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“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 the equivalent of 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, should anyone feel 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 Lagos 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 his Castro District 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 StreetView 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 stunt. 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 his preferred online dating platform 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, 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 a 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.

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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 a promising stinker.
- Anything worse than a simple rejection, backyard spelling, the occasional mockery, counts as an insulting stinker.

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 nations occasionally and misleadingly referred to as tribes, a multitude of languages, traditions and religions, 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, or yoghurt. 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 sociology 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 vicinity of the ultra poor. One big mess of a diverse place, a treat for the one in a million sociologist lucky enough to get funding for something worth analyzing.

Spending a little time on Lagos research 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 job 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, into taking 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 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.

Invigorated, 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 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, sort of.

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, dresses up into layers of at home clothes, makes himself a thermos of tea and retreats under his heap of blankets to recover.

If auntie Olga hadn't called for dinner at seven sharp, Danylo would probably have slept on. He grudgingly extricates himself from his bed. Skipping a meal is no option, unless he wants to wake up in the middle of the night, physically desperate for food. Having one more plate full of salty cabbage with bland potatoes is a disgusting necessity.

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 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, dressed in tight black long sleeve and jeans. 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 flabby state. He rubs himself with his soaked washcloth instead, vigorously, and drinks a couple of pints from the tab. Thus fortified, he dresses up and slips out of the flat before auntie Olga manages to aggress him with her horrendous ersatz coffee and whichever pancakes his stomach can't accept in its current condition.

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 as 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 beach 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 WebEx 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 get's 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', earths entry in Douglas Adams' famous Hitchikers 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 WebEx. 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 his mom 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 both rich people, or rather their means of transport, and poor people. 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 beach 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 the 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, because they consider repair men lowly folks. 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 steak, when do we start to learn something new?"

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. Danylo 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 rushing 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 and dress codes, 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. Now get off that line, or two hours of an endless loop of Eurovision winner songs 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, when the red dot went all aggressive, and Danylo panicked. He would love to have a second look at that interaction, to hopefully find out what went wrong, and how to do better in the future.

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, as a European, than about his dire financial straits. Red dot didn't sound good.

Searching the portal for recordings, 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, 4 and some more. What the fuck?

Danylo is on the verge of giving up when he suddenly recalls he hadn't been an early applicant. If the teams are numbered according to when the guide signed up, he might need to start from the end of the list.

Not like him, to solve riddles, that's one of the specialities of the maths crowd. Danylo clicks on the team 87 link anyway.

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 it, or failed to listen at all, 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 subtones of whimpering and whining. But he's still painful to listen to, very much unlike the cosmopolitan and worldwise 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 the 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 anything new?"

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 than half red dots 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. 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 or 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 veer 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 veg for sale at the stands, displaying such lush greens, yellows and reds. Totally unlike potatoes, grey, with cabbage, also grey. 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 for hours. He quickly plugs it in, hoping for the best. He can't afford to lose this device now.

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 too 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 structure in sight except for a hospital. No minarets.

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 for 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 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...”

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 another high point. Danylo is once again waxing lyrical about lovely fruits and greens 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 whole 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. Makes sense to defend your home. 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 his 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 everyone 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, perhaps even 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 per day 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 house of worship 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.

The guy with the head shaved bald, standing with his back to the camera, he 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 go. 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. He'll make the dots 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 on 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 no 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, united against alien ignorance.

While he was still enjoying to have spoken so strongly, the red dot weighed in on 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 the red dot 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 on 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 read enough, time for him to get back in charge. And he even knows what he’s talking about, courtesy of the Wikipedia entry he has 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 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. 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 up 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 partly 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 forward to see 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 intent 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 the 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.

Auntie 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.

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Danylo spends the next four 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 taking 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 volts.

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 thereafter.

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 sake 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 crisp 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 tried and tested way doesn'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 most US citizens are descendants of invaders, or the slaves these invaders brought in, 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 and 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 most messy side of overall messy. This might explain the gap. But he still feels hopelessly inadequate. He should never have applied for this stupid job. Any proper Lagosian would know about Adewunmi Abudu. He's on the verge of getting outed as a fake.

And it's not just the notable eluding Danylo. Same for the Aswani Mechanic Village.

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 along 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, and 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 intending to talk about, the canal crossed at 35 Osolo Way.

The greenery looks cool enough. Very green. Compares extremely 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 he 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 greenery. 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 vegetation 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 a short look at the hard working folks in the Mechanic Village, and a little lecture on the complex logistics of fixing vehicles. Cars, that's a marvelously global subject. How to source parts, preferably cheap used ones, that's an issue all over the world, nice safe topic.

Next, he'll move on to what he'll call the Mechanic Village canal. He'll talk a little about the sights and a lot about the 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, without getting to the canal. The car topic is worth a full forty five minutes all by itself, thanks to ample discussion. Which means he doesn't need to worry for a plan for the next day. Life is great!

###

On Saturday morning, Danylo gets woken at half past seven, by an excited auntie Olga not yet dressed up for the day. 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, 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. He 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 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 your [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 to not 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? Do 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 truly 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 kind of slander, mister Highfive? This would count against you.”

“Counts against you means time to piss [pants icon], Dany no boy.”

“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. His back is aching worse than ever. He needs ice for his toe. He slowly does a 360 degree of the picture of the canal while going:

“Thank you so much, dear guests, for this lively discussion. Never would I 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 or canals, fairies and Jedi knights, with or without laser swords, are figments of the imagination. We come up with this kind of stuff for entertainment purposes. It's not real, no physics, no science.

