for you to surprise you with; I know how much you like me to dress like this and to go out and show me off." Anyways, she nods barely noticeable and slips into her jeans and sneakers.

"In this outfit you are just as sexy for me as in the other one."

And I mean it. I cough briefly, feeling as if I had swallowed the wrong way.

We leave the apartment, fortunately without coming across anybody in the stairwell, strolling hand in hand towards the city center. Only a few people, other than us, are out and about, most wrapped in dark clothing, with bent-over bodies and pale grey faces, people who have come to terms with their fate in this ghetto, continuing in a vegetative state until old age or illness will relieve them.

In contrast there is the comparatively high number of prostitutes who more or less successfully try to somehow generate an additional income, women of all ages who stand out strikingly shrill from the rest of the crowd, dabs of color, which are supposed to draw attention to men who want to satisfy their sexual needs in exchange for money.

But with little success; hardly anybody is even interested in sex anymore and for most money is so sparse that they cannot even afford these discount whores. They prefer to spend their money on a cheap bottle of liquor which promises a longer high than the brief pleasure of a sexual climax.

With every step, with every turn into another street of despair, Lena becomes quieter, again and again she looks at me with a sad expression, sad about what kind of world I must spend the rest of my life in, a world that in comparison to the increasingly colorful and beautiful life outside only amplifies the stark contrast between the two parallel societies we live in.

Arriving in the center of the town, I ask her to wait just around the corner of the building, in an area where I hope she will not have any contact with others; I pop into a supermarket, quickly grab a few items of the sparsely filled shelves, pay, drop them into my bag and return to her.

"Did anybody try to talk to you?"

Lena shakes her head, gives me a kiss and we continue towards the other side of the ghetto, the areas furthest from the 'gate of liberation', the areas where the ones that have resigned themselves to spending the rest of their days here live, and which is even more run down than the part of town I live in. Only now does Lena notice that there are virtually no cars on the roads.

"Well, understandably so, on the one hand the protection zone is so small that you can actually do everything on foot, on the other hand, the cost of cars is so high that hardly anyone can afford one. The fuel is also considerably more expensive compared to the outside due to the increased logistical supply effort, as it is officially called. Of course, this only leads to people becoming less and less mobile and thus unable to leave the protection zone at all."

"It's all so terrible, what is happening to you here? The world out there, it exists only in its new beauty and perfection at your expense, because all the suffering and anguish of the world is crammed into this place; it shouldn't be like that."

"I agree with you, but the people out there think this is a self-imposed fate of the vaccine-opponents, and so they legitimize this situation to themselves and to others."

"But you are not a vaccine opponent!"

"Most of us here are not, but this is not statistically recorded, the only thing that counts is whether you received the vaccination or not, no third or fourth community will be founded, plus, well over 95% already have appropriate vaccination protection, why should they even differentiate between these few percentages left? And perhaps still make efforts to place part of this group under special protection? It is what it is; you on the outside think we are pharmaceutical terrorists and that your citizens have to be protected from us."

"Pharmaceutical terrorists? Somehow an ominous expression, but it fits. If political terrorists could be identified via a mobile phone app, they'd all be behind bars, no doubt."

"Yes, it's like prison here, even if it's not officially portrayed that way, but rather the other way around."

We reach the most remote areas of the ghetto. Garbage piling up in between the buildings in ever growing mounts, plaster peeling of the house walls, shards of smashed windows littering the sidewalk, rats scurrying about the mountains of trash; the stench of smoldering garbage burning my eyes and nose; around the piles of refuse ragged figures assemble, grotesque faces, roaring loudly, liquor bottle in hand, neglected, abandoned, lost.

I want to spare Lena this sight; the biting smoke makes me cough again, we walk through the town center without further detours, avoiding any approach by strangers and are glad to be able to close the door of my little apartment behind us. Lena has tears in her eyes, she is deeply touched by my predicament.

The smoke seems to have scorched my lungs, again and again I have to cough, I open a bottle of the newly acquired champagne, I still feel like celebrating, even if Lena seems sad and distraught. She figures out where I keep my liquor, pours us two glasses of gin to drive away the dreary thoughts, but only when I finally kiss her a smile appears on her face; our kisses get longer, wilder, more passionate, tearing each other's clothes off we stagger into the bedroom, laughing, and spending another wonderful night together.

The next morning, I get up with the same euphoria as yesterday to make coffee, to spoil my Lena with a first cup of coffee in bed; my lungs obviously did not suffer any damage from the biting smoke yesterday, also my sore throat and the headaches have subsided.

That is how we spend her vacation together in my cozy apartment, which has now, almost like the old place outside, become our love nest. With each passing day, however, her farewell is approaching, will it be forever this time? Repeatedly I wake up at night; as wonderful as it is to spend time with her, out of nowhere, I imagine that she just came to visit me for one last time to say goodbye for good, so that she can live her carefree life outside with friends and perhaps a new partner. I try to brush aside these dark thoughts, but I notice repeatedly, that they are invading my consciousness and rob me of sleep.

