

„What do you mean, exactly, by ‘Not available’? What kind of joke is this supposed to be? Now just let me tell you one thing: Not funny. Just do look at this shelf. How many ‘Not available’ stickers are there? Fifty? Sixty? Seventy? One hundred and twenty?

I mean, last week, there was the odd one, handwritten. I got that joke, more or less. I mean, I was the one eating pizza instead of burger. I would have preferred burger, I’m very much a meat person. But OK, you don’t always get what you want. And my girlfriend liked the pizza better. OK.

But today, that’s no longer funny. How many of those stickers did you get printed? Do they come by the sheet, or on a roll? How do you think you are going to survive, if you keep the shelves empty? A shop, that’s for selling stuff, man, not for joking.

And, far more importantly: How the hell am I supposed to survive? Do you really expect anyone to dine on, what does it say here? ‘Caramelised pepperoni’? What the hell is that, anyway? So, tonight’s dinner would be ‘caramelised pepperoni’ with ‘corn wafers, salted’? That’s no longer a joke, man, that’s asking to go out of business...”

Sarcasm alarm. Marcelo is by now well aware of the three types of reaction. His customers might be numerous and look diverse, but their coping strategies add up to a total count of three.

His favourite is of course stoical resilience. They come, don’t find whatever they are looking for, buy whatever is left, thank him for keeping it up, and are gone. That’s good. Rewarding.

Nervous breakdown isn’t as nice, but bearable. Only the sobbing creates a bit of a disturbance. Especially since he ran out of tissues. As toilet paper, napkins and all the other cellulose products are also long gone, he can only offer a rag to snort into. It’s wet from multiple use, and that creates additional sorrow. A bit messy. But overall, Marcelo can handle nervous breakdown. Especially since he started to use earplugs to dim down the shrieking.

Only sarcasm is bad. Each round has him wonder why exactly he’s still here, not making money from his mostly empty shop. He’s not staying for lack of options. He could move in with great aunt Rosalia and wait it out on the farm. Her cellar is full. If it wasn’t for her rapidly dwindling stock of antihypertensive drugs, she would be living as comfortably as last month.

The sarcasm is in his forties and pretty tall. Standing at at least 1.70 m. More like 1.75 m, probably. Not very bulky. His checkered shirt fits loosely, hiding details. But his jeans are kept up by a large belt squeezing surplus waistline upwards. He’s most probably no gym addict, and certainly no martial arts master. Good.

Marcelo wouldn’t be left standing, as one of the last open shops in the greater Nalsero area, without his optimism. No need to jump to conclusions, no need to for action yet. The conciliatory approach might still work. And so he goes:

“Totally with you, mister, totally with you. Would love to have more stuff to sell, absolutely. Had lentils, and lentils only, for three days in a row myself. It all sucks, absolutely with you. Praying for them to get things up and running again. To the Virgin. Every night. Fervently.”

Marcelo feels zero guilt, for omitting the onions that went with the lentils. And the Barbera. A quarter of the bottle went into the stew, the rest into their glasses. Minor deviation. The third dinner aspect was true enough. His wife even joked, that she never meant it like that, when she used to praise lentil stew as something she could ‘spend her live dining on’.

The sarcasm hesitates. The look on his face doesn’t bode well. That’s how you glance at your opponent in an assumed right of way conflict. Except you would be in your respective cars. And well protected by the software of your vehicles knowing best. Whereas they are standing less than a meter apart. The sarcasm makes a show of frowning, before stating, loudly:

“You’ve got a storeroom back there, don’t you? That’s where you hide the other stuff, right? How much is it, for a burger, these days? Let me guess that rate: Twenty Euros? No? Twenty five? Thirty? You think you know I can’t pay that kind of rate, and you don’t even ask me, right?”

There comes a point where insisting on optimism turns into stupidity. It has only been three weeks, but Marcelo knows how this exchange has to end. Action is necessary. For the sake of all the other clients. Also provides a little relief, from his own tension. He nods:

“Sure, mister, let’s go have a look, shall we? Please do have a good, thorough look. And feel free to pick whatever you fancy. I’ll make you a good price, a very good price. After you, mister, I’ll be right behind you. PIN is 2025, please do go ahead and enter it. The door will click open.”

This sarcasm is as clever as his twenty six predecessors. At an average of more than one per day, Marcelo doesn’t fail to notice it’s not exactly the IQ top scorers he’s dealing with.

The sarcasm walks where told, keys in the PIN, pulls open the door and steps right through. Zero hesitation. No wondering about why he should lead the way. No noticing of Marcelo’s right hand clutching something underneath his grey-blue franchise coat.

The reality of the storeroom, total emptiness except for a forklift with an empty palette parked right next to the door, hits the sarcasm at the same time as Marcelo’s taser. Sagging down with a sound that starts as an angry scream and ends on a miserable whimper, he’s reduced to watch the shop owner scotching up his mouth, arms and legs.

Marcelo’s secret, how he manages to stay open, is an army grade stun gun. Not the kiddie stuff openly sold for self protection. His device does serious paralyzing. A cousin working as a refugee containment centre guard found a spare one in the armoury, in exchange for a crate of brandy. Takes an adult man of average build five minutes to recover his senses. Plenty of time to wrap up the package, heave it onto the palette, drive it outside and dump it next to the waste containers. One little ‘one more’ text message to the neighbourhood militia, blessed be their practically minded sense of self help and organisation, and gone is the problem.

Marcelo is aware the next steps are a bit rough. The package will spend a couple of uncomfortable hours on the back of an e-quad. Once the driver reaches a scenic spot on the coast, where tourists hopefully will picnic again next summer, it will be unloaded. It will be told never to be a neighbourhood nuisance again. Depending on the militia member on duty, this telling might involve a little beating. Or a couple of kicks.

In the absence of most public and private transport, there is no common back. For the time being. Once normality is restored, all exiled sarcasms will of course be welcomed back. They will all have a good laugh. There won’t be no grudges. All is well that ends well.

Adjusting his earplugs, for better protection against the wailing of a particularly noisy nervous breakdown, Marcelo would appreciate normality to be restored soon. It’s really getting tedious, this disruption. Never has a malware attack been known to cause that much damage.

On the news, they said some people in some regions are so desperate for supplies, they are starting to search the scrap yards for vehicles with actual steering wheels. Human driving! Doesn’t get much worse, public hazard wise. They had thousands of casualties, in the bad old days. Besides, and on a more practical note, there’s no petrol. Even if anyone would be willing to risk their lives reactivating some of these monsters, there’s nothing to fill the tank.

Marcelo is confident the nerds will find a way to restore logistics. That’s what they are paid for. And much more than he’ll ever make. The nerds will manage. A continent wide network of autonomous electric vehicles, can’t be that hard to reconfigure and reboot.

Marcelo would appreciate the nerds to speed up their act. Touching this soggy rag is disgusting. And he’d rather have a burger for dinner. He’s also down to his last sheet of ‘Not available’ stickers. Impossible to print new ones.

Mental note for the future: Always have a spare printer cartridge ready. You never know how long the next downtime is going to last.