No physics, no science is of course also true for Gods, or in the case of most religions one God, defined as almighty. No physics, no science, but most people still proceed with their lives on the assumption that God is real, unlike ghosts. A contradiction, can understand it leads to confusion, but that's the way things are. We don't always make sense.

Talking of God and religions, the Catholic variant of Christians have what is called a pope, the boss of their church hierarchy, supposed to be in direct contact with God. Very important personality. For the sake of interfaith harmony, he's best not referred to as an 'old chap'. I think you're referring to his Easter blessing, a ritual indeed, well identified, congrats. But he's not getting married. Catholic priests don't do weddings, not on each other, it's a must not have for them. And Easter isn't about piece, as in piece of cake. It's about peace, as in war and peace.

With irregular superstitions and regular beliefs hopefully all sorted out, I'd suggest we go back to the more down to earth aspects of the canal, as mentioned in the article.

At the moment, or rather at the time when the Google StreetView picture was taken, we see mostly green, abundant tropical vegetation bordering a minuscule river, or rivulet. The article informs us that this picture can and does change, drastically. When the weather gets seriously wet, the water is going to pile up, with nowhere to go, and you get floods.

Let me show you a table of Lagos weather patterns, including precipitation, to give you an idea...”

Danylo keeps going, laboriously forcing his brain and mouth to go through the moves, despite his exhaustion. He's going to do this job, until he gets fired. He's promptly rewarded by a thumbs up from the green dot. At the end of his wet weather lecture, also the end of today's mercifully short session, he gets three applause icons, two smileys and no sack. What a day.

Danylo had to limp to the student club after this ordeal. The neighbor had handed him the seventy five straight and he's in a fuck-savings-and-good-intentions kind of mood.

The place was packed, mostly with young looking students he had never seen.

Having fetched his beer, Danylo apologized to a group of three. He claimed recent injury, to be allowed to squeeze in on his favorite sofa. The two novices at the far end didn't bother to look up and barely moved. The youngster with the curly hair at Danylo's end of the sofa enthusiastically made space for him, and started chatting right away.

Danylo had guessed right. Morph was new in town, and very excited to be a student.

The kid babbled nonstop. First for introductions, about his unusual name.

His mom apparently had watched Matrix right ahead of his birth, and was so impressed by his darkish complexion she called him Morpheus. This was subsequently shortened to Morph by a local administration not keen on exotic names, whatever the parentage of the child.

Right now, ten minutes in, Morph is still not done being proud of the looks he inherited from an Angolan father he never met. Danylo listens quietly, out of both politeness and fatigue.

Morph doesn't sound like he's going to appreciate a feedback telling him he doesn't look African, not to a man who has spent the last week looking at Lagos street life. His skin might be slightly darker and his hair a bit more curly than the Ukrainian average, but that's it.

The kid is rather good looking, though, and probably trying to flirt, in the gauche way of an early stage beginner. On a better day, Danylo would have noticed all of this at once. Today, the last thing his broken body needs is more action, never mind exertion.

First term students, such babies. No idea of the world as it really is. Full of illusions and unfulfillable hopes. Danylo's response to Morph's now more targeted advances keeps flipping from arrogance to envy and back. He's no longer at home in the student club, longs for mature company with whom to share his deep insights. Like Maksym.

After one mere beer, Danylo claims acute deterioration of his toe condition and flees, to Morph's very visible and vocal distress. What a cry baby!

Outside, Danylo discovers he hasn't even been pretending. Impossible to walk more than three steps in one stretch. He tries to apply his weight only to the heel. No good. As soon as his injured foot touches the ground, he endures agony.

Trying to jump forward on one leg is even worse, the shock of landing hard drives tears into his eyes. Danylo has to remove his left shoe, or he's never going to make it to auntie Olga's. Terrified to be seen in this undignified state, he hobbles home as fast as the throbbing toe allows.

Auntie Olga hears him coming, intercepts him in the corridor and demands to see his foot. She can be very stubborn, won't take no for an answer. He has to submit to the inspection.

Having looked at his blackening toe from all angles, she declares it “just bruised, not broken” and insists on applying a thick layer of a foul smelling black paste wrapped into layers of toilet paper held in place by a black sock, to avoid staining the bedsheets.

Danylo hurts too bad for resistance. He's also rather grateful for the attention, especially for the cheap brandy auntie Olga adds to the cup of tea she serves him, "for painkill".

When he wakes up on Sunday morning, his toe has stopped throbbing. But his hands are so blistered and sore he barely manages to shave. Over breakfast, he wonders if he should try the black paste trick on them, too. Auntie Olga forbids, "never on broken skin, stupid." But she cuts bits of plaster to size, to cover his open blisters, a very nice gesture.

Having had a close look at his hands, auntie Olga inquires about the type of job he was made to perform, and how much the neighbor paid. On hearing details she storms right out and up the stairs, at surprising speed. Once she reaches the targeted landing, she pushes the doorbell. And not just once. She must keep pushing it, because the hum corresponding to what is a very loud ring on the other side persists, until the neighbor opens the door to let her in.

No witnesses to what happens next and takes a while. When auntie Olga emerges, the goodbyes are so cheerful Danylo, who had been trying to listen in from behind the open flat door guesses auntie Olga must have sided with the neighbor, once again. Oldies, no heart for the young. Frustrated, he retreats back to the kitchen table, ready to put a sour mood on display.

