

“Young? Graduate? Looking for a #job? DM now to make 60K in November. One virtual tour of Lagos [Nigerian flag icon] per day, details at your discretion. Excellent English and basic IT skills mandatory, tourist guide credentials welcome.”

Sitting on his bed, Danylo checks the currency converter again. Once he had identified the green-white-green flag as Nigerian he had feared they'd pay peanuts, but no. 60,000 Nigerian Naira, that's equivalent to 4,200 Ukrainian Hryvnia, pretty exactly the minimum wage.

You won't get far if you try to live on a minimum wage in Kyiv. But for a freshly minted sociologist biting his nails in auntie Olga's spare room while looking forward to a lifetime of precarious jobs he has yet to find, a month on a minimum wage is a jackpot.

The Twitter account advertising this opportunity looks serious enough. The same 'End poverty' logo features on the World Bank website. The job offer has been retweeted 372 times. There are 912 likes and 86 comments. Danylo reads them all, none shouts fake.

Danylo's second twitter handle, the discreet one he uses for romantics, looks fit for purpose. 'Dany-High-Five' is a good name, for a tour guide. 'Let's be proud together' as slogan and 'The world' for location doesn't suggest he's living in Lagos, but nor does it actively contradict such an assumption, if anyone felt circumstantially inclined to develop it.

Danylo has made up his mind, it's worth a try. Assuming the guy in charge of this project at the World Bank will have been flooded with applications over the last twenty-four hours, he keeps his Direct Message short: "Certified English language tour guide ready to go."

It's not even a lie. Danylo holds a certificate issued by BoomTours Kyiv, on the basis of one day of training and assessment. He proved himself capable to locate the fortress on a map and quote from an English language booklet describing the military sights.

The tour operator never followed up with any job offer, but Danylo very much cherishes the memory of this exquisitely special Saturday anyway.

In BoomTours' damp classroom, under humming neon tubes exposing all stains on walls so worn they even retained the smell of socialism, Danylo met Maksym.

He of course chose to sit next to the only other guy.

Even better groomed than Danylo's low budget stylish self, Maksym looked equally lost, among eighteen all-shades-of-plain girls, ladies and matrons.

Together, they made the best of having to listen to a grumpy teacher in a gloomy room. A marvelous day of pretending to take notes while sharing scribbled jokes was followed by a frantic night in Maksym's hotel room on Taras Shevchenko Boulevard.

As fate, always such a cruel operator, would have it, Maksym was only stopping over in Kyiv.

As sour side dish to a hurried early breakfast he revealed he was on his way to Shenzhen, China, via Beijing, to perform something engineerish. He had signed up for the tour operator training by mistake, expecting an all day tourist event, and only stayed because of Danylo.

Maksym was to work in China for at least a year, possibly up to five, but ready to stay in touch.

Not wanting to appear his true desperate, Danylo had taken the news in good grace, and promised to call in twelve months at the earliest.

As of now, he has another one hundred and two days of restraint to grind through, before he can finally dial a number he has saved electronically on both his mobile and his laptop, and copied onto the last page of three different books, in his best handwriting.

One hundred and two days from now, Maksym will hopefully have kept his Ukrainian mobile number operational. And recall the last one night stand he had back home, fondly. And be as good as on his way back. And agree to be picked up at the airport.

A lot of ifs, a bit of a best case scenario. Danylo refuses to consider anything but. The odds for a next chapter in his affair with Maksym are far better than for a boom in sociology, and he needs something to look forward to. And any cash he can get hold of.

To prepare for his tour guide job interview, Danylo performs a couple of searches.

The Lagos place turns out not to be the capital of Nigeria, as he had assumed. But it's located in this country all right, and big. On the huge side of big. Some kind of sub Saharan Gotham, with a skyline that looks very unlike any of the African coverage on TV. Who'd have thought.

There's some of the more expected, too. A very scenic waterfront slum on stilts. And trust some white tourists to go poverty porn. Shameless, how they get themselves ferried around the misery, in their posh white boat. Inexcusable. Unless they're World Bank inspectors, of course.

Switching back to the more uplifting pictures of the Gotham style skyline, the fancy bridges and posh seafront properties, Danylo can't help notice the contrast between his old fashioned woolen bedspread and the lifestyles displayed on the screen of his battered laptop.

The food in Lekki restaurants is also sure to smell better than auntie Olga's cabbage.

A new follower? And a DM? Bracing himself for one more rejection, Danylo checks the incoming message at once. The End Poverty account is sending him a link. Nothing but a link.

If this isn't the mother of all phishing attacks, what would qualify?

Danylo keeps himself well informed on cyber hazards. He's no geek, but he has to take an interest. His laptop has been past Operating System updates for nearly two years, no novel safety features for him. He has to outsmart any online baddies by wetware means.

Hesitating to delete the DM, because the World Bank account looks so non fake, Danylo decides to brush up on his forensic skills. He searches "How to check a link". Provides a plethora of good advice he reads cursorily, before jumping onwards to the check sites.

The first one declares the presumed World Bank link safe and real. Same for the second. The third even delivers a quarantined preview of where Danylo is headed, provided he risks clicking on the link. Looks like the World Bank wants him to access some kind of portal. Once again no hint of any fishy business. All three check sites consider the link legit.

Danylo made it past the first gate, without any interview. Excited, he accesses what he now considers a genuine World Bank portal for real.

"Welcome, Dany Highfive, please define your password" goes the site.

A frantic five minutes later, Danylo has managed to come up with an identifier complex enough to satisfy the copious requirements of what is hopefully his future workspace.

Next, he has to define his gender and pronoun preferences. Very western.

"Thank you, mister Highfive" goes the site, in a nice touch of responsiveness, before asking him to read and sign a nine page whammer of a confidentiality agreement.

According to the few bits of the legalese that make sense, Danylo will spend years in jail if he so much as utters one word about this job in private. Talking about it in public, never mind revealing details to media people, will count as high treason, a death penalty offense.

No need for Danylo to check the location of the World Bank headquarters. A very US concept of criminal justice came up with this confidentiality agreement. Barbarians. The US, that's psychopaths roaming the streets carrying automatic weapons, and a sociopath for president. A terrible place. Danylo would love to get a visa and try his luck in San Francisco.

He rereads the confidentiality agreement instead of diving into this daydream.

The paragraphs about jurisdictional aspects are especially fuzzy, but the authors took great care to make it abundantly clear, even to the most legally unqualified and naive reader, that any tour guide daring to act in contravention of this contract will be hit by the full force of US law, whatever his location, passport, civil status or ethical objections.

Danylo notes the global aspirations of his future employer with relief. Nothing in this text suggests he will get into trouble for being Ukrainian.

He signs the confidentiality agreement without hesitation. A perfect no-brainer. He most certainly doesn't plan to brag about making money by pretending to introduce visitors to a city he doesn't know, on a continent he never so much as visited.

Danylo's very official electronic signature triggers one more "Thank you, mister Highfive". The site doesn't mind the difference between his chosen tour guide name and the details registered for his certified online identity, including his Ukrainian nationality. So far, so fine.

He's granted five seconds of exhilaration before getting to watch an auto start video.

A middle aged guy in formal business attire, white shirt, grey tie, black jacket, just like the next banker, except these are never black in Kyiv, starts the recorded tour guide tutorial by reminding the audience they signed a comprehensive confidentiality agreement and risk jail if they so much as whisper a word of what follows among family and friends.

Unimpressed, Danylo makes a mental note to tell his new bosses they're overdoing it.

Fine for some confidentiality. Even gigs in fast food joints come with contracts protecting whatever intellectual property is involved in burning burgers. Confidentiality, and Wikileaks, for where it's not appropriate, that's the way. But one signature should be amply sufficient. He's about to assist with sightseeing, not going to operate bomb dropping drones.

The black banker wastes a full three and half of his twelve minutes on reminding Danylo he's under oath not to talk about this. What a joke. Or would this be a joke?

It comes as a relief when the black banker finally goes:

"Now that confidentiality has been well established, let's talk about our clients.

I'll start with their aspirations, because that's the one and only bit of crystal clarity on offer.

Our clients have identified Lagos, Nigeria, as the place on earth with the highest density of underused intellectual potential. That's the reason they provided when we asked why they want to visit it, virtually. They're wildly keen on Lagos, extremely committed fans of the place.

Despite our best efforts, our clients are neither prepared to consider alternative destinations nor willing to broaden the scope of their virtual tour to a panoply of cities.

We don't know, yet, what particular aspects of Lagos and its citizens our clients are interested in. As their tour guides, you'll have to be ready for all kinds of questions that might not always make sense. Just answer to the best of your knowledge, and we should do fine, hopefully.

As of now, we have also no idea what next steps our clients might be planning. They refuse to reveal further intentions, are only prepared to discuss how - by WebEx - and when - in November - they want to visit Lagos. As they never displayed any signs of hostility, we assume their

intentions to be benign. Nevertheless, we very much hope to find out more in the course of their virtual visits, by analyzing any questions they will raise.

As this Lagos circus has been determined, scientifically determined, to a certainty level of 97.3 %, to be humanity's first first contact situation, we of course need to proceed with care.

All your exchanges with our clients will be recorded and analyzed, using both human and artificial intelligence. You won't be alone in dealing with our clients, dear tour guides. An extensive multidisciplinary team of experts will be at your side at all times..."

First first contact? As in a serious gentleman talking aliens, as in non-earth folks?!

Danylo has to restart the tutorial, to make sure he's getting this right. His English is excellent and the black banker is as easy to understand as a BBC World news anchor, but still...

The three and a half minutes confidentiality reminder seems much less exaggerated this time round. More like the mother of all understatements, actually.

Whichever global authority would be mad enough to...

And, talking of insanity, why the hell would the World Bank, of all institutions, get to handle aliens?

And they certainly shouldn't trust some nobody hired on Twitter to take care of such VIPs.

No one in his right mind has a sociologist perform a vital task. That's what Big Bang type of guys are for. Physicists, engineers, the maths lot. They get the status, and the cash, and the responsibility. Folks like Danylo perform the harmless stuff on a low budget.

Mister World Bank is done talking confidentiality, and here comes the frightening passage once again. He does indeed say "first first contact". The statement is there, loud and clear, no mistake to make. And he goes on to clarify in even more unambiguous terms:

"... Yes, dear tour guides, your heard me right. I did say 'first first contact', as in aliens. Being aware of the rather monumental implications, we are trying to break the news as gently as possible here, to minimize a potential for trauma we are well aware of..."

This is the weirdest imaginable joke. Danylo is impressed. Even the Ukrainian President would bow to this most accomplished of fellow comedians. Incredible, how the black banker manages to keep a straight face. He must be a comedian, obviously, anything else would be too mind boggling. And still manages to look like the embodiment of sincerity.

Next, the black banker even anticipates the tour guide project to be considered a joke, and seems to accept this embarrassing state of staff relations affairs:

"...No problem if you struggle with the concept of alien clients. As long as you perform, and keep this confidential, you are free to believe whatever suits you best. All you'll ever get to see, on your screen, are the WebEx icons of our clients, like red or blue or green dots.

Same for us at the World Bank, by the way. We have no clue what our clients look like, where they are located, how they managed to learn so much about earth. No clue.

Our clients contacted us through our website, in good old English email writing. Took them half a year to get through to more than the intern in charge of deleting unsolicited correspondence, and another six months to get declared genuine by the NSA experts the directorate called in, originally to help our IT guys get rid of a particularly stubborn cyber stalker.

We, as in the World Bank, were apparently chosen as facilitators because our African project expertise suggests we're able to organize the Lagos tours our clients crave.

According to the cyber command guys that keep trying to track down our clients, they are pretty accomplished hackers. Hence the 97.3 % certainty they're genuine aliens. But there's still a 2.7 % chance one more teen genius has come up with one hell of a sophisticated prank.

If you're squeamish around aliens, dear tour guides, please feel free to consider the icons on your screen as representing the aforementioned teen prankster, or whomever else. As long as it keeps you focused and performing, we are fine with whatever concept suits you best.

Your job is to introduce our clients to Lagos, Nigeria, on WebEx. You'll be using Google Street View for visual support, and no need to worry about outdated pictures. Our clients won't mind a broad brush. If a corner shop still going strong on the virtual map has burned down last month following a generator fire, and the street looks different by now, no problem.

Come November 1st, you'll do one WebEx meeting per day, of at least forty five minutes, at a time of your choosing, and walk the clients around Lagos, itinerary of your choosing, too.

On the financial side, half of your 60K Naira wage will be payed for showing up on your first day. You'll get the other half on November 30, provided you showed up every day and did your job. In case of minor health issues, we expect you to still..."

The rest of the tutorial is about the usual gig practicalities, mostly the mode of payment.

Danylo has to watch the clip for a third time, to confirm he isn't dreaming any of this.

The black banker does feel oddly familiar by now, but his story still makes zero sense.

Danylo wonders why anyone would waste such considerable effort on a joke. And about any risks he might be about to take, if he keeps proceeding with his application.

He has already got his tour guide portal account, he's an official signatory of the confidentiality agreement, only his bank details are missing. Nothing suggests there will be any further vetting. If the site accepts an account at Kyiv BTA Bank, he's all set, to potentially wreck humanity's chance of peaceful coexistence with mighty galactic neighbours?

It must be a joke. Aliens, honestly. And contacting the World Bank by email. No way.

Danylo recalls that weird nerd at high school, the one with the pronounced acne who would always make the rest of the class feel like idiots, by handing in his maths test after less than half the allocated time. Well despised, and excellent at looking smug while hating back.

Yes, the nerd prank scenario, that's plausible. A nerd setting up bots that pretend to be aliens, well enough to fool the NSA and the US cyber command, that makes sense.

Convinced he can't do any harm, Danylo provides his bank details.

His diligent cooperation gets rewarded at once, with a thirty day series of e-calendar appointments for November, each including a WebEx link. As promised, he can set the exact time of each forty five minute virtual tour, for each single date.

So far, so perfect. Very sophisticated, for a joke, but who cares?

As long as his wage will be paid on time, Danylo won't. His stomach is grumbling, will soon be ready to challenge his taste buds' reservations against auntie Olga's cabbage. After such a lot of excitement, he needs to eat, and he can't afford to fetch something tasty.

It's August 26 today. Leaves him with a little over two months to prepare for his Lagos tour guide stint. Ample time to find out anything there is to know about the place. Unless...

Danylo suddenly knows this joke is bound to have been debunked by then. He'll never see neither the promised money, nor any media coverage of the arrest of one more teenage genius gone wrong. Bad return on the hours he already wasted on one more hopeless project.

No way he throws in any more of his precious time before seeing some cash.

Much better to check match.com for dream fodder while waiting for auntie Olga's call for lunch.

She's taking ages these days. Her brain didn't recover well from her stroke, and having lost the use of her left arm slows her down. If only there were technologically advanced aliens in process of making first contact. They could fix auntie Olga, perhaps even improve her cooking.