11

On the morning of the sixth day, Lena wakes up late. She seems depressed, perhaps she also finds it difficult to say goodbye, especially if she really wants to break up with me. Then she would soon have to put her cards on the table.

With her coffee in my hand, I kiss her on the forehead, which feels warm and damp.

"Good morning, everything ok with you?"

"I feel totally weak, I've got a sore throat and I feel like coughing all the time. Oh, thank you for the coffee, it will get me back on my feet, I want to enjoy our last whole day together."

I hand her the cup.

"Did you forget the sugar today?" Lena looks at me inquiringly.

"No, I added two small spoons as always." I try to remember.

"Mhh, I can't taste it at all today."

I put my hand on her forehead, she definitely has a fever.

"You need a doctor right away."

Suddenly I realize that what I feared most actually happened.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm going to be fine, I want to hold you one more time before I have to go back, but I promise you, I'll spend my next vacation here with you again."

She has trouble speaking, she is gasping for air, pausing between words.

Immediately I reach for my cell phone, call the only doctor in the protection zone. He is an actual vaccine opponent, not in relation to traditional vaccination but he opposes any kind of flu shot. In contrast to me, he is a true Darwinian and repeatedly cites scientifically sound evidence to that effect. In his view, the flu is a natural selection process to which people with a weak, unadaptable immune system fall victim and by which those with a strong immune system further strengthen their bodies by provoking a strong immune response.

Both groups naturally reproduce and so the weaker immune system is passed on to their descendants. According to the doctor's theory, the Corona Wave of 2020 would have been less devastating had it not been for all those with an already weak immune system being pulled through without recourse to natural selection.

I do not agree with him, but discussions with him have proved pointless, as he is, both scientifically and rhetorically superior to me. To me, his approach is too unemotional, too non-compassionate, too factual, too harsh; he only looks at the hard facts and not the people behind the numbers and statistics, simply, too inhumane.

12

About 30 minutes later the doctor arrives; Lena is getting worse by the minute, she is struggling to breathe, and her temperature rises at an alarming rate, she barely says a word.

I pay the doctor in cash, health insurance for NegiVaXs has been abolished in 2023, because the society does not want to pay for those who, in their eyes, show themselves to be antisocial towards their fellow men. He takes a quick look at Lena, pulls out a rapid-test kit, which basically only confirms what he feared all along.

"How can this be? She has received all the required vaccinations." I show him her cell phone app.

"What is she actually doing here in the ProZo? Does she have any pre-existing conditions?"

"She's my girl-friend, we've been apart for so long, so she came here to visit me for a week and, yes, she has congenital asthma."

"She needs to get to the hospital right away, I'm calling an ambulance." He dials a number on his phone.

"We need an ambulance immediately, Main Street 54. Acute flu infection, patient needs to be on a ventilator stat! "

"Isn't that in ProZo 44002? We have more important things to do than worry about NegiVaXs." comes the derogatory answer.

"She is a PosiVaX, fully vaccinated!" the doctor yells into his cell phone.

"What?? So, what is she doing in the ProZo? We are on our way."

He hangs up. Lena's breath becomes noticeably shallow, visibly in pain, she tries to suck air into her lungs, with little success, she looks at me through pleading eyes, I hold her hand, feel her grip weakening.

The doctor covers Lena's mouth and nose with an Ambu bag, ventilating her lungs, which does little to improve her breathing.

"I love you, Lena." She is unable to reply because of the Ambu bag, maybe she would not have been able to anyways. "Everything will be fine; the EMTs will be here soon."

Her pulse is weakening, her face twisting in pain with every breath; helplessly I sit with the doctor at her bedside, constantly checking my watch and listening for the sirens of the ambulance. Lena's eyes roll back; her, in a matter of hours completely exhausted body, rises briefly, before she falls into a coma.

Finally, the sound of a siren, getting louder and louder until it abruptly falls silent in front of our building. Lena's body gets limp, her heart, which had always beaten for me, stops, no longer pounding, standing still, just as the EMTs enter the apartment in full protective gear.

They try to resuscitate Lena for half an hour until they finally give up and, together with the doctor, leave my apartment in silence. On her death certificate, the cause of death reads, "asthmatic lung failure"; better for the statistics of the PosiVaXs.

I myself am too sad to cry, I feel empty inside, my heart is crushed, my soul shattered. During her time in the ProZo, she only had contact with me, I had made sure of that. Suddenly I remember my not feeling well at the beginning of the week, and I start crying. I must have gotten infected somehow without showing major symptoms or without actually getting sick. But I was sufficiently contagious to infect Lena with the deadly disease during our countless kisses.

I have killed her.

No.

My undying love for her has killed her.

Infinitely sad, with a leaden void inside, I go down to the basement and fetch the rope with which I always tied my..... our sailboat to the pier, the last thing left of that boat...

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