Expect there turns out to be no need to go angry youth on auntie Olga. Once she's back down, her face all red from what must have been a lively debate, she hands him another seventy five Hryvnia, going: "Didn't they teach you anything at that university of yours? Next time you work for this bastard of a sweater, remind me to tell you about the going rates, not to get yourself cheated again. And you're entitled to safety gear, helmet, gloves, boots, the lot. He's always borrowing equipment from where he works, no problem for him to bring that as well."

It's humiliating, to be aided by a limping wreck of a senior, but Danylo is grateful anyway. He makes a mental note to buy a little something for auntie Olga.

###

With his body so sore, spending the Sunday on preparing for tonight's tour is no problem. Handling a mouse is about all Danylo can do without experiencing pangs of pain. He's determined to do the Malaria topic. It's interesting, it's very Lagos, there's plenty of online material, the dots need to learn about this. He'll remind them how they talked wet weather yesterday, and then they get their forty five minutes of Malaria.

Danylo will start the tour at the Mechanic Village canal and zoom in on the very still water. From there, he'll jump to a Malaria prevention poster. Next, they'll go YouTube, to watch ten minutes of very nicely educational material explaining the complex lifecycles of the parasite in the human and the mosquito host. Finally, they'll go back to Google StreetView to visit the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research at 357 Edmund Crescent in Yaba. It's a bit of a sudden jump from Osolo street, but the direction is right. Danylo needs to make progress, otherwise his plan to reach the Elegushi Royal Beach by November 30 at the latest might go bin.

The Nigerian Institute of Medical Research is a nice green campus, with plenty of lovely palm trees and well kept lawns between modern buildings. According to its website, the inside is even more impressive, featuring state of the art labs with lots of high tech equipment operated by a crowd of professionals distributed across a multitude of departments.

That's a Lagos his dots will love to see. Danylo looks forward to a tour that can't go wrong.

And it doesn't go wrong. The dots gobble it up. No altercation, not one problem. Not even with the sluggish response of the NIMR website. Danylo goes all fidgety because he has to fill gap after gap with his semi-informed waffling while the site takes its time loading, but the dots can't get enough of the institute. Every corner of the website gets inspected, down to the price list for the parasitic identification of stool samples, one thousand naira a pop.

Danylo ends the session back on Google Maps with a zoom out, to show the dots how they would get from Osolo Way to Edmund Crescent, a seven kilometer trip. It's an easy trajectory:

Osolo Way southwards, left onto Mushin Road that turns into Isolo Road, two kilometers on the A5, Empire Road, Murtala Muhammad Way, there you are, Edmund Crescent.

It's 19:47 and Danylo is already well into his end-of-session greetings when he gets a question from the purple dot: "The directions, why are they in different colors? Is this about the state of the road, with or without tarmac, with or without potholes?"

Danylo only just manages not to say "rats" aloud. He should have switched off the bloody traffic forecast function, not to trigger this type of inquiry. Now he's all set for one more humiliation, or even the sack, if the next step goes seriously wrong. And it's all his own bloody fault. The only thing he can do now, and it's just mitigation, not a solution, is to defer.

Aloud, he goes: "Excellent question, thank you! Unfortunately, time is too advanced to properly answer this today. Let's start with looking at that same trajectory tomorrow, shall we, and I'll gladly provide some context. Thank you once again for your kind attention..."

The usual round of applause icons suggests Danylo is safe for now. But the purple dot won't forget this topic, and it's not into taking bullshit for an answer. Danylo has his work cut out.

He quickly fetches himself some boiled potatoes with a little salt, pepper and margarine, to eat in his room, over a main dish of Lagos traffic research.

Less than a minute in, Danylo knows it was wise to get himself informed before blabbing.

Traffic tends to be a hot topic in any city. There are never enough roads. However many get built, they will be clogged during rush hour, to the distress of the poor motorists. Commuters mostly can't decide when to show up for work and when to leave. They don't get that much say in where they live and where they work. They're stuck in a herd they didn't choose to join.

Bad rush hour traffic is a global phenomenon, but Lagos is right up there, competing for a top slot in the world gridlock league. By the sound of some of the news Danylo reviews, it's catching up fast with more established rivals like Paris, LA and Rio. There's even a local term, the go-slow. Unfortunately, the statistics don't seem to be publicly available. No tables to quote from.

Danylo goes to bed with a heavy heart, knowing he's about to waste a full six to five Monday watching Lagos congestion patterns in real time, to provide himself with something to talk about when he meets his dots again. If only he could skip that bloody job.

On Monday, November 11, Danylo goes Lagos very first thing in the morning, before even having a pee. 27 C, without thunderstorms, for once, and a lot of red on the traffic map. Those go-slows are no rumor, they show up in real time. Getting on, off and across the islands looks like a particularly unpleasant exercise, traffic on some stretches moves at pedestrian speed. Less red on the mainland, but it does feature its share of red hot congestion spots.

Looking at the trajectory from Osolo Way to Edmund Crescent, Danylo discovers a go-slow captured by Google StreetView on Isolo Road. There's also a feature hinting at recurring congestion issues: Instead of a continuous middle line separating what is probably supposed to be two lanes in each direction, there's a wall. Such robust rule enforcement suggests motorists won't reliably resist the temptation to sneak ahead on the opposite lane. They only get that creative when seriously stuck and desperate to get ahead.

Hour by hour, Danylo feels his expertise grow. Watching the traffic intensity shift, he tries to imagine what it would be like, to be stuck in a red spot.