The more profiles Danylo screens on match.com, the more he longs for Berlin. If only he was the kind of rich a sociologist is supposed to call middle class, and could meet one of those flashy guys in one of these fancy clubs. The picture's from this year's CSD events alone suffice to give him jaundice. It's not fair, to be stuck in auntie Olga's spare room.

An hour later, Danylo devours a second helping of potatoes with his cabbage.

He has as good as forgotten his weird World Bank encounter over a chat with Dave, a Brexit fugitive trying to marry into Schengen for ease of business purposes. Rather good looking chap, and as stupid as a door mat. Thinks Kyiv is EU, and proposes like mad. Danylo would love to take advantage, like have the Dave come over, just for the fun of it, but he's not cold hearted enough.

September flies by, in a flurry of disappointments.

Danylo has meanwhile taken to categorize his days by type of stinker.

No mail at all, neither hardcopy nor e, counts as a basic stinker. A simple rejection, the usual two liner with correct spelling, including of his name, counts as an advanced stinker.

Anything more sophisticated, like good wishes for his career, or an encouragement to apply again in the future, counts as promising. Anything worse than a simple rejection, backyard spelling, the occasional mockery, counts as insulting. Both promising and insulting stinkers call for an outing, of the celebratory or soothing kind.

Nothing fancy, of course. One cheap beer at the student club Danylo is still entitled to access because his card stays valid until the end of the year, that's all he can afford.

Danylo is seeing the student club much more frequently than in his final year. Half of the little money he makes by distributing flyers for his barber shop, as a living advertisement, goes right into the soothing kind of beers. Human Resources people seem to hold sociologists in even lower esteem than convicts and untrained school dropouts.

If Danylo applies for simple administrative jobs or entry level project work, he's considered overqualified and told to find himself something more sophisticated. If he applies for such roles, he's considered too young, too freshly diplomaed, lacking in experience.

Desperate for cash because he really needs a new laptop, and a change of winter wardrobe, Danylo even started to apply for unskilled jobs, in building and logistics. He's young, in excellent physical shape, and pretty good at using his hands, with or without tools. But if he admits he spent the last years at university, studying sociology, the average craftsman won't hear him out.

Not one single serious opportunity, for the whole of September.

On October 4, Danylo is considering one more application as a food delivery boy. He's toying with the idea to pretend he spent the last four years in a Moldovan jail, for drug offenses he didn't commit, to hide his academic phase, when an alert goes off:

"Mister Highfive, four weeks from now, you'll be leading your first virtual tour through Lagos. We are looking forward to your contribution. Thanks for signing into the portal to confirm you're still on board. Please make sure to keep us informed of any change of contact details."

Takes Danylo a puzzled moment to understand that this is a legitimate reminder. He did sign up for that joke of the year of a weirdo job. Virtual tours of Lagos for aliens, still not off the table?!

A reminder four weeks in advance, for a minimum wage gig, that's serious planning. Bit too serious for some acne plagued teenager trying to have fun with the World Bank. But aliens, honestly?! Even more implausible. This must be a prank.

Danylo is well organized. It takes him less than half an hour to find the link to the tour guide portal, and the file with the corresponding, absurdly complex password.

The portal is still there and welcomes him with a joyful:

"Thank you so much for confirming your participation, Mister Highfive. Please check the schedule you defined. Please adjust individual appointments no later than one week in advance, to give our guests time to adapt their own schedules."

That's one very good idea. When he signed up, Danylo set all daily tours to 09:00 to 09:45, without thinking about it. This was stupid, why get up so early? And if he manages to find a real job, this is also sure to collide. He promptly resets all tours to 19:00 to 19:45. Nice time of the day, for his very personal kind of science fiction comedy series.

The tour guide portal looks exactly as Danylo remembers it. The black banker is still talking lots of confidentiality, and aliens. Total madness, dressed up to look official and professional.

Danylo feels a sting. If this is real after all, he's kind of betraying the one employer who is willing to trust him with a job. He even pays the minimum wage, for a leisurely forty-five minutes of work per day. A pretty good deal that calls for some effort in return. Unless it's a joke.

Danylo can't turn himself into a Nigerian, obviously, but he could at least read up on the Lagos place, before starting to talk about it. Time for Wikipedia.

Now this is one lot of information. On Nigeria, on Lagos, on West African relations and pan African organizations. Who'd have guessed an African place might be so complicated?

Danylo had never thought much, about anywhere in Africa.

The continent barely features in what stayed with him from his school days.

Geography must have mentioned Africa, obviously. There aren't enough continents to completely ignore one. But African geography didn't take center stage. A big, nicely shaped continent featuring a patchwork of multicolored countries with as many capital cities that occasionally go by funny names, like Ouagadougou, that's about all Danylo recalls.

History was too busy trying to talk sense into the nasty European habit to invade and butcher each other to care much about more remote victims, especially those that never invaded back. No place for Africa in the history books. Danylo is of course vaguely aware of the ravages of colonialism and slavery, but the details turn out to be far more complicated than expected.

Deeply bewildered by his first contact with a panoply of tribes, languages, traditions and religions and a cast of totally unfamiliar villains and heroes, Danylo gives up his quest for basic knowledge after a couple of hours. Much easier to expect the prank to be called off before November 1st.

One more alert on October 11. And another one on October 18.

Danylo is developing a routine. He has decided to display a minimum of diligence. Each time he gets prompted, he logs into the portal to verify his access credentials are still valid. With this achievement accomplished, he reads the Wikipedia entries for Nigeria and Lagos once again. Just the main entries, none of the links. He won't overdo work on a joke.

Danylo can't help noticing he's making progress.

Funny, how some of the terms he had never heard before start to feel familiar. Four weeks ago, if anyone had said Yoruba, Danylo would have guessed pop starlet, female. Igbo would have been expected to burn money in the Uber category of companies, and a Hausa would have had a better chance to outrace and outreach a Tesla than grandpas Lada.

Danylo does regret having wasted so much time on his degree. But some of the curiosity is still there, and attracted by the complexities he's discovering.

Lagos is even bigger than New York. It sounds like a West African melting pot where the super rich live in bike riding distance of the ultra poor. Lots of contrast, a treat for the one in a million sociologist lucky enough to get funding for something worth analyzing.

Spending a little time on Lagos reasearch every Friday is Danylo's new happy hour.

He's desperate for anything that might cheer him up.

Confined to his room for lack of money, he spends most of his days on his bed. Wrapped into a blanket against the autumn chill, he idles away on his laptop, pretending to look for jobs.

There aren't any. No jobs at all.

Right after his exam, Danylo saw promising job adverts everywhere. How young and foolish he was, in those happy days of innocence. By now, he knows what is no market by heart.

There are the sales people who pretend to offer jobs but want you to buy something first. One more course, online or meatspace, a whole library of books, help with visa applications, so many expensive ways to get your career going. There must be a lot of jobless academics with well off parents out there. A depressing thought, for someone stuck with auntie Olga.

There are the pyramid schemers with their get-rich-quick-zero-effort guarantees. Danylo would just have to talk auntie Olga, and her friends, and the neighbors, to take out loans to allow him to invest into anything from carbon capturing cauliflower to cancer curbing crystals. This would turn him into the next George Soros, and the world into a better place.

And, last not least, there are the exotic occupations.

Danylo did three rounds on the plasma donation circuit. He would have been prepared to endure some more of the vomiting, but the seizure after the last session was too bruising and scary. Open minded bar tendering turned out to mean wearing a loincloth to draw beer for bare buttocked old leeches yelling "tip-strip, strip-tip" at him. Personal nightlife guide was code for delivering tourists to venues where they would be robbed.

There are no jobs. Some plumbers, electricians, car mechanics or construction workers might go lucky. If their skills and health are top. If they're prepared to accept away jobs. If their wage expectations are modest. But sociologists, no.

Danylo is looking forward to a winter of gloom.

On October 25, he catches himself shaving with extra care, in anticipation of the prompt not to forget his upcoming tour guide job. The portal will at least address him politely, signal an interest and expectations. Totally unlike auntie Olga, who has taken to call him lazy sod to his face.

A couple of weeks ago, she was only badmouthing him behind his back.

He would occasionally overhear her complaining to her favourite neighbor: "Danylo? Don't ask! Who'd have guessed such a promising boy would grow up into such a useless disgrace of a failure? Certainly not me, or I'd never have let him stay with me. As useless as his bitch of a mother, the bloody lad. Did I ever tell you about how our poor Vlad kicked her out, because enough was enough? Well, one look at Danylo now, same story."

Nowadays, auntie Olga calls Danylo lazy sod to his face.

Every time he shows up for meals, she goes: "Ah, here comes my lazy sod of a nephew, as if it was his birthright to get fed at my table and pampered in my flat. Such a disgrace, glad my poor late Alex doesn't have to witness this."

Permutations of this greeting is about all auntie Olga ever says. She won't even let Danylo tell her about his failed applications any more. "Spare me your lies, you're making it worse," she would go, as if he was faking the job hunt. Letting Danylo survive in her spare room and on her cabbage is supposed to be a big gift, to be rewarded with everlasting thankfulness.

Danylo is sick of begging. He really needs the Lagos tour guide job to happen.

Even a beer at the student club is out of reach by now. Zero money in the bank, not enough for a bus fare in his wallet. He was lucky with his haircut, got it for free because the apprentice wanted to rehearse for his upcoming exam. Without this coincidence, he would look as tramp as he feels.

"Mister Highfive, one week from now you'll be leading your first virtual tour through Lagos. We are looking forward to your contribution. Thanks for signing into the portal to confirm you're still on board. Please make sure to keep us informed of any change of contact details."

Same procedure as last week. In a corner of his mind, Danylo is disappointed. He had been hoping for more, with only a couple of days to go.

Doubts creep in once again. Not hard, to set up such a portal, put it on auto loop and forget about it. This whole joke might be long over by now, and only stupid him left to log in every Friday, and hope against the odds there's money in this madness.

With nothing else to do, Danylo sticks with his training routine anyway.

First he reads the Wikipedia page on Nigeria, aloud, to keep his accent polished.

He always sounds like some Russian oligarch in a BBC interview at first. By the third paragraph, on Nigeria as the Giant of Africa, he's doing much better. Not exactly news anchor English, but hopefully good enough for alien visitors. Alien visitors?!...

Danylo doesn't allow the doubts to distract him now. He has a ritual to perform.

He even raises his voice a tad, for the benefit of auntie Olga.

That'll teach the old witch not to accuse him of wasting his days watching porn and masturbating. Yes, he's on his bed, with his laptop. But he's hard at work, getting ready for a sophisticated job that requires English language skills totally beyond someone like her. Hearing the foreign tongue should remind her she's got an intellectual in the family now, and that he's due respect.

Done with Nigeria, Danylo moves on to Lagos. Twenty one million people, according to the highest estimate for the wider metropolitan area. Half as many as in the whole of Ukraine. And people are still moving in, at a rate of two hundred thousand per year. Wow. Size does matter.

Upon hitting his favourite Lagos paragraph, about the weather, Danylo wraps himself tighter into his blanket. Reading about a tropical savanna climate in 9 C Kyiv makes him feel the chill worse than ever. His weather app confirms the Wikipedia forecast. At this very moment, it's 24 C and one more thunderstorm for Lagos. Right between the average daily low and mean for October, which makes perfect sense at nine o'clock in the morning. Lucky Lagosians.

Danylo aches with envy. If he had a warm thunderstorm at his disposal, he would head straight outside, find himself a dry spot under a roof, watch the rain and enjoy sweating.

He hasn't been properly warm for weeks.

Layers of clothes, plus bathtubs of tea, plus some gymnastics he's glad no one gets to see, such tried and tested precautions do keep Danylo's body heat up and trapped. But the flat is still moist with chill, not cosy at all in an insufferably smelly way. Feels barely better than living under the bridge he will have to select if auntie Olga really does kick him out.

She has been running up arrears on the heating bill. This killer innovation is beyond the means of most tenants. They don't pay, because they can't. In response, the new private landlord turned down the temperature to the bare minimum. The water pipes won't freeze, but that's about it. This strategy will ruin the building, but the man with the Porsche SUV insists: "No more free heating. We all have to sacrifice some comfort to stop climate change."

Danylo's room is so mouldy the wallpaper bulges away from the surface it's supposed to stick to. Couple more weeks without proper heating will bring down the mess. No big loss. The mock brocade pattern is so ugly any alternative, even bare concrete, is an improvement. If Danylo had cash, he would love to replace the eyesore of a wallpaper by paint. Something sixtieish, psychedelic patterns, an explosion of bright colors against the autumn gloom.

Done with Lagos, Danylo puts aside the laptop and huddles into his heap of blankets.

He closes his eyes to recall what Maksym looked like, how he felt. Another fifty two days to go. That stupid alien visitors prank will have come and gone, with or without delivering cash, and then, on December 6, he will call Maksym.

Danylo doesn't approve of auntie Olga's candle lighting habit. He's aware most of the good Lord's footsoldiers don't endorse gay happiness and stays well away from churches. But a tiny little wish that could be mistaken for a prayer, that's OK. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Danylo is desperate for Maksym to come back, and help him through the gloom.

On October 26, Danylo is kicked out of a particularly bad bout of blues by a new message:

"Mister Highfive, thank you for staying the course! With less than a week to go until your first performance, please sign into the portal to confirm the account designated to receive your remuneration, to make sure you get it on your first day at the latest."

Danylo's heart jumps on hearing this most welcome of surprises of a voice message. The joke is still on, and it seems to be going strong, financially.

Totally unlike the neighbor two floors up who hired him to help redo the kitchen. A whole day of hard dirty work survived by looking forward to the first beer in weeks, at the student club, and what happens in the evening? The bastard suddenly notices he's out of cash, promises to make good on the next day, and hasn't been seen in the stairwell since.

With the routine of a site regular knowing his password by heart, Danylo goes portal.

There is even more than he was led to expect by the message. In addition to a three click confirmation form to validate his bank details he finds a new video clip. It's a different black guy, very short and thin. Looks like a long distance runner dressed up to impersonate a banker. Or a banker with more talent for marathon than most.

Danylo itches to find out about the next weird, but first things first. He triple checks the name of his bank and his account number as entered by himself on August 26 and confirms this is where he wants his cash to land. He's ashamed of his own eagerness. Such trepidation over such a miserable sum. How did he ever manage to sink so low? He knows he will check his banking app every hour from now on, for any incoming. Being broke is such a drag.

Having done his best to get the cash flowing, Danylo hesitates to start the video. The last thing he needs now is a reminder of how odd this stunt is. A second guy talking aliens, despite being all dressed up for serious business, that's going to make this feel even more surreal.

Not watching the video is stupid. It might contain vital information. Danylo is in no position to risk losing the second tranche of his remuneration by failing in his duties. He might know dick about Lagos and make a fool of himself, but he won't skip instructions.

The new banker does Danylo the favor not to mention aliens. He talks of "our dear visitors" and "our cherished clients", with the kind of fake exuberance more readily associated with sales people. The short pep talk is all about service orientation, customer experience, flexibility, sociability, memorability and assorted mumbo-jumbo, not substance. If this kind of waffling is to be considered adequate, Danylo should be doing fine, despite his cluelessness.