Probably quite nice, to spend a bit more time in that white Mercedes. The vehicle is sure to feature air conditioning and more of a sound system than he'll ever call his own, and might well be chauffeur driven. No problem, to spend one hour more or less under such comfortable circumstances. Whereas the same hour can get long, if you're squeezed four to a sticky plastic Volkswagen bench in a humid 30 C. Your companions might be sweaty, and wear no or too much aftershave. Wafts of exhaust fumes will flow in through the open door and windows.

Danylo feels kinship, with the folks riding the Volkswagens to work. He wonders what their jobs look like. Formally, he's entitled to work in an office, because diploma. In practice, he only knows this kind of occupation from TV. The closest he got to getting paid for paperwork was two weeks of helping the university library move to an interim building, and a stunt that involved printing leaflets before distributing them at a trade fair. Everything else was manual work requiring no special qualifications, with catering as both the high and low point.

As he needs to keep watching the traffic at regular intervals throughout the day, to determine the ebbs and flows he will describe in his session with the dots, Danylo has time for a look at Lagos job adverts. First impression: Even less opportunities than in Kyiv.

Being a fresh graduate seems no easier there than here. Shocking. Whoever invented all those 'get ahead through education, do better than your forebears' slogans failed to inform the job market. Danylo's fellows in suffering are piling degrees upon degrees, keep polishing their CVs as if they were Harley chrome, and still end up stuck in dead end gigs and low skill hustles.

The afternoon traffic is thickening, time to entertain his dots.

They lap it up like kids raiding the candy store. Impossible for Danylo to stick to plan. As soon as the dots have overcome their initial disbelief, quote purple dot "They wouldn't have real time traffic information, would they?" Danylo ends up in the classic dumb click job: Whichever dot gets in first clamors for a StreetView of a particular red section of road, he pulls it up.

The dots would be perfectly able to do this all by themselves, but they prefer the guided version.

"No, not this one, Dany, lower, still lower, that's it. What's it called, can you zoom in? Apapa Oworonshoki? What a name, four os, like rolling wheels, except they don't, don't they, because dark red means standstill, right? And now the StreetView, Dany, please. Oh look how it's all empty, picture must have been taken on Churchday. Can they take pictures on Churchday, does it count like fixing power lines, or would it be prohibited..."

"Talking of bullshit, Dany no boy, if zooming in on the soft underbelly of Lagos Badagry shows people praying on a carpet, wouldn't that signal green means Islam, not light traffic?"

"Talking of doubts, they really fill all these roads? To the point of clogging them? There must be another way. Or is there some hidden fun we're failing to grasp? Can we have another look at the still traffic on Isolo Road again, for better understanding?"

Red, black and purple, always ready to weigh in. Danylo is no longer terrified by their interventions. On his more confident moments, he even comes close to enjoying the action.

Orange is nicer to have than the three troublemakers, it's always content, throwing smileys at him for three times nothing and back. But the others are more fun.

Red because, honestly, how can anyone make such a mess of what must have been a heap of mostly sound information? Danylo can't laugh out loud, but suppressing the reflex is nearly as good. Red is a perfect idiot, the kind of guy that allows you to feel intellectually superior.

And Purple must have started as the one baby dot not taking a chocolate from a stranger. Always suspecting all kinds of mischief, never trusting no one, except peddlers of conspiracy theories, of course, the more abstruse, the better. A natural Trump voter, ick.

Whereas Black, well, if it was a person, male, good looking and gay, Danylo would be tempted. The way it goes sarcasm when Red is talking rubbish, that's so attractive.

The Monday session flies by in a series of dot requests. Danylo is the finger manipulating the screen, and the service voice going "Thanks for your request, dear guest. Here we go, let's have a look...". Quite a relaxing activity. If it wasn't for some residual suspense, because with dots, one never can be sure to be safe, this wouldn't qualify as work. Not hard enough.

And they're not done, insist on doing more traffic hotspots over the next days. Pretty fond of broad roads and junctions, the visitors. Danylo would prefer less concrete and tarmac, he's a big fan of green Lagos green, especially palm trees, but the guests rule. And the more they discuss among themselves, the lesser his risk.

He's extremely aware of his vulnerability. The longer he virtually visits Lagos, the stronger his feeling of incompetence. He doesn't know dick, about this place. This whole project can go terribly wrong, any second. He's forever wondering what is worse, to lose his face or half a month of minimum wage. Danylo has always been proud, but 2.100 Hryvnia is a packet.

On Thursday November 14, they once again look at Agege Motor Road. It has turned dark red, again, and the purple dot won't believe people come back for more, after having had four days of go slow in this section. Danylo dutifully zooms in on the mess of cars, vendors, shoppers and pedestrians once again, expecting one more congestion discussion when the white dot goes: "Amazing how people never get hurt. Good believing, good guardian angels..."

While the dot goes esotericism, Danylo checks road fatalities on his phone. He's not surprised to find dreadful numbers. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria sits on slot 191 of 192 countries with 162 deaths per 100.000 people, adding up to a total of 5.000 per year. And that's just the dead. Another 30.000 people sustain injuries serious enough to get recorded.

By the time the white dot should be done reading its first rebuke, from the black dot going "What kind of patron saint do I need to get involved, to make you shut up?" Danylo is ready to lecture.

He delivers the traffic fatalities numbers, and his source first. Next, he engages in his new speciality, a well balanced assessment of the facts:

"So that's the numbers for Nigeria. But we're not looking at the whole of Nigeria, we only want to know about the situation in Lagos. We need to wonder if the national average applies, or if there are deviations. To do this, we need to look at potentially relevant variables.

The traffic is sure to be more dense in a metropolitan area, with people on foot right amidst massive cars. They're sure to be more at risk than a villager on a path that sees less cars in one day than pass this spot in one minute, assuming the traffic flows. Suggests an increase in risk.

On the other hand, city people are better educated. They also learn how to navigate traffic from an early age. And they are richer, on average, implying better vehicles. And it's easier to maintain a vehicle in a city, with professionals and parts at hand. All these factors suggest less risk.

With so many variables at play, tugging in different directions, they might even cancel each other out, for Lagos to end up with exactly the same level of traffic accident risk as Nigeria overall. Exciting possibilities. Lots of fine research could be done, if budget there was."

As usually, the black dot counters: "Well done, Dany no boy. Very nice way to say you've got no more clue than we do. Next topic, please. And don't forget to piss [pant icon]."

Unashamed, Danylo strikes back: "Thanks a lot for your suggestion, dear guest. I was actually hoping for a chance to get you interested in another topic, the health system. We're just around the corner from Lagos University Teaching Hospital. How about leaving the go slow crowd to find out where victims of a traffic accident may get treated?"

Applause from the black dot, that's a nice surprise. The yellow, beige and grey dot must also have been waiting for a change of program, they send applause and flowers. Danylo doesn't need more encouragement, he quickly jumps to the impressive main gate of Lagos University Teaching Hospital on Ishaga Road. Scrolling along the perimeter fence, he has the dots discover the area.

After a short roll along Ishaga Road and a right turn into the smaller Fagbenro Street, Danylo and his group encounter another gate.

He mentions how cars have to roll through a big puddle of a rain filled pothole to enter the College of Medicine, and how this puts pedestrians at risk of getting splashed.

Not able to enter, because the StreetView car didn't, Danylo and his dots roll on to turn right again, into Ojetinde Street. It's yet smaller, and greener, and busy, bustling with mopeds and people going about their businesses. There's still a wall to the right, but it looks different, and sure enough, the next entrance doesn't lead to a medical facility. A high rusty gate carries the menacing mention 'Correctional Centre for Girls'. And then Ojerinde Street gets residential.

Danylo explains he'll keep rolling anyway, aiming for a full tour of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, as close as possible to its perimeter. Ojerinde gets followed by Awoniyi Street, one more busy place bustling with industrious people. Lots of shops, small and big, from simple roadside stacks of bottled water shielded by an umbrella to specialized outfits.

Where Awoniyi turns into Apesin Street, a pharmacy and a coffin maker symbolize both the promises and the limits of modern health care, right next to the back entrance of the medical facility Danylo and his dots are circling.

To stay as close to the hospital premises as possible, Danylo jumps into very narrow Akintola Street. Cars barely manage to squeeze through, but this won't stop enterprising Lagos residents from practicing a roadside trade. Everybody seems into selling at least food and drinks.

One more jump and they land in a different universe. Road 1, inside the medical facility, is perfectly kept. Multistorey residential buildings, probably for staff, a school of nursing, posh cars, posh people, lots of big leafy trees, a pleasant place.

Danylo pretends to ignore a group of people in uniforms more suggestive of police or security staff than nursing at the street corner. He scrolls along Road 1 fast and ends up right next to what must be the main building in the campus, complete with a perfectly kept front lawn. This is obviously the center of a prestigious institution.

As navigation is limited inside, Danylo takes his dots back out, onto residential Akintulu and Owokoniran Street. Solid modern housing, few shops and stalls, the residents must have found a more lucrative way to make a living. The one shop on number 40 is upmarket. A nicely displayed assortment of foodstuffs, including neatly stacked eggs. Colorful drinks, sweets and treats, phone recharge cards. Even the chair for the shopkeeper is posh, no monobloc.

Danylo takes his dots along Akobi Crescent onto Ofundunmi Street, to jump on to Lawani Street. This leads them back onto Ishaga Road. He has been jumping to and fro between the StreetView and the map, and is starting to feel the strain. Much tougher than checking out go slow spots one at a time, without trying to drive somewhere particular.

Danylo had to explain about dead ends as one of the challenges of driving in a dense city, about the evolution of neighborhoods and about the challenges of infrastructure maintenance. It went surprisingly well, overall, because none of these aspects is Lagos specific. They had featured at depth in one of his favourite lectures, 'Human settlements, a sociograph?'. Some sociology can come in handy, for a tour guide with a patient audience.

No questions so far from Danylo's dots. No signs of discontent, either. They must be too busy watching and listening to come up with anything.

Small wonder. Far more people in far more diverse action in sight. The city landscape along the major thoroughfares they visited this week is more picturesque and colorful than similar areas in Kyiv, because outdoor-friendly climate, but it's still mostly people on the move, cars and concrete.

Around Lagos Teaching University Hospital and on its premises, a less transient way of life is on display. Kids go to school, housewives hang up their washing, nurses chat on the way to the canteen, a husband picks up his wife to drive her home on a moped.

While entertaining his dots with cityscape waffle, Danylo couldn't help noticing how the people, for example on Owokoniran street, looked at the camera. Their faces are blurred, but their posture signals a mixture of surprise tinged with irritation. They might well be thinking something on the lines of 'What's this weird looking car supposed to be doing here? I didn't ask for this device to roll through my street like it was a movie set, hey?'

He makes a mental note to come back later for a second look, and to find out more about 'Schalom Kliffon Secondary School' on Akintulu Street. Nice building, two storeys, facade and wall freshly painted in blueish and greenish shades of grey, suggests valuable and well structured education will be dispensed inside. Bit of a contrast with the locked metal cages lining the opposite wall. Each sports a household type power cable running across the wall, suggesting generators. Power supply, definitely an issue in Lagos.