Envigored, Danylo pulls himself together. He crawls out of the relative comfort of his bed, ventures out of his room, crosses the corridor pretending not to hear auntie Olga's sharply worded resentment, makes it into the bathroom and thoroughly scrubs himself. He's shivering, the flat is as cold as a cellar and the chilly water is hard to bear, but he won't let this inconvenience deter him. He'll turn himself into something resembling a human, walk upstairs and confront a neighbor who has no right to withhold what has been agreed.

Half an hour later, Danylo is back to feeling stupid. Ringing again won't help, the neighbor has been ignoring the doorbell twice already. He's trying to duck out, and there isn't much for Danylo to do about this. He can't stand here forever. He forgot to put on a coat, has already exhausted most of the heat of his determination. Defeated, he walks back down, pretends to ignore auntie Olga's promise to rob him of his key and retreats back into his bed.

Not even memories of Maksym can ease his suffering. Auntie Olga is starting to mean it, the key thing. He's one wrong move away from haunting the streets with a backpack. Or signing up with the army, to get himself shot in some freezing muddy trench over in the East.

Ping goes Danylo's banking app. It has been such a long time, he barely recognizes the sound of imminent relief. And there it is, really and truly, his cash. 2,100 Hryvnia have been added to the one minimum Hryvnia he had to leave standing, to keep his account active.

Danylo rushes to the kitchen to tell auntie Olga. He hates the old witch, but this is no moment for bad feelings. It's the end of the month, her pension is gone, right now she's as broke as he is. She ran out of her blood thinning medication yesterday, is at acute risk of one more stroke, and now he has the means to help her. A moment of pride.

Auntie Olga is appropriately touched by Danylo's grand gesture, even calls him a good boy. This should keep him safe for a while, no more talk of kicking him out.

At the pharmacy, Danylo bumps into his upstairs neighbor. With his open wallet in his hands, and a wad of notes clearly visible, the cheat doesn't dare refuse paying up. Mumbling something about his wage arrears having suddenly been paid, he hands over a fifty Hryvnia bill. A bit of a joke, for a whole day of hard work, but Danylo feels rich. With money in his pocket and in the bank, the world is suddenly a much more homely place.

Walking home together, the neighbor and Danylo bump into one more oldie, a balding guy with an eyesore of a silver-chains-on-black-denim dresstyle. By ways of introductions, the neighbor praises Danylo's skills and diligence. Being called "my favorite day laborer" is a bit of an insult.

Danylo is still wondering how to retaliate when the Baldy inquires if he would by chance be available, at short notice, like starting tomorrow, to help him redo the roof of a shed. Nothing big, just getting the place ready for winter. Couple of days at most, light work, anyone can do it. Ten cash per hour, free food and drink, just bring yourself and let's get it done.

Ten per hour, that's double what he got from the neighbor, for hard dirty work. Danylo agrees with enthusiasm, failing once again to haggle for more, never mind inquire about details.

For the next days, Danylo doesn't get any chance to think about his upcoming Lagos tour guide stunt. What Baldy, who is to be called 'boss, sir' described as a shed is actually his two storey house, moped workshop and showroom extension on the ground floor, living quarters above. There is no scaffolding. Danylo is made to crawl across the roof and balance on ladders to access individual tiles or whole sections that need replacing. Dangerous hard work. For ten an hour.

Danylo's body feels just like when he got caught and kicked by the fascists who stormed the Pussy Riot solidarity remembrance he was attending, because of the music, not the politics. Then, he was one big multicolored bruise. Now, his body looks OK, except for his hands ravaged by the cold, and the sharp edges of the tiles. But the pain is worse, every movement aches.

Danylo is not born for manual labor. He needs a desk job, not this frantic physical strain.

He's done with redoing the roof, cleaning the windows of the show room and tidying up the workshop at noon on October 31. He survived, made 360 Hryvnia and is entitled to a fifty percent rebate on the official price if ever he needs a moped. A good week.

Back at auntie Olga's, Danylo discards the old clothes he wears for manual work into the laundry bag, forces himself to take a short, barely tepid shower, makes himself a thermos of tea and retreats under his heap of blankets. He needs a couple of minutes of rest before getting ready for his next stunt, the Lagos tour guide job that still hasn't been called off.

If auntie Olga hadn't called for dinner at seven sharp, Danylo would probably have slept on. He grudgingly extricates himself from his bed, torn between skipping a meal, deferred bad, or having one more plate full of salty cabbage with bland potatoes, imminent bad.

By his third potato, Danylo recalls it's the evening of October 31st.

There is a Halloween event at the student club. He has got money in his pocket, and reasons to reward himself. He won't meet no Maksym in this dull place, there'll be nothing but kiddies below the cheap and ugly masks. But as long as he stays in his corner, with his beer, his imagination should be able to come up with some nice nightdream.

On a November 1st, Danylo wakes up at nine, thirsty. Funny, how a couple of weeks without alcohol amplify the effects. He's sure he stayed once again clear of the vodka that was circulating despite the prohibition of anything stronger than beer, he would never let himself get blinded by moonshine. According to his wallet, he must have had four beers, and given his usual generous tip, to provide staff with an incentive not to check his student card come January.

That much is obvious, but he doesn't recall anything after the third beer. When he had it, a competition for the most ugly, the most scary and the most creative mask had been announced. The audience was to vote by clapping, with the noise level measured by means of some app. An order of catwalk was being determined in a bit of a shuffle, select masks were provided with numbers to be carried for identification. They must have walked next. At some point, there must have been votes, and an awards ceremony.

His memory can't fail him like that just because of a couple of beers. He must have taken something else. Danylo quickly checks his condoms. Sure enough, there is one missing.

With the help of this lead, he becomes vaguely aware why he doesn't recall any votes or awards. There was this Dracula mask, just dressed in tight black long sleeve and jeans below. He commented on Danylo's similar choice of costume, Anonymous mask over tight black mock-leather. They hinted, they touched, and then they retreated to the student club library. Must have taken some booster together. On top of beer. No wonder there's no total recall.

It's a clear sunny just above freezing outside, according to Danylo's phone. He takes a deep breath, kicks his screaming ass out of the bed and into the bathroom. He wouldn't be able to withstand the shock of a cool shower in his current marshmallow state. He rubs himself with his soaked washcloth instead, vigorously, and drinks at least a liter from the tab. Thus fortified, he dressed up and slips out of the flat before auntie Olga manages to aggress him with her horrendous ersatz coffee and whichever pancakes.

Walking nowhere fast, it takes Danylo's head half an hour to clear up enough to remember the student club library situation in more detail. They both drank from the bottle of coke Dracula mask had brought along. It must have contained an additional ingredient. They didn't take their masks off at any time, both equally keen on preserving their anonymity. Nor did they exchange any contact details. A mutually agreed one off. Good.

With his body still sore and cash in the wallet, Danylo decides to award himself the ultimate luxury, two hours in the Olympic Centre. Swimming a couple of rounds in a huge pool and sweating out the remnants of whatever wrecked his memory in the sauna should fix him. He'll be back home by early afternoon with enough time to get himself ready for his first tour guide stunt. Cramming can't save him now, only wits he needs to get back to sharp.

Turns out it's Happy Friday at the Olympic Center, four hours for the price of two. No need to think twice, Danylo takes advantage of this generous offer.

The place is a spacious and undercrowded as he recalls it from his last visit, courtesy of a voucher he won online. Mostly ladies in attendance. They come in two versions, young and pretty despite too much make-up, or old and so chronically ugly no make-up has ever helped. A few old men around, most of them so grossly fat they probably can't drown. Two stand out, they're so sickly thin skeletons come to mind. Perfect physique for a Halloween Pool party.

Danylo takes the absence of temptation in his stride. A little something for the eye, and for the eye only today, would have been nice, but keeping himself focused on the upcoming task is even better. Swimming up and down at a leisurely pace, he ponders his Lagos tour guide strategy.

He can't pretend to live or ever have lived in Lagos, unless he wants to invite questions on where exactly. If anyone asks, he has to own up to his overseas residence. If pushed, he'll call his location Europe, to keep this personal detail both true and vague enough not to trigger additional inquiries of the 'how does a Nigerian end up in Ukraine' kind.

He'll proceed just like tour guides usually do. They've got a standard speech and deliver it, regardless of the audience in attendance whose members can call themselves lucky if they are provided with some slots for questions. He'll pick a Google StreetView still to start with, and talk about it for as long as he can get away with. There's a lot to see, on one picture of a street, and forty five minutes can fly by fast, as long as someone keeps talking. Enthusiasm is key here, and Danylo knows he's good at feigning that.

He'll need a route. Tour guides always proceed along their standard route. With no clue about Lagos, defining such a trajectory feels like an insurmountable challenge. Danylo has to switch to a fast crawl, to get rid of a sudden bout of stage fright.

Two lanes later, he reverts to a more leisurely pace and his creativity does its thing, as expected. He'll start at the airport, of course. That's where travel agency staff pick up their overseas clients, and that's where his tour for his extremely overseas customers will start.

Aliens. Danylo is as bewildered as ever, by even the most remote possibility of having been selected to deal with real, live, potentially dangerous aliens. Jobs where he ends up at risk, like clinging to someone else's roof and praying to fate to save his neck, that makes sense. If you're stupid enough to learn the wrong trade, that's what happens. But anyone trusting him with a task that might put humanity's future at risk, that's so obscene it can't be true.

Thinking about the nature of his customers sends Danylo wondering how to address them. "Ladies and gentlemen", the traditional tour guide intro, feels inappropriate. If they are aliens, they might struggle with the duality of this gender concept. What if they are asex or unisex, and consider differentiations along more or less randomly selected physiological differences an insult? His first three words might start a galactic war, with humanity in the role of the overwhelmed primitives about to discover advanced weaponry, from the deadly end.

"Dear guests", Danylo will definitely address his clients as "dear guests". That's polite, in a welcoming way, and equally fit for ray beings, sentient clouds of dust or something resembling a fellow mammal. Having defined his first two words, Danylo is suddenly very aware he'll need another 5.898. Forty five minutes, that's 6k words. Feels like a lot. Time for the sauna.

Danylo exits the pool slowly, taking care to leisure around the potted palms for a while before heading for the sauna. With a little luck, some of the pretty young ladies in the pool are hanging out here on purpose, just like they will grace a hotel bar with their presence later in the day. He's young, in good shape, not obviously poor, an alluring target.

Sure enough, two giggling blondes in matching swimsuits, both noticeable for surprisingly big boobs compared to their slender waists and thin legs, leave the pool to join him. "Would he be headed for the sauna next, and be willing to gentlemanly escort two ladies at risk of getting groped by ugly old leeches?" they go, and he does them the favor. It's good to get seen with barely dressed women from time to time, to contradict any rumors he might be gay. Some people can be so suspicious, of good looking guys without fiancées.

Both blondes perform the slow motion wooden bench version of a pole dance in the sauna, to the very physically visible exhilaration of two oligarch type fat guys quickly done with talking business. Danylo keeps himself coyly covered by his towel, to hide his lack of interest. All he aims for is a hard sweat and the peace of mind it delivers, to get ready for his tour guide stunt.

He'll start off at the airport, to lead his clients straight through the whole of Lagos, towards the posh seaside resort on the island at the far end. That's where rich people like these two old leeches reside, to get catered for by the exact same type of girls. This route should provide him with enough material for thirty times 6k words. 180k words in total. Put like this, the wage feels very modest indeed. Danylo decides it's only fair to talk rubbish.

Having noticed his lack of enthusiasm, the two blondes refocus their performance on the old leeches and let Danylo leave the sauna by himself. Getting more than his fair share of cold water at home, he skips the icy basin to head straight back into the main pool once again. He has still got more than two hours and will make the most of this rare treat.

"Dear guests, welcome to Lagos airport" he will go. Sounds pretty good, for a starter phrase. Except airports tend to come with a name, like Igor Sikorsky or Boryspil, in Kyiv. Danylo suddenly knows he will need both his gadgets, to perform. The laptop for the actual Skype with the aliens, and the phone for last second searches to beef up his tale and answer any questions. The voice recognition on his Chinese phone is pretty good, in English. He can preset it to search modus, and augment the little he knows about Lagos on the fly.

Proud of his technological prowess and creativity, Danylo grants himself some jacuzzi. Just a tiny dose, because warm bubbles always make him the opposite of alert.

Taking care not to be seen by any pretty young girls this time, jacuzzis are too small for him to sit at ease next to potentially groping predators, he makes his way around the locker room to access the wellness area from the far side. Two of the five jacuzzis are occupied, each by one of the blondes and an old leech. Poor girls, tough job. Even tougher than risking ones neck in the cold.

Danylo should have known it, and stayed well clear. Never no problem for him to stop drinking beer, or eating chocolate, or having sex. He does everything in a measured, grown-up way. Everything except jacuzzis.

Different types of bubbles and jets switching on and off at a preset rhythm, that's his one and only addiction. Once he's inside, he can't get enough of this. He'll stay until the very last possible moment, forcing himself to rush out in a frenzy to barely avoid paying a surcharge. And for the rest of the day, he'll be a brainwashed slow motion zombie falling asleep as soon as he stops walking. Perfect recipe for a catastrophic start into his tour guide career.

Danylo knows how this will play out, and that it's wrong to stay put. But he paid a fortune to get into this bowl of pure pleasure. It would be a crime against his sore muscles to leave the jacuzzi any second earlier than necessary. Tough luck for the aliens. And humanity.

This damned clock seems to move ever faster. The minutes slip by at the speed of seconds. Three minutes to get out and get dressed, or they'll make him pay. Exerting maximum willpower, Danylo forces himself to leave the jacuzzi, rush to the locker room, get dressed and sprint out with seconds left on his access chip. He made it, and now has to wait in the warm lobby for his hair to dry, if he wants to make it home through a 4C chill without catching a cold.

It's just past four in the afternoon, but the sun is mostly down already. Fucking autumn. No wonder everybody is so tense. The weather is so bad, and you know it's going to get even worse, much worse, before it gets better again. Danylo would love to stay in the comfort of this lobby for as long as the security guards would let him, but he has a job upcoming. At five, he declares his hair dry enough and marches back at a stiff pace.

The cold air kickstarts his brain back into action. By the time he reaches auntie Olga's flat to be greeted by an overwhelming smell of freshly boiled cauliflower, Danylo is ready for action.

First, he informs auntie Olga he'll be working, online and internationally, between 18:45 and 19:45, and can't be disturbed under any circumstances. He'll have his dinner afterwards, no need to wait for him. She's duly impressed, as he had hoped she would be.

Next, he retrieves the multiple socket from the living room to be able to plug in both his laptop and his phone. He doesn't trust the batteries, and auntie Olga won't notice the radio is without power. As long as she has got her beloved TV blabbing, she won't touch the radio.