Danylo only makes a mental note to revisit Akintulu Street. Never would he point out features he's not sure to understand to his dots. They have a way of coming up with tricky questions, or mindbogglingly weird associations, that can send a poor impromptu guide tumbling.

The daily forty five minutes have gone by in a fly, with so much to look at. Holding his breath, Danylo calls end of session, suddenly anxious. His dots have been unusually quiet today. What if they hate the new format? What if their silence means they have been coordinating offline, to get him sacked? He feels like shit for a very long second.

Turns out Danylo shouldn't have worried. "Thank you very much, Dany, for this very informative session," goes the green dot. "Can we please do more of this visiting of where people live and work? And perhaps come back to the streets we saw today, for a longer look? This would be very welcome. But we of course trust you to know best. Looking forward to tomorrow!".

This big accolade of a positive feedback is followed by a round of applause. Wow.

Empowered by his success, Danylo skips dinner to dive right back into Akintulu Street. He had planned to have a second look anyway, might as well share it with the dots tomorrow.

###

There is a Schalom Kliffon Secondary School on Facebook and it has a website, but the address is wrong. Riola Avenue turns out to be located at the far eastern end of Lagos, next stop Ogun state. It's a dirt track, but a pile of gravel suggests road building ambitions and the nice houses standing much farther apart than downtown suggest a good area to raise kids.

Danylo manages to locate two primary schools, both nice well kept buildings, confirming his guess of a residential area for aspiring young families able to afford both a house and a substantial daily commute. No sign of Schalom Kliffon Secondary, though. Perhaps one more typo? The website suggests Riola Avenue to go off one Camp Davis Road that turns out to be Captain Davies Street. Truth on the internet, so forever presumed and yet so rare.

Danylo wonders if he can risk reenacting this same research with his dots. No problem if they ask why he doesn't know the area. No resident of any major agglomeration is familiar with more than a couple of his own notorious spots, unless he's a taxi driver. He could go "Never been there, sorry." and wouldn't even be lying. But what if they ask about where in Lagos he used to hang out? To think about this big fucking showstopper sends him sweating.

No way to find out more about this bloody secondary school. It had him waste an hour on what turns out to be no plan for the next day. Not feeling shalom at all, Danylo decides to give in to his stomach and heat some of auntie Olga's cabbage for a late dinner.

Having opted for curry as spice of the day, his currently preferred gourmet approach to a dish he has sworn himself never to touch again if ever he gets rich, Danylo once again ponders his options. He has been at this for two weeks, without major glitches. There are one or two daily moments of panic, when he sees something a local would be sure to be able to explain without

hesitation while setting him wondering, about Lagos mores. Feels horrible. The terror of today's close encounter is still haunting his core, but they didn't ask, once again.

Two weeks already, and he's as clueless as ever, about his dots.

They're easy to tell apart, very different characters. If ever Black ended up moving in with White, or Red, they'd be at each other's throats breakfast to bedtime. Very pronounced personalities, and pretty consistent. Orange never seems to have a grump day. Makes it a very odd dot indeed, quite grating in its constant cheerfulness. Whereas Red never encountered a piece of information, a term or a picture it failed to get wrong. As stupid as a doormat, not one clear thought inside, but deeply convinced of its own wisdom, and sharing it mercilessly.

Danylo once again catches himself wondering if the dots do gender, and reprimands himself for his sexist associations. In a sitcom, Orange, Red and White would be girls, pretty but hollow, whereas Green and Black would be guys, occasionally rough but clearly superior.

Reproducing gender stereotypes isn't his fault, after twenty five years of TV consumption. Danylo knows the system is to blame. But he has to work, to become more aware of the impulse, and he has to fight it. Unthinking sexism doesn't look good, on a gay intellectual. Much better to consider and verbalize, with just the right tinge of regret. Also shuts up the feminists you occasionally can't avoid meeting, in the age of Pussy Riot adulation.

Danylo is well acquainted with his dots by now. But what are they?

Their consistency suggests the bot hypothesis is still in the race, and going strong. There's a clear pattern, and IT guys like patterns. Not hard to imagine some juvenile nerd programming into dot bots what he hates in girls who are never going to date him.

Dot bots is a possibility, but hell, if they are software, they're the high end kind of sophisticated. The bots don't just write, they react to the pictures on the screen, in real time.

Danylo isn't familiar with the world of image recognition, only vaguely aware of progress, but Lagos street scenes are highly complex. If anything could digest such complexity in real time, driverless cars should be all over the place. A juvenile nerd with access to the kind of resources big multinational companies throw at autonomous vehicle development, without that much to show for all their efforts up to now, that's not plausible.

But real people operating the bots feels even more far fetched. People in India are rumored to do pretty much anything online, in perfect English, at the fraction of the cost of OECD based operators. But ten of them showing up for 45 minutes, day in, day out, over a month, for each of the 87 tours, that adds up to a crowd of 870 diligent online professionals. Too costly, logistics a nightmare, and they would need to be real good actors, to play their dots so consistently. Who the hell would go to such lengths, and for what? A billionaire with a twisted mind? Honestly?

And the dots type too fast. Not even the most nimble Indian fingers can achieve this speed.

Leaves the alien hypothesis. Danylo would love to be able to discard it, but that's still as hard as before his first tour. Aliens with access to all online information on earth, they could have learned English, it's all over the place. Archeologists have managed to decipher hieroglyphs, without even the help of artificial intelligence. Much easier to perform the same feat on a bigger dataset, even for the kind of very different folks aliens are supposed to be.

Having learned English, those same aliens would have made sense of what is going on, on the planet. Also possible they identified Lagos as a place of interest. It's big, it's diverse, it's young, it's brimming with schools and universities. It's packed with churches, too, suggesting the rationale impulse associated with all that learning only carries so far, but aliens might struggle with the concept of religion. Danylo's dots certainly do. They know all the words, but even auntie would balk at their way to use them. Stronger believers would shout blasphemy.

Danylo is no more prepared to accept the dots as aliens than on his first day. And not just because of their lack of an invasive mentality. Even Black, as threatening as dots get with its recurring pissed pants joke, doesn't feel the right kind of dangerous. Danylo is scared to lose his job, because impostor, not his planet.

Any alien civilization advanced enough to be able to just drop by to hire tour guides for a better virtual look at Lagos would never opt to depict itself as mere dots. Why belittle themselves, instead of showing up as purple spiders, big fanged star worms, nearly translucent light beings or whatever more truly alien other physical form? Going for dots is no way to impress the natives, and technologically mighty aliens are bound to be galaxy-wise enough to know as much.

Unless they want to avoid impressing the natives, of course.

The longer Danylo works for the dots, the more often he goes back to the possibility that they might be aliens after all. This fixation on Lagos, that's a clue he struggles to ignore.

Why would anyone be so keen on it? The Lagos palm trees are pretty, sure, but this kind of flora looks even better as background to a white beach bordering a blue sea. Many stronger competitors, for the most paradisiac palm resort. Next to some Indian Ocean islands Danylo discovered by means of an inspiring calendar, Lagos is a tropical also-ran.

Same for the skyline. It's impressive, in bright daylight and even more so at night. Lagos does feature the kind of skyscrapers and monumental bridges one expects of a seaside mega city. But compared to the architectural caprices gracing the old wealthopolises of Western Europe and their up and coming rivals in the US and Asia, Lagos falls short.

Population is a more impressive factor. But even assuming the highest estimate, greater Lagos would still be smaller than Tokyo, Delhi and Shanghai. It's big, yes, but it only gets outstanding once its youth and expected future growth is factored in. Who on earth would do that?

Done with his cabbage, Danylo makes himself a big pot of herbal tea, to dilute the aftertaste of an excess of curry. According to the package, his beverage should taste of mint, but it's too cheap to live up to the promise, only achieves to look slightly green and smell hot.

Back in his room, Danylo decides to have one more look at the tour guide video, for Friday night entertainment. He has been revisiting it every other day, hoping for clues that would finally help him solve the aliens-or-bots riddle. So far, he achieved the opposite. The more often he listens to him, the more enigmatic the black banker gets.

He's so seriously talking aliens. With the money he promised having arrived ahead of time, and the ten dots showing up day in, day out at 19:45 sharp, as per their schedule, it's getting harder and harder for Danylo to consider the black banker a prankster. This guy is much less of a clown than POTUA Zelensky, never mind POTUS Trump. Both TV stars turned politicians come across as a bit of a parody, totally unlike the chief alien tour manager at the World Bank.

The black banker is so sincerely willing to go the extra mile, to make this whole unsettling endeavor easier for the frontline operators. How he urges Danylo and his colleagues to think teenage prankster, to avoid getting traumatized by their role in humanity's first first contact situation, that's awfully kind. A charming contrast to his outfit, a type of suit more suggestive of a cold hearted bottom line first, second, third and counting approach to fellow humans.

This is one nice guy, and Danylo would be willing to share a beer with him. Preferably on his tap, because that suit alone is worth more money than he expects to have to his name for the foreseeable future. But he would be willing to sit down with him, thereby subscribing to the notion of a banker worth making friends with. Pretty off scale concept. Not much additional boggle needed, to mentally go acceptance of a dot-shaped alien presence.

Danylo suddenly craves a beer, and human company. In the flesh normality, loud and drunk, as befits a Friday night. This would get his mind off creepy aliens. But he can't afford a break, not yet, he first needs a plan for Saturday. He has a promise to keep.

Serving himself another cup of lukewarm greenish water, Danylo forces his eyes back to Akintulu Street and his brain to come up with a plan.

It definitely says 'Hurry now and register' and 'Shalom Kliffon Secondary School - Gouvernement/ WAEC & NECO approved' on the wall. Danylo decides he's entitled to declare this a school, even in the absence of a website or Facebook page with a matching address.

WAEC turns out to mean 'West African Examination Council', NECO stands for the 'National Examination Council'. Both institutions have a proper online presence, something to quote from. Should be good for at least ten minutes each.

Danylo is well aware of the risk associated with talking education. Health care is easy. No one expects a young man to be familiar with details, unless he's doing medical studies. Fine for a tour guide to claim lack of knowledge around hospitals, clinics and the like. Education is different. To qualify as a tour guide, one needs schooling. Impossible to claim lack of information.

Danylo comforts himself by revisiting his exit strategy. It's a good one. He only needs to go stubborn and repeat his prepared statement as often as necessary. Simple in principle, tough in practice. He's far from sure to keep his voice calm and resolute.

Done with the school, Danylo scrolls on towards the dead end of Akintulu Street, where six lines and three racks of laundry hang to dry, plus a couple of shirts on hangers. Someone has been hard at work, using lots of water. One more tricky topic. Where did the water come from, where's the tap? None in sight. Danylo decides not to dig too deeply into any household chores. He's a guy after all, he's entitled not to care about this kind of pastime.