Finally, he sets his phone to voice recognition and probes Wikipedia for 'Lagos airport'. Works fine in principle only, the software assumes he's keen on a trip to Lagos, Portugal. He has to ask for 'Lagos, Nigeria, airport' to be served with the correct answer, Murtala Muhammed International Airport. So far so good, not too hard to pronounce. But who the hell is this guy?

Danylo, suddenly very aware of how steep a learning curve he signed up for, performs a second search, for Murtala Muhammed. Turns out his full name is a mouthful, Murtala Rufai Ramat Muhammed, and that he was a military ruler of Nigeria who got himself assassinated in 1976. One hell of a dynamic biography, an awful lot of life crammed into just thirty seven years.

Danylo wonders if and how much he should tell the aliens, about Murtala Muhammad. Might not be a good idea, to touch topics like military coups, purges and assassinations early on. Makes humanity look ferocious. Which it is, in a way, up to a point. But not exclusively and outstandingly. 'Mostly harmless', earth's entry in Douglas Adams' famous Hitchhiker's Guide, sums it up well. Humanity, that's jacuzzis and trenches. No need to emphasize the latter.

Danylo decides he'll keep his mention of Murtala Muhammad brief, and to stick to the present as much as possible overall. Only if his customers insist will he talk about a Nigerian history that seems to contain more than a fair share of bloody incidents.

What else is there, to talk about on arrival at an airport? The local weather, of course. That's a nice uplifting topic. Right now, it's 31C in Lagos, a lovely temperature. The weather app also mentions one more thunderstorm, but that's no problem for visitors not arriving by plane.

Danylo decides he'll spend his first day telling his customers about the Lagos climate, and the corresponding vegetation. With a little luck, there will be some palm tree by the roadside, to provide a visual anchor. He won't switch his screen to Wikipedia, not to reveal his source.

The clock is ticking faster once again. Time for Danylo to log into the portal and do his best.

With ten minutes to go until the official start, he's still on his own in Skype. Ample time to bring up Google StreetView, find the international Airport Road, position himself in front of the building and zoom in on a sign announcing a 50k Naira penalty for anyone daring to wait or park in this spot. Perfect way to introduce visitors to an orderly place where diligent professionals clad in blue and equipped with trolleys wait for customers who need help with their luggage.

Danylo shares his screen and waits.

He feels his heart rate accelerate. Two minutes to go, until he meets dots that might be aliens. If they resent an Ukrainian cheat, humanity might be headed for an unexpected kind of extinction. He should never have done this. He should quit. He needs to go to the loo.

Here they are. Danylo counts ten dots. Black, white and grey. Red, purple, blue and green. Orange, yellow and beige. He's short of saliva, has to force himself to clear his voice to go:

"Dear guests, nice to meet you, and a warm welcome to Lagos, Nigeria! Talking of warm, it's 27C right now, you have chosen to visit a pleasantly warm location with lovely weather. It's called a tropical savanna climate, meaning it never gets cold, just more or less wet..."

Danylo is reading from the Wikipedia entry on his phone. This whole exercise is far more stressful than he would have expected. He should have tried talking about something he doesn't know dick about, before signing up for this job. He hears his voice vibrating, as if he was about to break down, which is very much aligned with his feelings, but terribly embarrassing. He's going to be found out any second now, and sent packing, And the World Bank will claim its money back.

A smiley and a thumbs up, from the orange dot, broadcast to the whole group? Danylo had no idea what if any interaction to expect, and is taken by surprise, struggling to react.

His well behaved inner self takes over and makes him go: "Thank you, orange guest, glad to see you like my work. Please don't hesitate to comment, at any time, be it good news or bad news. Love to be of service, and to adapt the tour to your preferences."

Danylo hates himself for being stupid, and auntie Olga for drilling a perfect service mentality bordering on servility into him. He's actively calling for questions, the best way to fail.

Orange dot seems to like him even better for it, though. It goes "Thank you so much" followed by one more smiley, and a request to slow down a bit. He's talking too fast, obviously, because he's reading from his phone. Danylo apologizes and promises to slow down.

Orange dot is definitely into smileys, now it sends three in one go. Green dot weighs in less cheerfully, stating: "Just get a grip on yourself, lad. Fine to hear about Lagos climate, if this helps you settle into your role, but please keep it short. We're here for the people, not the weather." And black dot to add, to Danylo's terror: "No need to piss your pants, kiddie. We wouldn't book a month of this if we were inclined to blast the planet to pieces. No need to piss your pants, yet."

"Thanks for your feedback, I'll do my best" is all Danylo manages to come up with in response, before transitioning as elegantly as possible to the requested topic: "I actually only mentioned the weather to explain why the professionals you can see on my screen are so lightly dressed. Short sleeves outside, that's a sure sign of warm weather. The luggage handlers waiting for customers in front of the airport wouldn't feel comfy just standing there in a colder climate."

Same for the other people we can see, both in the drop-off zone and one level down, both the air passengers and whoever caters to them in whichever way, with or without wearing yellow security vests. Everybody is lightly dressed. Not hard to guess that most of those big flashy cars dropping off travelers will have air conditioning.

Which brings in another people topic. We'll be encountering this one again and again over the next couple of days. There are a lot of luggage handlers ready to perform, and a lot of big flashy cars. Let me put it like this: The former won't be able to afford the latter. You need to be rich, to afford a big flashy car, and you don't get rich handling luggage. The airport is one of the places where we get to see rich people, or rather their means of transport. Let's leave it to roll towards the city proper, shall we?"

Danylo scrolls along until he reaches a green sign he reads aloud: "Welcome to Lagos, state of aquatic splendor. That's it, dear guests, that's the place we will now discover step by step. Our journey will take us to the sea, to a resort that embodies the aquatic splendor mentioned here. But before we reach it, we will discover slightly less splendid neighborhoods, with much less green. Please enjoy the perfect tarmac of this mostly empty road, and the lush vegetation, there won't be much more of this further downtown."

Danylo scrolls along the airport road repeating this same statement in different wordings. No reactions from the dots suggests they like it. They pass what might be a toll road portal. As he's far from sure to have identified its function correctly, he prefers not to comment. Same for the billboards. The advertisements are easy enough to decipher, but the brands are alien. Impossible for him to know if these are new or supposed to be household names.

It's a long road, and quite boring for most of the time. Could be pretty much anywhere. Danylo would have expected something more exotic. "Africa in general, and Nigeria and Lagos in particular, it's pretty much like anywhere else, at the end of the day" he hears himself saying, without really having intended to risk such an assessment.

Suddenly aware the aliens might resent it, he quickly adds "Very superficially speaking, of course. Roads, cars and concrete, everybody does those, anywhere. Same for TV and the internet, and football. We agree on those, too. That's called globalization, when most people everywhere do more or less the same. But Lagos is of course much more interesting than most places. Very interesting people, in Lagos."

Danylo feels himself slipping and sliding on his own slime, shamelessly. He would be an excellent employee, if given the chance. His nascent self-esteem is confirmed by one more smiley, from orange dot. Emboldened by this positive feedback, he adds "We might share roads, cars, concrete, TV and football the world over, but Lagos stands out. It's really huge, and seriously young, with lots and lots of highly educated people. Lagos is the future. The rest of the world, or ROW, as we call it, just doesn't get that yet. Too old, too conservative, too backward looking..."

Danylo would have gone on for a couple more scrolls along Airport Road, but his slime prompts the red dot to weigh in for the first time. It finishes his sentence: "... too focused on past glories that weren't any in the first place. So many barbarian acts of exploitation have been performed by Europeans and their descendants, all over the world, and most of them don't even consider the due reparations worth discussing. Outrageous, perfectly outrageous. But, no offense intended, Dany Highfive, we know all this inside out already, that's why we're here. You wouldn't try to, how was this called, suckling up to us, Dany? Where's the beef, when do we start to learn?"

Black dot adds a devil smiley, and a pants icon. Danylo feels trapped.

He gets rescued by green dot writing: "Come on, colleagues, give the poor lad a chance. It's his first day, he's meaning well and not doing that badly. If we want to understand, we'll have to listen. Yes, we already do know a lot, but we lack context. Dany is giving his best shot at providing it, so let's have him do his thing."

What can be more humiliating than having to rely on a green dot to keep order?

A flashback shoots across Danylo's mind. That look on the face of his social sciences teacher, when he mentioned he was envisaging a career in teaching. The stunned expression will stay with him forever. It so clearly suggested he would never be able to handle a classroom full of teens he immediately dropped the idea. A lucky coincidence. As he has meanwhile discovered, Ukrainian parents have yet to develop a fondness of gay teachers.

Another twenty minutes to fill. Danylo swallows what is left of his pride and goes: "Dear guests, apologies for any inconvenience caused by my lack of experience. That's the thing, with young people like me. We do stuff for the first time, and not always right on that first time. We don't mean bad, we just lack the decades of practice you get with old people."

Like the young guys you see here, next to the white tanker truck with the damaged drivers cabin titled forward. Doesn't look very safe, how they handle canisters of a highly flammable liquid right next to cars speeding by at motorway speed. Old people with their far more pronounced graveyard proximity awareness, they would think hazard and stay well clear."

"You really think they're retrieving petrol from the tanker truck? Looks more like them cooking breakfast to me. No one in his right mind, however young and foolish, would be mad enough to handle petrol without proper safety precautions..." goes purple dot in response.

Danylo doesn't wait for one more green dot intervention. Sure of his statement, he shoots back: "Little do you know. No offense intended, but I really need to correct a misconception here. Young people do take risks, mind boggling risks even. One look at road kill stats will tell you as much. Same for wars, they're run on recruits too young to consider dying an outcome. And, to mention again what will stay with us, some people are both young and poor. Just try being broke for a week, before you decide which risks are worth taking."

Danylo speaks up with the authority of an angry young man who came close not to make it to this very appointment because of one slippery rung on a long ladder he had to climb to survive. Purple dot sends an embarrassedly apologetic smiley in response.

Scrolling some more along Airport Road, Danylo stops at number 45 to zoom in on the Welcome Centre Hotel advertising a rate of 19,500 Naira. Explicitly quoting from a table on living wages in the wider Lagos region he has pulled up on his phone, he explains how some people are spending for one night what carries others through a whole month. Rattling through the numbers takes him a while, but the dots don't mind, they let him proceed. He even gets one more smiley from orange dot. Mental note to spend some more time quoting tables in the future.

With only a few minutes left, Danylo decides to wrap up the day on a nice green and upbeat note. He scrolls forward to the Jhalobia Recreation Park and Garden.

Plenty of pictures of well kept greenery frequented by happy people dressed up in their Sunday best takes him well past 19:45. He is made to explain why some of the ladies wear dresses that visibly impede their ability to breathe and move, and look so content anyway. The dots seem to be aware, on a very general and abstract level, of the physiological male-female duality, and of the concept of differentiated gender roles, but they struggle with the practicalities. Reading about bicycles never taught anyone how to ride them.

Noticing the time, Danylo apologizes for the overrun, thanks his guests for their patience with his young novice ways, and promises to do better next time. He gets rewarded by a surge of eight smileys. Orange dot even adds a bouquet of flowers to the one it sends. So many clear signs of appreciation come as a nice surprise. Black and purple dot fail to send smileys, but that's fine, too. With their temper, not getting shouted at counts as success.

The dots have left. Danylo has made it through his first tour, alive and as of now unsacked.

This was incredibly intense, in totally unexpected ways. He has been talking to dots on a screen. Most probably, these dots are just lines of code taught to mimick humans.

Didn't feel that way. Not at all. That was not chat bot language, far too sophisticated. Chat bots, that's "If you're calling for a new contract, press one. If you're calling for an extension of an existing contract, press two. If you're calling for support, press three." No chat bot ever added "And if you really are stupid enough to press three hoping for help from a fellow human, why not shoot yourself in the knee, too? Support only costs money, never makes us any, and making money is the sole and unique purpose of our existence. No get off that line, or two hours of an endless loop of Eurovision winners will teach you not to be an imbecile."

If the dots are chat bots, still a far more plausible assumption than them being actual, in the flesh, or in the ray, or in the whatever aliens, they were not programmed by a teen. Wrong language. Teens talk slang. Even the rare bootlickers forever trying to please adults, and they don't do worldwide pranks, wouldn't come up with the language Danylo's dots used in the chat room. They sounded like some conference. Or something on TV. Politicians, perhaps.

Danylo swallows his spit. Politicians, that would actually make sense. If the dots are aliens.

There was this one moment, where the red dot went all aggressive, and Danylo panicked. He would love to have a second look at that interaction, to hopefully find out he misread the red dot.

Still logged into the portal, Danylo recalls one of the black bankers mentioning recordings. All tour guides are supposed to be monitored, and to be provided with guidance in cases of glitches.

Danylo fervently hopes not to be a case of glitch. Not just because of the second tranche of the money. He does need that cash. It will be very hard to earn, judging by today's experience, but he's willing to proceed. Now, he's more worried about the fate of Europe, including his own fate, as a European, than about his dire financial straits. Red dot didn't sound good.

Searching the portal for recordings on an impulse, Danylo finds the relevant section fast. It's a long numbered list of 87 so called teams, suggesting 87 Lagos tour guides at work. With 870 potentially alien dots? Wow. This is far bigger than he would have expected.

It's one line per team, and each features a green check symbol in column 1 of 30. There's a link behind each team number, but clicking on it for team 1 only delivers an 'access denied' error message. Same for teams 2, 3 and 4.

Danylo is on the verge of giving up when he suddenly understands the table. November has thirty days. His guide contract calls for one tour per day. The green check symbol in column 1 means today's tour has happened on schedule. It's evening in Lagos. Assuming the other 86 guides to be located there, all tours should be completed by now. With a little luck, he's team 87.

Not like him, to solve riddles, that's one of the specialities of the maths crowd. Danylo clicks on the team 87 link anyway, and triggers no error message. His screen switches to a YouTube like interface instead. It offers one recording, of today's tour, and displays two WB entries signalling he did perform as mandated per contract and has been cleared to keep going. Wow.

Inflated with a surge of pride, Danylo starts the clip, to quickly redeflate, to below zero. He sounds horrible. Even the Russian oligarchs on the BBC manage more fluency. He's stammering like some eight year old loth to admit he played football instead of learning the poem he's now supposed to recite in front of a whole grinning class.

Danylo has to stop the clip to avoid imminent death by shame.

With the still of the Airport Road filling the screen, he struggles to regain composure. Whoever vetted him to keep going didn't consider his performance as abysmal as it sounds. He must have gotten better over the course of the tour. Or would his manager be as incompetent and worthy of the sack as himself? It's the World Bank at the helm. International institutions, never to be trusted not to fuck up. If the rest of his performance is as ridiculous as the start, watching the whole forty five minutes will be more excruciating than anything a urologist can come up with.

Danylo's precarious self esteem is fighting a losing battle with his survival instinct. If there really is the threat he remembers in there, if his manager really is incompetent or lazy enough to have overheard or failed to listen to it, he has to alert someone.

Bracing himself for a kick into the balls of his pride, Danylo resumes watching.

His talking actually does get better, a tiny bit, in the course of the tour. Less nervous vibes, less subtone of whimpering and whining. But he's still painful to listen to, very much unlike the cosmopolitan and worldly image of himself he was hoping to project.

Here comes the sequence where red dot chews him out.

One moment, he was going, pretty fluently and enthusiastically, for once: "Lagos is the future. The rest of the world, or ROW, as we call it, just doesn't get that yet. Too old, too conservative, too backward looking..." only to get interrupted by their message from red dot:

"... too focused on past glories that weren't any in the first place. So many barbarian acts of exploitation have been performed by Europeans and their descendants, all over the world, and most of them don't even consider the due reparations worth discussing. Outrageous, perfectly outrageous. But, no offense intended, Dany Highfive, we know all this inside out already, that's why we're here. You wouldn't try to, how was this called, suckling up to us, Dany? Where's the beef, when do we start to learn?"

Watching the recording, Danylo notices for the first time how incredibly fast red dot must be typing. Its words flow in at speech speed, totally unlike any chatroom experience. Even aficionados of this type of conversation manage less half its tempo. Suggests it's most probably not typing, or blessed with an anatomy allowing superior performance. Some kind of space pentadecapus using its fifteen tentacles on a ball shaped keyboard? Some kind of brain interface involved? Or is this the output of an AI that was trained on an overdose of infotainment?

Red dot's way of weighing in, especially if read aloud, sounds like a transcript from NPR, Danylo's second favourite way to get himself acquainted with authentic English. National Public Radio had this series, prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement, about the historical roots of current differences in wealth, health and general wellbeing. Same jargon, same call for reparations.

If red dot is a bot, it wasn't created by a teen prankster. Some serious grown-up thinking went into this statement. Someone is unhappy with the way things are, and not necessarily resigned to keep them that way, yet. Red dot's call for beef might signal more than a longing for sense. Understanding how things got the way they are can be the first step to change them.

But red dot doesn't threaten to blow up the planet. That was black dot. And he was joking. No one sends a pant icon to signal the start of an invasion.

At the end of the first day, this whole Lagos tour guide stunt is still to be considered a joke. Pretty elaborate, involving lots of rather advanced technology, but a joke. No need for Danylo to do anything but get ready for the next round. Another twenty nine to go.

Auntie Olga's cabbage tastes better than usual, and not just because Danylo is as hungry as a wolf after all the excitement and exercise of the day. She's showering him in praise, for having found an abroad job and shouldering his share of the bills. She says 'finally shouldering', as per her custom, but her tone is much improved, really appreciative.

Danylo is tempted to brag, it might be the ultimate abroad he's handling after all. But he keeps mum, as mandated by his contract. Impressing auntie Olga isn't worth the risk. He just tells her he's dealing with Americans. Turns out they work as well with her as aliens would, if not better. She gets all excited, urges him to watch out for Russian speaking men in dark suits wielding poisoned umbrellas. She has always been a bit of a Russophobe, and watching all that propaganda on TV is blowing what little is left of her brain sideways.

Danylo explains, with extra patience, how his Americans are bankers, World Bankers even, not soldiers or spies. Auntie Olga does nod, because he's talking forcefully about something too complex for a retired canteen helper, but he can see she's not convinced. She'll probably lock them in again, to fend off imagined assailants, and hide the keys so well it will take him hours to find them. If ever a fire breaks out, like in the same building two streets down, they are doomed.

Danylo longs for a job that would allow him to move out.

Back in his room, he logs into the portal again, for one more look at the clip. The two WB entries clearing him to keep going feel good, a nice validation of his efforts. The clip as such is still one hell of a downer, he sounds terribly insecure and mangles so many words so badly it's a surprise the dots managed to make sense of his musings. But they liked it, eight smileys and a bouquet of flowers are there for him to enjoy again. All is well that ends well.

Day one ended well, despite Danylo's dire lack of preparation and some glitches. He has to do better on day two, as he promised. He needs to do research, for tomorrow's route, and rehearse the pronunciation of important words and phrases.

With his body as sore as pounded meat, Danylo decides to shut down the laptop and do the research on his phone. That way, he'll be able to lay down, just straining his right arm and hand to hold it up above his head resting on his pillow. Said and done. Much better. His back loves the new position, he must have overdone the jacuzzi.

Google StreetView is still displaying the Jhalobia Recreation Park and Garden. He decides to pick it up right there, for day two. Start with the posh greenery, but ever off Airport Road to provide the dots with a first glimpse of a less well off area.

Turns out he doesn't even need to leave Airport Road. A very little way down, the junction at number 52 delivers the kind of street scene he's looking for.

At the back a very new and posh Zenith bank building, and a couple of very scenic palm trees. Up front a jumble of market stalls, each with its umbrella, fighting for the best roadside space. There's one of the yellow danfo buses parked in front of the stands, and a couple more are rolling on the other lane, in the opposite direction.

The more Danylo looks, the more he envies Lagosians.

Palm trees, a sight worse dying for, so suggestive of warmth and never no more snow boots. The Lagos climate is so benign they can even afford to plant them between the lanes. Vegetation worthy of a botanical garden as roadside scrubs!

And the fruit and greens for sale at the stands, displaying such lush greens, yellows and reds. Totally unlike gray potatoes and cabbage. Umbrellas and people in short sleeves, like on a beach holiday. Even the potholes look promising, with their so obviously not frozen water.

Danylo lays down the phone to close his eyes for just one second, to imagine himself strolling along the stands to pick some fruit, with Maksym. They'd get themselves some of these exotic treats, and some iced tea, before heading back to Maksym's room in the Golden Tulip Hotel, to do what they did last time they met.

When Danylo wakes up, it's half past nine in the morning. Takes him a frantic couple of seconds to find his phone among the sheets, luckily unbroken. Only the battery is down to the red death zone, has been crying for the charger he quickly plugs in for hours.

So much for his idea to prepare his next tour a day in advance, to allow the corresponding information and terminology to properly sag in over a good nights sleep. He really has to get his act together now, fast, unless he wants to spend another tumultuous forty five minutes culminating in an avalanche of mumbled apologies.

But first he needs breakfast. And for a proper breakfast, he needs to go buy some real coffee. He's a member of the workforce now, he's entitled to start the day with something more palatable than auntie Olga's ersatz.

The old witch is of course glad to see him all shaved and dressed up before noon, and thrilled when he explains what he's up to. Takes her less than three minutes to write down what else they need, if he really has enough cash to purchase foreign coffee. Some pretty expensive items on her list, unfortunately. Lard and tea, that alone is going to cost him a packet.

Danylo resigns himself to spend some of his hard earned cash on basics. Auntie Olga does have a point. He has been living off her pension for a while, and never thought twice about brewing himself another pot of tea, to fend off the chill. It's his turn.

Following auntie Olga's recommendations where to get the best price, it takes Danylo hours to purchase all the items on the list, minus the coffee. It's outrageously expensive everywhere, in all available formats. Much better to make do with discount tea.

Back at the flat, he gets some smoked sausage with his cabbage for lunch, to reward him for his efforts. A nice tasty gesture, especially as he wasn't made to purchase it. Auntie Olga explains how she can get this treat from a neighbor with connections to a village butcher, pretty cheaply. Her old stomach resents the amount of fat and the strong marjoram flavor, but with him suddenly being a good laborious boy, she got him some.

All tired after his copious lunch, Danylo retreats to his room with the firm intention to do some research, to make sure today's tour works fine.

He's getting good at Google StreetView, quickly locates the Golden Tulip Hotel now forever associated with a night he spent there with Maksym, virtually.

Maksym. Danylo once again itches to call him. The urge is worse than ever, because he's doing something interesting. He's not allowed to talk about it. But Maksym is an engineer, and in China. He'll be using a Chinese phone contract, and Chinese messenger apps. He'll be familiar with ways to circumvent both the Great Firewall and evade US surveillance. Perfectly feasible, for someone of Maksym's caliber, to establish a secure channel.

How would Maksym react, if Danylo was to start talking aliens?

The natural reaction would be to consider him mad, and hang up.

Danylo would have to introduce the topic carefully, casually.

He might show off his very professional looking portal, with the table with the 87 lines proving he's not alone. He could mention his initial assumption to he dealing with some teen nerd prankster, and how it got replaced by the more sinister belief to be dealing with some very grown-up wannabe revolutionaries, like Black Panthers reloaded. The legacy political activist group, not the Marvel franchise movie.

Danylo has convinced himself he's dealing with human politicians, not aliens.

Aliens with such a profound grasp of English and global civilization would be to scary.

Danylo must have fallen asleep once again, courtesy of the daydreaming in combination with a big morsel of hard to digest fatty sausage. It's half past five when he wakes up. Barely enough time to come up with a plan for today.

Looking at the map, he discovers two mosques and a couple of churches in the vicinity of the Golden Tulip Hotel. Funny, how fast the scenery changes as soon as he scrolls away from the main thoroughfare.

Mafoluku Central Mosque and Mulikudeen Mosque are supposed to be located on Oloware Street. They feature very clearly on the map, with properly recorded entries, but none of the buildings looks the part. No big solid building in sight except for a hospital, no minaret.

Danylo has already wasted twenty precious minutes without managing to locate the Islamic houses of worship with a sufficient level of certainty. He decides to make do with a mention of Islam as one of the religions practiced in Lagos, and visit a mosque on another day. He makes a mental note of the hospital, though. Health care institutions should make a good topic.

St Jude Catholic Church Mafoluku looks the part. Pretty fancy modernist building right next to a busy street with some aspirational housing. A middle class neighbourhood with its fair share of big cars, but also some Danfo vehicles around. And roadside stalls with umbrellas. Lagosians are very much into all kinds of sales, very entrepreneurial people. There are also palm trees, once again. Quite painful to watch, for someone stuck in dark cloudy autumnal Kyiv.

It's six o'clock already. Danylo decides today's tour will start at the Golden Tulip and end on old Ewo Road. Plenty to look at and describe there, in case the dots don't fancy him quoting at length from the Religion in Nigeria section of Wikipedia. Which he intends to try, because the mix feels important, from his professional point of view. If the dots want something more substantial than nice pictures to chew on, the sociologist in him is ready to deliver.

There are even some prominent non-religious Nigerians to mention, quite a feat in a country where a relevant part of the population approves of the death penalty for abandoning one's inherited faith and some regions feature anti-blasphemy laws. Danylo is especially impressed by the biography of Wole Soyinka, winner of a Nobel Prize in Literature, no less.

At 18:45, Danylo is ready to go and logs into the portal. To his surprise, he gets joined by the orange dot at 18:48. An awkward situation. This is the nice cheerful customer, but it's still supposed to be an alien. Danylo prefers not to react, pretending he's not on duty yet. That he clocked in early doesn't need to mean he's in attendance. He might have left for a couple of minutes, to fetch himself a drink, to help with a throat that feels dry and sore.

Perfect plan. At 18:50, the screen action picks up speed. The orange dot sends an inquisitive "Hi Dany Highfive, are you there yet? Very much look forward to what you'll teach us today", followed by one more of its trademark smileys. A nice touch. On a heavier note, the green dot shows up early, too. It starts chatting right away: "So, Dany, what's your plan for today? Hope you don't mind me asking. Just want to make sure we're headed for a good session." Bastard.

Danylo hates pushy people, especially self appointed managers. He'd love to shout at the green dot. Something like "None of your business at 18:51. How about being a good customer, for a change, shut the hell up and wait for whatever I deign to come up with?"

Instead, he goes "Warm welcome, dear guests. Thanks to both of you, for showing your appreciation of my services by checking in ahead of time. Today's tour will take us into our first real neighborhood, as opposed to a highway lined with hotels and office buildings. We'll have a look at Mafoluku, to discover how people live, do business, move around etc. I'd rather save the details for later, if you don't mind. A picture says more than a thousand words, and I'd prefer you to look first, before you listen to the additional information I have prepared."

The orange dot sends a smiley, a bouquet of flowers and another smiley. The green dot goes "Sounds acceptable. Just make sure not to waste too much time on quoting Wikipedia. We're perfectly able to read, as you will certainly have noticed by now."

Danylo takes a deep breath. He won't let himself get bullied by a green dot, be it alien, artificially intelligent or whatever else. He has to talk back, but carefully. After another deep breath, he goes "Hearing you, dear customer, hearing you, and ever so at your service. I will try to keep the quotes as short as possible, but I owe you facts, not mere individual impressions. A lot of diligent pro bono research went into what you have astutely identified as Wikipedia entries. Much better to take advantage of this collective effort than to rely on my humble brain, don't you think?"

Danylo holds his breath, hoping the soothing slime to do the trick. Nothing happens, for seconds. Danylo is already steadying himself for the sack when the green dot sends a thumbs up. Just a thumbs up, without any further comment. Danylo decides to count this as a win.

At 18:00 sharp all the other dots sign in in quick succession. The red one doesn't even wait for Danylo to say hi. On seeing the Golden Tulip Hotel, it at once starts chatting: "Oh come on, Highfive, not another hotel? Please allow me to point out we are visiting virtually. Your standard customers might love to find out how fellow tourists are lodged, but we couldn't care less."

Danylo barely trusts his eyes, comes close to crying with pride. He's being taken for an authentic Lagos tour guide, by a dot bragging about being exceptionally well informed.

The unintended compliment makes his day. Enervated by the acceptance, he throws himself into the next act of his performance, going

"Dear guests, thanks a lot for joining me once again. No need to worry, we won't waste time on the posh hotel. Let's start with a look at the business folks lining the Airport Road a little further down. They won't be able to afford a night at the Golden Tulip, but look at those succulent wares. Perfectly mouthwatering, what they have got on offer. This kind of roadside stall, that's very Lagos. And not just for fruits and greens. An incredible number of enterprising folks will sell you pretty much anything by the roadside. A vibrant place, full of clever young people coming up with innumerable business plans to make a living..."

Danylo goes on like this for a while scrolling into Mafoluku. He mostly does well.

There's a tense moment when the purple dot argues he should call what looks exactly like bananas plantain. That's true, according to Danylo's phone, he has to give in. Luckily, his phone also mentions plantain being referred to as cooking bananas, providing him with an exit strategy. The term cooking bananas is considered acceptable by the purple dot, they're back to friends.

That sequence of the tour also delivers one more high point. Danylo is once more waxing lyrical about about lovely fruits and green when the black dot cuts in with a remark that would have sounded like spitting if read out aloud:

"Stop it, will you? This street is one dirty mess of muddy water holes. Can't you see how the people would love to blow the hole place up? Now don't you try to tell me this is a dignified way to make a living, because I'm not buying this kind of bullshit. No one wants to call that kind of street home, nice food or no food. If they loved the place, they'd fix it."

The black dot shouldn't have written 'food or no food'. Not to a tour guide surviving on auntie Olga's cabbage, mostly without lard. A guy unable to afford even one small wake-up coffee in the morning. A guy facing a wall adorned with waves of soggy mock brocade paper.

Without even trying to come up with a polite way to state what needs stating, Danylo shoots back: "Food or no food? Do you even hear yourself? Might be different for you guys, but me, and the whole of my kind, we need to eat. No food, no me. Not for much longer. Sorry to go blunt, but you really need to get some aspects, or contexts, or whatever you want to call them. Food is very important, and you want to be able to afford nice fruits and green. The sellers are proud of their wares. Do you even notice how nicely everything is arranged, to look appetizing? Same for the buyers. They love to be able to afford to pick from a gorgeous display. That's the good life. And for fixing the street, that's easier said than done. Have you got any idea how much road works cost? You don't just wake up and go 'That pothole sucks. Plan for the day: Fix tarmac'."

Danylo would have gone on, but seeing three more smileys sent by the orange dot calms him down. His anger dissipates as fast as it had welled up from somewhere real deep inside. He pauses, afraid to have sounded too harsh. Sure enough, the black dot writes: "Time to reconsider? Time to blow up the planet early? Time for Dany to piss [pant icon]?"

This feels like a clear case of advanced uh-oh. Danylo is ready to panic and run. Instead, he gets to see another smiley from the orange dot, a banana plus a shamrock from the yellow dot,

whatever that might mean, and a surprisingly positive line from the green dot: “Well said, lad, point duly acknowledged. That’s exactly the context we need, good job.”

And the red dot to add: “Good job indeed, Dany, and apologies if we hurt your feelings. Must be tough, to live in your kind of neighborhood. The mud, the crap, that’s so gross. But this gross is your home, your home gross, in a way. You feel a need to defend it. Good lad.”

Danylo feels both insulted and vindicated. The red dot talks down to him as if he was a three year old in need of comfort after dropping his lollipop in the sandbox. Its condescension stabs right into Danylo’s proud heart. ‘Good lad’. Why not an outright ‘good boy’, as if he was some dog following orders? At the same time, he’s exhilarated to be considered a resident of Mafoluku. That’s a big feat, for someone from Kyiv who only just learned the word plantain.

It’s nearly 19:30. With a little more than fifteen minutes to fill, Danylo decides to tackle the assorted places of worship, as he had planned. Should easily take him to the 19:45 finishing line. Careful not put himself center stage again, he goes:

“Thanks for your feedback, and glad you appreciate the occasional frank retort. Let’s leave food and infrastructure and move on to a more immaterial and hence less hot topic: Religions.

Please do note how I’m using the plural, religions. Lagos is a place of many religions. Within walking distance from where we stand, you’ll find two mosques as well as a Catholic, an Anglican and two Protestant churches.

Many places of worship in Lagos, many people of different faiths living side by side. Some of them ardent practitioners, others more detached. As individual religious practice is so diverse, I hope you won’t mind me quoting some statistics to introduce this topic...”

The dots let him get away with it. Danylo reads, slowly and articulately, until 19:44. At 19:45 sharp, he wraps it up with a nearly sincere “And that’s it for today, dear guests. Thanks for your attention, hope you enjoyed the tour as much as I did. See you tomorrow.”

He gets rewarded by a heap of smileys from the orange dot and one clapping hands icon from anyone else except the black dot. Suggests he’s doing OK. Time for the cabbage.

Over lunch, Danylo reads some more about religions in Nigeria on his phone. Auntie Olga wouldn’t normally tolerate the device at the dinner table, but his new status as lard winner lets him dare try, and he gets away with the offense, without even so much as a comment. Cash matters.

Turns out religious coexistence is less rosy than he made it sound. He erred on the sunny side, which is certainly better than erroneously rubbishing the place, but still... Suddenly anxious to find out if he’s still cleared to go ahead and not daring to access the portal in auntie Olga’s presence, Danylo gulps down what is left on his plate to retire to his room as fast as possible.

The portal lists team 87 as checked for day two, both WB reviews have been performed.

Whoever is supervising this is either incompetent, or lazy, or both.

Danylo is annoyed. The folks at the World Bank should care more. He didn’t mean to, but he has been spreading false rumors of pronounced religious harmony. That’s hopefully not the kind of fake news bound to start bloody riots, but who knows? Religious zealots are good at twisted minds. Impossible to exclude the existence of a sect considering good interfaith relations the worst kind of blasphemy. Someone senior should listen in, and correct where necessary.

These dots might be aliens. As in dangerous. Not to be handled by a sociologist.

These dots read just like real, meatspace people. Pretty well educated people. Tertiary level, absolutely, degrees in social sciences not impossible.

These dots don't read like bots at all. If they were revealed to be bots, Danylo would run for the loo. His bowels would insist to get rid of all that cabbage before the Matrix strikes.

These dots can't be real, meatspace people. They type way too fast.

Danylo feels stuck. Something is wrong. He's missing something.

He's neither prepared to consider the dots genuine aliens nor ready to assume well educated people would waste forty five minutes per day on pretending to be aliens, by means of a voice recognition software allowing them to seem to be typing faster than most folks manage to talk. Even the aliens hypothesis makes more sense than that. Which leads Danylo straight back to the advanced-bots-Matrix interpretation of his ordeal. Shit!

If only Danylo had someone to talk to. If only he knew one of the other tour guides, preferably well enough to share a secure channel. He doesn't.

His mind wanders back to Maksym. Danylo knows he can't call Maksym yet.

Never show up early, to a party or rendezvous, never call ahead of the agreed date, that's basic basics. Early bird signals loser. In an emergency, one can aim for a seemingly random encounter of the you-at-your-favourite-club-what-a-coincidence type, but even this is generally considered a sign of despair. If you value yourself as you want to be valued, you make sure to avoid places where you might bump into the target of your affection.

Being made to handle aliens for a living is an emergency. Danylo could grant himself permission to engineer a coincidence. But it's really hard to bump into someone living at the other end of the world. And he's not desperate enough to resort to the ultimate self humiliation. Even considering to hear himself stammer "Oh, Maksym, what a nice surprise! You've still got that number active? Must have managed to call it somehow, clumsy fingers. How are you doing?" brings him within a heartbeat of sudden death. And Maksym doesn't date certified losers.

The evening is still young. Danylo heads for the student club, to break the endless loop.

He wakes up early on November 3. It's raining outside, but at least it's warm, for the season. He should go out, have some fresh air, walk a bit, before diving back into Lagos, to get his act together for tonight. A pity they don't do five day weeks, in this nuisance of a job. At least one free Sunday per week, that should be mandatory, regardless of the number of hours. It's stressful, to work every single day. The mind needs a break.

It's far from comfortable outside. Danylo has to walk fast, to keep himself warm. At least it's not too windy. The light breeze barely affects the course of a spray that is more low hanging cloud than rain. The city smells nice, in this weather, of wet leaves instead of exhaust fumes. Small wonder, with only minimal traffic around on a Sunday morning. He could as well walk on the street, instead of the pavement. It's more even, too. The city never fixes sidewalks.

Thinking roadworks flips Danylo's brain back towards Lagos. The guys he saw on StreetView, how would they feel, about hearing him praise their business acumen? Would they share a laugh? Or get mad at the overseas chap daring to talk about them? Do they know they feature online? Do they care? What's it really like, to live in Mafoluku? Do they stay with their version of auntie Olga, is that what makes them hang out on a street corner? What are they really up to?

Ten hours from now, Danylo will have to entertain those bloody dots once again. If only he knew why they are doing this to him. What's the point? Why pay him for his musings, instead of just looking at StreetView and reading Wikipedia on their own? They must have done some of this, to be so well informed. Why hire a tour guide on top?

Context, they said. We need context. Raises more questions than it answers.

Danylo can't quit, not unless he finds a better job. He needs the money. If he makes it through today's tour, he'll be done with ten percent of this nightmare. A mere ten percent.

This walk doesn't work. Danylo gives up and hurries back to auntie Olga's, to bury himself into the map and Wikipedia once again. What is supposed to be a leisurely forty five minutes stunt is turning into a rock-around-the-clock full time job, with stage fright on top.

Danylo doesn't struggle one bit to locate Mafoluku again.

Zooming into the map, he notices the area features even more churches than he had already discovered. And they should all be packed, on a Sunday, according to a pretty recent article in a newspaper called Punch, hopefully a reliable source.

There's a big impressive one on Mafoluku Road, St Paul's Anglican Church, protected by a high wall, freshly painted in beige and adorned with a stern warning, in red: 'Post no bill. Do no urinate here. No dumping of refuse here.' Curious to get a feel for what happens inside, Danylo asks his search engine for help. Such a big number should feature, but no. It barely registers. Nothing on YouTube, either. The parishioners don't seem to be very online people. Boring.

On the opposite side of Mafoluku Road, a group of three young men busy themselves around a bike, in front of a workshop selling tyres. Two other guys are crouched next to what must be their own bikes, absorbed by fixing them. But it's the group of three that attracts Danylo's attention.

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The guy with the head shaved bald standing with his back to the camera wears a green, black and white tracksuit vest marked 'SV Grün-Weiß Großbeeren' in big white letters, over faded jeans and flipflops. That's a German ü and ß. Danylo is sure. He doesn't know any German, but he spent enough lonely nights longing for Berlin clubs to be familiar with the specific letters. Sure enough, to add insult to injury, Großbeeren turns out to be a Berlin suburb. The shaved guy must have managed to travel where Danylo longs to travel. It's not fair.

Time is flying by, and Danylo still has to come up with a plan. Searching YouTube for material on the Lagos Anglican Church, he finds a six minute news clip of the kickoff for the centenary celebration. A hall full of old people, all dressed up in white, purple, gold and glitter, in one hell of a pompous decorum, really showing off their wealth hard. And the bishop puts the gravel into his voice, to talk about serving the poor and the needy? The dots need to see this.

Danylo will start with showing the dots the high wall, zooming in on the inscription he'll read aloud. Then he'll do a 360 degree pan shot, slowly, to reveal the young street life riding or working on their bikes. And then, sharp contrast, switch to the news clip with the elders showing off their wealth. They'll make them watch it whole, if they let him get away with it. And then, sharp contrast again, he'll switch to Al Jazeera's take on Enoch Adeboye celebrating mass at his mega church. It's not located in Mafoluku, but who cares? The guy is all over Nigeria. And for dessert, Channels Television reporting in muslims celebrating Eid. That's not today, and muslims don't do Sundays, which he will duly mention, but they should feature, in any tour about religions in Lagos.

Danylo feels like a movie director. If his dots let him perform as planned, they're in for some pretty good infotainment. If they let him perform. He's supposed to use Google StreetView, not YouTube. His supervisor might not like this deviation from standard practice.

With barely two hours left until his performance, Danylo decides to take the risk. He's got all the bookmarks well aligned, he feels relatively well prepared, why kick good work into the bucket? Rules are for breaking, if they don't deliver.

Danylo had considered art school, somewhere around age sixteen. He's into esthetics. No good at drawing and a hopeless singer, but equipped with enough of a dress style to make himself look pleasant on a low budget. He could have targeted photography, on the portrait and fashion side. Or tried his lack of a knack for technology on the complex equipment used to make movies.

He considered, and discarded. Being gay in the arts scene is complicated. Very accepted, of course. Heterosexual men come under more pressure to justify their existence than gays. But the arts scene is also demanding. One is supposed to be very openly gay. That's not an option for

someone relying on auntie Olga for housing. She'd be very upset. And upset can go very wrong, at her age, with her fragile health. Not an option.

Danylo likes to tell himself this story. It's a nice, presentable one. Deeper down, there is a second aspect. He prefers not to advertise his sexual orientation. He's perfectly comfortable with it, absolutely at ease. His romantic life is the one bright spot standing out from mostly twilight, at best. He came of age in a modern city, had no stress finding his first love. No need for a closet. But he dislikes extroverts. His sexual orientation is not for public consumption. It's private, to be shared with the select few guys he has sex with. It's nobody else's business.

Danylo is glad he stayed clear of art school. Sociology was a stupid choice, he should have tried harder to discover his inner engineer, but the arts would have been worse. Jobless artists are ten a kopiok, Kyiv is full of them. A degree in sociology, that gives him an exotic touch. Something to small talk about, when he feels like sharing biographical details.

18:48 already? Danylo logs into the portal and gets immediately joined by the orange dot. A real fan, this one, and already firing off smileys. The green dot doesn't show up early today. Hopefully a good sign, its way to display satisfaction with yesterday's show.

At 19:00, the rest of the team shows up at once. No, not the whole rest. There are only nine dots, one is missing. Danylo struggles to recall the color, but he's sure he counted ten dots, not nine. It's 19:01 already, he needs to get started. Clearing his voice, he goes:

"Dear guests, welcome back. Hope you don't mind me waiting just a little longer, would prefer to start when we're all on board. Any idea why your colleague didn't make it on time? Any suggestions how long we should wait for him, anyone?"

Danylo doesn't dare say more. It's hard to find the right words when he doesn't even recall the color of the missing dot. And there's this pronoun issue. How does one talk of a dot representing an alien? He shouldn't have said 'wait for him'. That's declaring the missing dot male by default, the kind of archaic behavior he prides his progressive self never to display.

There were ten dots yesterday, he's dead certain of this. Or is he? This pause is getting awfully long. He will have to proceed soon, not to look incompetent.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, dialed into the wrong channel. Now that was funny, because I didn't get it right away, why we were suddenly indoors, and in what kind of indoors. Tour 86, they're on their third day of doing the Nigerian National Museum. Nice artifacts, lots of stories. Will we be going there too, Dany Highfive? I'd like to hear the story about the car..."

The white dot writes so fast Danylo barely manages to keep up. It's just white, no wonder he struggled to recall its color. Didn't do anything for the last two days, but obviously not for lack of temper. It's still sharing its enthusiasm. What now?

"Thank you! Dany lad, would you please?". The green dot sorts it out, once again.

Danylo jumps right in, to make up for the lost time:

"It's Sunday, dear guests. A very important concept. Sunday is not just any day, it's different. Sunday is typically not for working, unless you're a nurse, or police, or a power line maintenance worker, or a tour guide. Some jobs need to be done seven days a week. But most don't, and the practitioners get at least one day off. If the Christian religious tradition determined the calendar in a region, this day off will be a Sunday. One gets the chance to idle, or to go to church. And this is what we'll do, too, on our first Sunday. Yesterday, I told you about religions in general. Today, we'll look at some churches, and at what happens inside..."

Danylo is very much in the flow today. His tour is unfolding exactly as he planned it, despite the bungled start. It's also quite interactive, and in a good way.

It all started with the purple dot doubting the writing on the church wall. It went

“Why would anyone ask passers-by to refrain from urinating where there is no toilet to sit on? Is this inscription a fake? Highfive, are you messing with us?”

Danylo was so surprised by the purple dot’s lack of understanding he shot back:

“Sorry?! You did so much research, and never ever came across men making a nuisance of themselves by pissing in public? Especially in the dark of night, and when pissed? ‘Pissed’ by the way means drunk, under the influence of alcohol, inebriated.

Well, dear guest, let me put it like this: If such information counts as a surprise, you’ve got a learning curve ahead. Please allow me to restate: Yes, whoever got this wall painted had reason to be worried about people posting bills or dumping refuse, and about men mistaking it for a urinal. Men are perfectly able to piss without sitting down, and they do it.”

Danylo had not trouble going authoritative on this one. He was sure of his thing, for once. The same inscription could feature on a Kyiv wall, it’s not Lagos specific. An us-versus-them emotion welled up, with him on the side of all fellow men.

While he was still enjoying to have spoken so strongly, the red dot weighed in in his side. It produced an avalanche of quotes confirming the existence of an issue most often referred to as ‘peeing in public’. Danylo didn’t need to do anything for the two minutes it took him to read about an array of prohibitions and corresponding fines attempting to stem the flow.

Next, Danylo zoomed in on some of the young people on Mafoluku Road, praising their good looks and impeccable dress style, and how purposeful they all looked. Their faces were of course blurred out, for a minimum of privacy preservation, but their whole body language clearly spoke of the many aims and goals they were about to achieve.

He would have gone in waxing lyrical about beautiful young people, but the black dot cut him short, going: “... yeah, I see. Aims and goals, as in not getting abducted and robbed by the Metro Patrol passing by? Or are those the good guys? Pretty flashy car they’re driving. Not as flashy as that white Mercedes, but pretty good, and brandnew. Nice contrast with the Danfo. Aims and goals? Can we now get serious, Dany boy dear?”

Danylo promptly lost his temper, for the second time in a row. He might not know about whatever a ‘Danfo’ is, but no one calls him ‘boy’. He snapped back:

“Yes, aims and goals. Young people do aims and goals, believe it or not. And living in a street where you get to see both a rusty old VW and a shiny new Mercedes makes you aim harder. Might not work out, or not right away, but you do aim. In many ways big and small. Like me, for example, a humble tour guide. Won’t stop me aiming for respect, as in being called by my name, Dany, or Dany Highfive. Not ‘Dany boy’, please. I’m no shoeshine boy.”

This outburst caused a bit of a commotion that is still ongoing.

The orange dot responded, immediately and chaotically. First, it sent three smileys, only to recall them after a few seconds, to replace them by “Dear Dany, thanks for enlightening us” followed by five smileys. The yellow dot added a flower. The blue dot went thumbs up.

This proved to much positive vibes for the black dot. It countered, now attacking the group:

“Oh come on, you three?! Months of preparation, only to fall for a fairy tale a mere two hours in?! Dany not to be called boy here - fine with me Dany, by the way, no offense intended - he has decided to sell us Lagos as a great place, against contrarian on-screen evidence. That’s his choice, and why not? Fine, he will keep us entertained. But don’t you three fall for it. Code word ‘shithole’, remember? Talking of remembering, Dany, might be a good idea to take note of this one. There might come a point, when, how to put this, [pant icon]...”

Danylo does as told while the green dot weighs in:

“Enough of this topic, it doesn’t belong here. And enough of us chatting. We’re here to learn, not not lecture. Dany, if you please...”

Danylo would have done as told, but the debate isn’t over yet.

Purple dot cuts in, siding with black dot in its own way:

“Lagos as an attractive location, definitely a surprise. We can’t just listen to this, our job is to make sense. So we need to ask: Why is Dany doing this? What’s in for him?...”

Danylo has heard enough, time for him to get back in charge. And he even knows what he’s talking about, courtesy of the Wikipedia pat eh read so often. He goes:

“Thank you so much for the question, glad you asked. Lagos is indeed an attractive location, if you’re prepared to listen to facts, not rumors. Lagos grows by over two hundred fifty thousand inhabitants per year. Doesn’t sound like much? Adds up to a million new Lagosians, every four years. What a Lagos adds in four years counts as a big city pretty much anywhere.

Won’t deny the statistics are fuzzy, demographic estimates vary wildly. Population increases can also have different causes. An adult moving in is more of an endorsement than a baby getting born, and both show up as one up in the charts. But if Lagos wasn’t attractive, it could be expected to lose people, not gain them.”

Danylo is pleasantly surprised not to get interrupted. Encouraged, he goes on:

“Let’s ask ourselves: How does Lagos attract people, what does make it attractive? You’ll probably get as many answers as people move there, but I’d bet many of those answers could be summed up under the header of hope. Hope, a very important ingredient. Lose hope, you’ll stop striving, you’ll be sure not to achieve anything.

Like me, for example, I hope to entertain you. I might bore you, despite all my best efforts, but I hope and strive. Same for people moving to Lagos: They move there to make it, they hope and strive for success. They might still fail. No guarantees. Not everyone will get to ride that white Mercedes. But where there’s so much going on, there’s a chance to make it.

And this leitmotiv of hope, it brings us right back to Sunday, the church going aspect of Sunday. I can’t show you what’s going on in St Paul’s Anglican Church, didn’t find any recordings. But I can show you footage from a different kind of Christian Protestant event.

We have to leave Google StreetView for a couple of minutes, to watch some pretty recent Al Jazeera news footage, but I promise this insight is well worth a detour. The hall you’re going to discover is a so-called mega church, it accommodates up to fifty thousand people. The preacher, Enoch Adeboye, is a star performer. And the crowd, they hope, they are hope. Watch them, how they look, the expressions on their faces, and you’ll get hope. Here we go.”

Danylo hears himself sound very much like a preacher. He’s glad to hand over to the Al Jazeera presenter trying to make sense of the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

No reaction from the dots. They all watch the news footage without commenting. Good sign? Bad sign? Whichever way, Danylo has eight more minutes to fill. Feasible. Al Jazeera is done. Clearing his voice, he switches his screen back to Mafoluku street, and goes:

“Pretty impressive, isn’t it? So many people, so ecstatic. You don’t need to believe in God yourself to get that these people are in effervescence, mentally ready to move the proverbial mountains. They know they’re on the right path, with God at their side.

Always helps, to have might at your side, by the way. For a lucky few people, this friendly might will be an oligarch father, some big man who can and will get them going and smother their path. For most, belief in God is as close as they’ll ever get to knowing someone mighty.

Anyway, back to hope, and why Lagos is attractive, is attracting people.

You can look at Mafoluku Road in two ways. If you're depressed, or keen to talk the location down, you can focus on open sections of gutter, or a little litter here and there, or a wreck of an automobile. If you're hopeful, or keen to talk it up, you can point out the perfect tarmac, the fine wares on display in the stores, the nice school..."

Danylo would have gone on, but the red dot cuts in:

"It's all relative, right? You're teaching us relativity, Dany, right? I really like that concept. Is the Einstein person from Lagos? Was relativity invented there, because of men peeing at walls is both good, for the plants growing next to the wall, and bad, because smell? Like with the apple from the Steve Jobs guy getting attracted by earth?"

Danylo has to swallow hard to hide how irritated he is. Stupid imbecile of a red dot. That's not a halfwit, that's a quarter wit, at best. What is a tour guide supposed to do when a customer blabs nonsense? Carefully leveling his voice, he goes:

"Yes, dear guest, you're right. Albert Einstein came up with the concept of special and general relativity, but please don't count on me to explain it, never been good at physics. I can state it's about space time warps, not about peeing, and that's it. And no, Einstein is no Lagosian. The physicist with the apple, that's Isaac Newton. Not to be confounded with Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, a company making connected electronic gadgets."

Danylo did it. Set things straight without getting rude. Some of the dots appreciate. Orange, yellow and blue send applause. The black dot sends a... Whatever that icon is. A kind of green ball with spikes, also green. Danylo guesses this doesn't count as appreciation.

With just one more minute to fill, he goes:

"Thanks for your feedback. Now, to wrap our Sunday session: Please keep in mind there's not one Lagos story, one Lagos truth to be revealed. There are facts, and I will gladly provide them when and where they are useful. But what these facts mean, how they add up, this part depends on the individual, on his situation, on his intentions, on his fears and hopes. For one and the same Lagos, some people will be desperate to get there, others will be desperate to leave, and yet another group won't care much either way, provided whatever else works out. Thanks for your attention, looking Woodward to seein you again same time tomorrow."

Nine applause icons, one of which is preceded by 'Dear Dany' and followed by a mix of smileys and flowers - the orange dot, of course - signal broad acceptance.

Should be easy for Danylo to ignore the one critical feedback. Especially as it's short and not that negative: "If you say so, expert". The black dot doesn't even add its customary pants icon. No obvious intend to threaten, no outright aggression. But calling Danylo 'expert', that's worse. This dot doesn't trust its tour guide, and it wants him to know it. Sucks.

Danylo resists then urge to go out for one more beer. He needs to prepare the Monday session. And not spending what little cash he has feels like a very good idea, now that he's under attack. If the black dot gets him sacked, he's back to broke. Talking of hope...

If he wants to reach Lekki by the end of the month, as per his original plan, Danylo has to advance in that direction. Strange, how he's not keen, to leave Mafoluku. He's never been there. The section he has been talking about feels all familiar anyway, after spending so much time scrutinizing Google StreetView. If he bumped into the guy with the Großbeeren tracksuit vest, he'd sure recognize him. Or rather the vest. In association with a shaved head, black.

Danylo doesn't usually bump into black guys. They're vanishingly rare, in Kyiv.

He wonders if there are any Nigerians visiting. Turns out there's an embassy, on Vasylkivskyi lane. Its website displays a registration form for Nigerians living in Ukraine, suggesting a presence. This explains why the World Bank accepted his location and bank details.

Danylo would love to bump into a Nigerian. Preferably from Lagos. And gay. And his age.

Fat chance. Bumping into this Nigerian is about as likely as Maksym showing up at the door of auntie Olga's flat, without ever having been told the address.

Danylo imagines the door bell ringing, any second now. It's not late. Early Sunday evening is a perfect time of the week for an impromptu visit.

Auntie Olga would open, and say something rude on seeing Maksym. Any stranger showing up at her door triggers her self defense reflex because he's bound to be after money she doesn't have, to pay bills she never actively signed up for.

Angie Olga would call Maksym an impostor and tell him to piss off. He would raise his voice in response, claiming to be a friend of Danylo, and entitled to visit. Danylo would rush to the door, and die of shame. The concept of Maksym getting one nose full of auntie Olga's cabbage, and a glimpse of her hideous corridor, especially the flowers, plastic, in the mock Roman vase, plastic, on the mock Roman column, plastic, that's unbearable.

It was a wise decision not to tell Maksym his address.

Thinking of auntie Olga's cabbage has Danylo smell it. His stomach is due dinner, and calls for action. The route for tomorrow evening will be planned tomorrow morning after all.

Danylo spends the four next tours, from Monday, November 3, to Thursday, November 7, slowly advancing along Asolo way.

No more experiments, no more excursions into YouTube, no more sociology, he had decided on Monday morning, after a good night's sleep. Sticking to Google StreetView, as required in his contract, and restricting himself to descriptions of what is there for all participants to see, that's the safest and easiest way forward.

Plenty to see, on Asolo Way. The traffic is light, a mix of expensive cars and many yellow tricycles. Seeing this mode of public transport always sends Danylo dreaming. Such mostly open vehicles can only operate year round in a warm climate, would be useless in chilly Kyiv. Some of the stationary traffic is parked under dedicated roofs, showing how much the owners value their wheels, and don't want them to be all hot for the evening commute.

Many nice buildings on Asolo Way. Some well kept properties, mostly commercial, with the banks talking the lead for posh. But the building of the micro and small tax office doesn't look bad, either. A banner declares it recently opened, and it must have been collecting well, to deserve such fine architecture and an array of air conditioning units.

Air conditioning, that's another aspect of Lagos that always sends Danylo dreaming.

He'd love to need air conditioning, instead of looking at soggy wallpaper wrapped in a blanket. It's not even that cold, for early November. But lots of rain and zero sunshine make for an awful ambiance. Impossible not to envy all those happy Lagosians in their summer wear. Flip flops, Danylo would so love to be in a flip flops kind of place.

It's mostly men, on the street, and they're unanimously attractive. Not one old fat ugly in sight. Asolo Way is populated by good looking guys dressed to look even better. Some of them wear US type casual, others the more colorful local variant, but they all select and combine with care. Even the guy in the wheelchair following what might be his lady with their baby looks stylish. Red hat over checkered yellow suit, that's uplifting, catches the eye in a most pleasant way.

Danylo of course chooses his words carefully, when talking about the pretty men on his new favourite street. No need to alert his dots to his sexual orientation. They might be aliens, and perhaps asexual, but will this stop them from catching local bugs? Gender stereotyping and homophobia have a way of going viral. Better not to take risks.

The shops on Asolo Way differ from what they encountered in Mafoluku. Batteries, all sizes, all purposes, do feature a lot, suggesting power storage to be a big local topic. When he noticed the phenomenon, Danylo was clever enough not to speculate right away. He held his tongue, to do more research ahead of the next session.

And sure enough power, as in the mains power going on and off, turned out to be a major Lagos topic. Lots of power lines, often with many improvised extensions, lots of trouble and precarious trouble shooting, lots of batteries and generators. Having held his tongue provided Danylo with material for a whole session dedicated to the very specific Lagos power infrastructure.

The dots liked Danylo's power Thursday session, and did most of the work.

He had barely started talking when the red one weighed in, comprehensively. It waffled for what would amount to at least a two page letter, about power shortages caused by delays in power plant construction. This dot gobbles up whatever it encounters, from whichever source, to regurgitate it without a hint of a thought. Perfect propaganda target. The kind of character called 'one more good soviet citizen' by auntie Olga, no compliment intended.

The purple dot challenged the concept of a nation blessed with abundant petrol suffering power outages. It accused the red dot of spreading fake news. Right in principle, wrong on this particular occasion. The outages are real enough, the causality is just a tad more complex.

The white dot responded to the red-against-purple controversy by musing, extensively, about a world without power lines. According to its vision, everybody would happily generate their own electricity, by wearing clothes and baseball caps made of photovoltaic fabric, with a plug to charge their gadgets on the walk, and a battery seam to store surplus energy.

Reading that one nearly sent Danylo laughing. He couldn't help think of auntie Olga in a high tech version of her beige-on-brown-and-green abstract pattern apron dress sharing surplus power with an apron dress seamstress, or a photovoltaic fabric weaver. Danylo is all in favor of ecology and sustainability. He met cute solar punks at university. But he's a sociologist, a statistics, analytics and structures man. Really hard to reconcile, with their kind of vision.

The black dot was on Danylo's side, for once. It contributed a laughing-until-tears smiley, followed by a series of icons asking the white dot to find itself a nuclear reactor and have a swim in the spent fuel pit, to learn about physics. Not a nice thing to tell a fellow dot.

Danylo still felt inclined to side with his arch enemy. For the laughing-until-tears smiley bit only, of course. Killing a dot would be inhu... No, not inhumane. Inalien? Inspeciel? If this joke gets real, a term will have to be defined. One needs to be able to think certain thoughts, even if they get discarded as totally inappropriate immediately.

Provoked by the mention of nuclear reactors, the red dot struck back with a three page vengeance, proving zero understanding of both the pro and the anti atomic energy propaganda. What it insists on calling its research would make the worst cram school principal blush. Tchernoshima and Fukubyl are on its more accurate side of wrong.

Danylo wasn't done reading the nuke junk when the green dot asked the assembled dotity to shut up tight, for the sale of science, and let the tour guide resume his nice informative lecture.

Very appreciative and motivating remark.

The positive vibes helped Danylo deliver a crisp ten minute summary of his own research on the strengths (few) and weaknesses (many) of the Lagos power grid, with their corresponding

historical roots. But no chance to get in even a brief outlook for the imminent, medium and longterm future, the opportunities (many) and threats (many, too) part.

Danylo felt bad, about the choice between gap and overrun, and admitted as much, before trying to close the session. The green dot wouldn't let him. It asked for the overrun, explicitly and nicely, and all dots sent applause icons to support it.

Danylo did another crip ten minutes, and was rewarded by the promise to give him back his precious time on Friday. Power Thursday, a first big milestone of a success.

On Friday morning, Danylo enthusiastically throws himself into the preparation of the next session. He's getting the knack. He's good at this.

Scrolling up and down Asolo Way, he easily comes up with two options, for today's short session: A look at Faithcity Hospital Limited, augmented by information on Lagos healthcare infrastructure in general. Or a look at the canal between Adewunmi Abudu Street and Aswani Mechanic Village, with a piece on Lagos topography and the corresponding issues.

After only the shortest of considerations, Danylo selects the little waterway as his target. Friday, that's casual dress day, perfect for a little excursion into the inner city wilderness. But first, he has to understand the two street names. Who is Adewunmi Abudu? Why would anyone call a street Aswani Mechanic Village, and what is an Aswani?

Normally, a search engine should solve these kind of queries in seconds. To Danylo's surprise and distress, the tired and tested ways don't deliver. His troubles start the usual way.

Search engines have a naughty habit. They deliver tons of US results, unless a very unlike English language is used. It's especially grating for names.

As the US citizenry are mostly descendants from invaders and the different types of slaves they brought along, pretty much any name will be present in US records. Any search will deliver a long list of athletes, actors and otherwise noteworthy US folks to scroll through, before finally mentioning the one namesake a non-US resident is sharing a location with looking for.

No problem for users residing in what search engines consider relevant countries. They filter by location, and voilà, Adewunmi Abudu the Wyoming University athlete disappears, to leave centre stage to the Adewunmi Abudu and his shop in Cologne.

No such luck for residents of what search engines consider ROW, rest of world. A look at the filter picklist delivers an insult. No Ukraine between Turkey and United Kingdom. No Nigeria between New Zealand and Norway. No equal rights in globalization.

Danylo scrolls and scrolls and reads and scrolls again, without getting any wiser.

Adewunmi Abudu is important enough to have gotten a street named after himself, but his feats have yet to make it into what is supposed to be the repository of all human wisdom. Shocking.

Amazon does offer a hint, a twenty seven pages booklet with the telling title 'Press statement on the 1990 budget of Ogun state of Nigeria'. Publisher: Ogun state of Nigeria (1990). Author: Adewunmi Abudu. Nothing else, no cover page, no preview.

Danylo is by now well enough aware of recent Nigerian history to know the eighties and early nineties were on the messy side of overall messy. This might explain the gap. But he stills feels hopelessly inadequate. He should never have applied for this stupid job. Any proper Lagosian would know about Adewunmi Abudu. He'll be outed any day.

And it's not just the notable eluding him. Same for the Aswani Mechanic Viillage.

A pretty recent Realnews Magazine article features one Osita Aboloma, some kind of federal standards manager, urging car repair professionals to use proper lubricants and brake fluids, to

avoid accidents. Suggests the street name is to be read literally. 'Mechanic' does mean a cluster of metal bashers and wrench wielders, as confirmed by a look at the StreetView. Same literal for 'Village'. No nice smooth tarmac here, the mechanics ply their trade on a dirt track.

The federal standards manager has yet to entice the local professionals to invest into safety garb. Flip flops instead of hard-toed boots, stylish casual instead of boilersuits, amidst an endless jumble of cars in different states of disrepair. They are parked so tightly there's barely any space left for their rolling kin trying to pass through. The faces of the mechanics are blurred, but the way they look at the camera of the Google StreetView car suggests a certain surprise. Perhaps combined with a rough estimate of how well its parts would sell.

So far, so good for the Mechanic Village. But why 'Aswani'? What is an Aswani?

Danylo plunges new depths of despair. One possible explanation is a reference to Aswan, as in Aswan dam, Egypt, on the Nile. Roughly in the vicinity of the Red Sea, by no means close to the Gulf of Guinea. Aswan and Lagos (Nigeria) are on the same continent, like Kyiv and Lagos (Portugal). There's no Lagos Road in Kyiv, why would there be an Aswan Road in Lagos?

Danylo's mind is creative enough to come up with alternative explanations.

Aswani might refer to the people of Aswan in general or one Aswani person in particular. Perhaps some intrepid explorer, a.k.a trader, who made it all across the continent, settled next to this canal and subsequently got called by the name of his native place.

Or Aswani could have a meaning in one of the local languages. Google Translate is less of a snob than Danylo's search engine, it kindly provides Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, some as for Ukrainian. All three Nigerian languages translate 'aswani' as 'these'. No way for him to verify if this is correct. And if it is, to find out what the hell it is supposed to mean. 'These Mechanic Village'?!

Danylo ends up wasting a full day on what should have been a quick and easy check. And he hasn't even started trying to figure out more about the landscape he's actually intending to talk about, the canal crossed at 35 Osolo Way.

The greenery looks cool enough. Very green. Compares very favorably to what Danylo would find if he had any time to venture outside, to get himself rained on and slip on brown leaves. None of those at what now calls the Mechanic Village section of the canal, Mechanic Village canal for short, for lack of knowing its actual name.

Little river, mostly still, the brownish water does look more dirty than deep, boarded by lots of fat, rabidly growing green. Would very much help to know the plants. Is the dominant vegetation some very high kind of grass, or a tropical version of reeds? What's the higher growing stuff with the bigger leaves? One more research confirms banana plants look like this. But so do short stemmed palm trees, a kind of palm bushes. And some giant ferns from Jurassic Park that somehow made it into his search results alongside the science.

Danylo feels lost. No one expects a tour guide to be a botanist, but a couple of names to call local greenery should feature in his vocabulary.

Looking at the bloody canal again, he'd so wish to take a stroll along the footpath, to get away from all the stress. Should be pleasantly sweaty, in 30C heat. Except if there are mosquitoes.

That's it, that's his topic. Searching for Malaria in Lagos, Danylo immediately finds what he's looking for. His guess is confirmed, amply. The article in Outbreak News Today describes Nigeria as a hotbed for Malaria, and Lagos as its epicenter, with a million cases per year.

His plan is suddenly all ready, just in time for a tour to be started in thirty minutes.

He'll start with what he'll call the Mechanic Village canal. He'll talk a little about the greenery leading over to a lot of information on the local climate. He'll explain the dangers associated with still waters as breeding grounds for mosquitoes, and introduce Malaria as one of the diseases

ravaging Lagos. The Malaria cycle alone is worth a good five minutes, the evolution of treatments another five. With a little luck, the red dot will have heard about the Global Fund and weigh in, triggering one more discussion. Good plan.

And on Saturday, they'll go hospital, and learn about health care in Lagos.

Danylo has recovered his pride just in time for his performance. He does well.

On Saturday morning, Danylo gets woken at half past seven, by an excited auntie Olga not yet dressed up for the days. She stands in his room in her faded pink dressing gown, her hair hidden under the darker pink kind of turban she wears at night not to mess it up, talking all excitedly while he's still busy resenting the intrusion. No privacy in this bloody place!

Turns out auntie Olga can claim a good reason for her offense. The upstairs neighbor is at the door, asking if Danylo would be available for one more little job. At short notice, as in right now. Couple of hours of light work, at the dacha. Should be quite pleasant, with today's nice weather. Barely any clouds in the sky, a lovely high of a full thirteen degrees in the making, practically a summer day. For a full one hundred Hryvnia, plus lunch.

A no brainer. Danylo might get himself sacked from his tour guide job at any time, for not knowing Adewunmi Abudu. He's in no position to refuse any job offer, only needs to make sure they'll be back in time for his tour. "No problem" vouches the neighbor, "we'll be back by four at the latest."

Danylo does the sums. The neighbor can't be trusted, but three hours feels like a sufficient safety margin. Danylo quickly makes sure they'll be going by car, and that it's parked nearby, he can't be seen in public in the old garb he's going to wear for a dacha job, dresses up and joins the neighbor, making him once again promise to be back in town by 17:00 at the latest. "International online job", he goes, and the neighbor does him the favor to pretend to look impressed.

The supposedly light work turns out to be one more leaky roof. Danylo first has to remove a great many smallish corrugated sheet sections that must have come from different sources. Someone performed a nice bit of a recycling here, by the look and feel of the screws a long time before such endeavors became environmentally fashionable. Next, the large hut of a dacha gets covered in tarred paper, for insulation. Finally, the corrugated sheet sections go back up.

Thanks to his clever approach, he had taken care to spread the sections on the ground in a replica of their positions on the roof, to recall what goes where, Danylo was done by lunchtime. The neighbor was pleased, handed him two sausage sandwiches, for lunch, and asked him to "chop some wood" to round up the day and deserve his cash.

"Some wood" turned out to mean five recently felled spruces, and they weren't even ready for chopping. Danylo had to remove their branches first, by means of pruning shears, for the small ones, or a saw, for the larger ones. Next, the neighbor used his motor saw to cut up the trunks into logs Danylo only just managed to carry to the chopping block.

By the time the sun went down, Danylo's hands were covered in blisters. His back felt smashed and he was convinced to have broken a toe, courtesy of a log that tried to flee the chop.

A look at his phone confirmed: It was 16:30 already, high time to leave for the city. Unfortunately, the neighbor wouldn't have it. He started to haggle: Them leaving early, with only three of five spruces done, was supposed to mean sixty instead of one hundred Hryvnia.

Danylo argued back, reminding the neighbor of his good job with the roof. This was accepted in principle, but the spruces declared the main act. Danylo had to settle for seventy five, or promise to do the rest a week from now. Under pressure from his aching body, Danylo settled.

They made it back to auntie Olga's flat at 18:30. No time even for a shower. Danylo could only wash his face and hands, have one look at this badly swollen toe and make himself a cup of tea before logging into the portal to perform. Tough life.

Luckily, his dots are once again docile. The active kind of docile.

Danylo has barely introduced them to the Mechanic Village canal when the the black dot goes: “Yummy. Let’s all imagine a nose full of this. Are you going to talk drains, Dany no boy? Pissing you [pants icon] early today? Nice change from all the mains talk, though [thumbs up]”.

Danylo would love to tell the black dot to shove its bad pants joke. He knows he can’t, because he’s service, but he’d love to. Still trying to come up with a retort, he’s pleased to read this comment from the green dot: “Stuff the [pants icon], please, not funny. Go ahead, Dany. This canal looks like an interesting surprise of a landscape. How comes?”.

Danylo swallows hard. One wrong move now, and this victory will turn into a disaster faster than anyone can say ‘dot’. He’s got no clue, concerning the origin of this canal, or any Lagos canals, assuming they’re a recurring feature. He needs to waffle incoherently while trying to find out more on his phone. Multitasking. As if this day hadn’t been hard enough already.

Ignoring the question, Danylo goes: “Yes, an interesting surprise indeed, to suddenly see so much green right in the middle of a dense agglomeration. And this is no artificial green, totally unlike the gardens you will hopefully recall visiting. Let me bring up those images again, for comparison. Look for yourself, how manicured the lawn and trees are. Totally unlike the canal...”

Using his left hand to leaf through the gallery of Jhalobia Recreation Park and Gardens, Danylo works the search engine on his phone with this right one. Fate rewards the brave and hard working, occasionally. There’s tons of material, on the Lagos canals, a prominent feature.

Danylo selects an article from The Sun Nigeria entitled “Lagos canals of woes” and asks the green dot if he may quote from it, to provide the dear guests with an idea of the advantages and disadvantages of this notorious landscape feature. Permission is granted and he spends the better part of the session reading that article aloud, with his screen set to show the comparatively lovely view from the bridge. Really hard to believe, that such a nice place turns into a crime scene at night, with terrifyingly bad guys performing unspeakable rituals.

The three authors Danylo takes care to mention, out of respect and for source transparency, Olakunke Olafioye, Henry Okonkwo and James Ojo Adakole, know how to thrill. He’s in process of reading one very nice piece of infotainment. A perfect mix of the shocking and the good to know, with just the right dose of nudging not to annoy the reader.

When he’s done reading, all dot hell breaks loose.

The white dot is first out of the starting blocks, for once. Obviously excited, it goes:

“Haunted? You did say haunted, Dany Highfive, didn’t you? So it’s true, they do have ghosts, in Lagos? Can we get to meet the Lagos ghosts? Preferably the good fairies, obviously, if there are any? Do any show up on the Google StreetView, or can they only be seen at night, when the cars capturing all these fine pictures don’t roam? What kind of rituals do people perform, to get to see the ghosts? So they grant wishes? Can you turn them against your foes...”

What a mess. If ever the white dot is an alien, its utterings are proof positive that superstition is a phenomenon of not just global but rather galactic proportions. If it’s a bot, it shows the limitations and hazards of letting artificial intelligence gobble up what is out there unsupervised.

Danylo’s feeling turns out to be shared. In such a quick on screen succession they must have done their fast kind of writing simultaneously, the purple, the black and the red dot weigh in:

“This article pretends ritualists are real? Ritualists, as in people harming other people because they believe crap? That’s all prejudice, never has there been one ounce of truth in such rumors. You wouldn’t spread that slander, mister Highfive? This would count against you.”

“Counts against you means time to piss [pamts icon].”

“Rituals are so cool. Very much like the one where the old chap in the white matrimonial dress offers all the world a piece of his wedding cake. And he does it in all kinds of languages, to make sure people understand him, and know they’re invited. Must be one hell of a big cake. Only pity they never show his husband. Must be a cultural thing, a taboo. The piece of cake, that’s my preferred ritual. Second best is the ritual combat with the laser swords. The red, double blade one, that’s so real, with its swooshing sound, really wonder if it’s purely ceremonial. Looks like the real thing to me. Are laser swords used in any of the Lagos rituals, Dany?”

On good days, this is the moment where the green dot saves Danylo.

This Saturday is not a good day. Danylo longs for a break but keeps going, slowly navigating the picture of the canal still filling the screen:

“Thank you so much, dear guests, for this lively discussion. Never would have expected Mechanic Village canal to trigger such strong feelings. Afraid I’m slightly overwhelmed at the moment, can’t answer all your questions at once.

Please allow me to start at the simple end: There are no ghosts. Ghosts, haunted houses, fairies and Jedi knights are figments of the imagination, not real at all. No scientific experiment ever managed to prove the existence of ghosts.

This is of course also true for Gods, or in the case of most religions one God, almighty. No scientific proof of God, and most people still agree he’s for real whereas ghosts aren’t. Bit of a contradiction, and I can understand how differing approaches lead to confusion.