Generators in locked metal cages, that's proper guy business. Danylo inspects the array as closely as the pretty powerful StreetView zoom lets him. Metal cages with robust locks, different types of, each with its emerging cable, to power whichever electric devices on the other side of the wall. The generators are not visible, but they're what is bound to be locked up. Danylo will point them out, and mention the haphazard mains power situation. Another ten minutes.

The drain between the street and the narrow sidewalk with the generators is full of filth. Danylo wonders about smells. The laundry should smell of detergent, more or less scented. The thick black water and garbage in the drain evokes very different odors. Which scent is going to win? What are the dots going to make of such a question? They see, hear and write. Impossible to tell if they're also able to experience scents. And what about touch?

Danylo twitches. He did it, for real. He assumed the dots to be aliens. He's going mad.

Up by the corner, opposite the school gate, five guys linger in a hard to identify open air workshop. Not very busy, the team. The guy in the long sleeved checkered shirt with the phone might be the boss, judging by his posture.

Scrolling up and down, Danylo discovers a phenomenon. The car with the StreetView camera caught the team twice, probably on its way in and out of the dead end. There's a picture where a woman inspects whatever wares on offer, and another one where she has left, talking back to one of the guys. Like a mini movie. He feels like Big Brother, ashamed to intrude.

But he has a job to do, a performance to plan. He needs some more material to talk the dots through, and is determined to find it on Owokoniran Street.

A lady selling sweets, right next to a school, that makes sense. Kids will want to waste whatever pocket money they might have here. Same for the popcorn stall. Popcorn and hair extensions, Lagosians often surprise Danylo with their creative sales mixes. A scarves stall is more conservative, nice array of colors. Next to it, bulk grains, perhaps maize, are on offer, and different types of a kind of flour. Would whatever is cooked on this basis be the Lagos equivalent of auntie Olga's potatoes? Is it cheap enough to be accessible for all, under most circumstances?

Zooming back out, Danylo notices a big yellow and white balloon floating above the scene, suggesting some ongoing event. And there's more to see, up above. The local way of multiplying power lines. Explains the generators in their cages. Good opportunity for Danylo to recycle some of his mains power lecture, if the dots let him.

This should be enough, for 45 minutes, assuming a good day with docile dots.

Exhausted, Danylo shuts down his laptop and lets himself sag back.

Too late for the student club. Arriving now, older and more sober than the crowd, that would only worsen his blues. Or perhaps not. The Morph kid had potential, in his funny way. A little adulation would get Danylo's mind off that bloody they-might-be-aliens angle.

The dots might be aliens. And the clock might be ticking. Scary.

Danylo's gut feeling insists the dots are not going to just disappear on November 30. Nobody, not even an alien, invests a month of daily action without an aim. By the end of the tours, the dots will have learned a lot about Lagos. Danylo knows dick about the place, but he still managed to show them some sights. And he did quote serious sounding sources.

Two hours later, Danylo wakes up, because he's freezing. He had fallen asleep fully dressed, without brushing his teeth, and his mouth feels worse than after a night of binge drinking. Two in the morning. Quietly, quietly, not to wake up auntie Olga, he slips into the bathroom to get himself ready for bed, and some hours of proper sleep. He's once again disgusted by himself. Falling asleep over an old laptop, aliens in his mind, is no way to spend a Friday night.

###

The Saturday tour works like magic. Danylo doesn't get much farther than the array of generators on Akintulu Street. The purple dot challenges his interpretation. "Why would anyone put his generator on the other side of the compound wall? Much better to have them right next to his own door. Or inside his house. Much safer, much more efficient burglary prevention."

Danylo was still in process of steadying his breathing, not to laugh, when the blue dot beat him to the starting line for the due counter. It went: "Not close. Because noise. Never inside. Because fumes, deadly." Clear, curt, all that needs saying is said.

Danylo grabs the opportunity to talk about something he understands anyway.

With the array of generators still filling the screen, he first explains about internal combustion engines in general. Chamber, fuel, ignition, blast, power and exhaust, these six words suffice to fill as many minutes, without even resorting to waffling yet.

Next, Danylo dives into a lecture on the most ubiquitous of internal combustion engines.

"All those thousands of cars on all those roads we've been looking at," he goes, "independently of whether they're rolling fast or waiting for their chance to advance another meter in a go slow, they'll have this same happening inside. Chamber, fuel, ignition, blast, power and exhaust. Again and again and yet again. Until they reach their destination and get parked.

If cars get parked inside, in some kind of garage, there's danger. Outside, the exhaust disperses so fast it barely irritates the throat and lungs of pedestrians. They can walk among thick traffic without dropping dead, most of them won't even get sick. We've seen many people doing this, on the roadside and right in the middle of traffic, and they're as healthy as they look. But inside, where the exhaust can't disperse, it might suffocate you. That's why underground parking facilities need ventilation. Same for long tunnels, by the way.

Chamber, fuel, ignition, blast, power and exhaust. Always.

Generators are just like cars, they might even use the same fuel, as available at every gas station, but they stay put. Instead of driving a car forward, they make electricity, to power devices. Mobile phones to connect with friends and decide where to watch this Saturday's football, a television to actually perform the watching, a fridge to chill the beer needed to watch the match.

I listed the devices by order of power consumption. A mobile phone, or even a laptop, that's small fry, your generator will barely notice. A television, especially the nice big one you want for football, that's on a different page, your generator will have to chug along steady and strong. Whereas a fridge operating in 28 C Lagos with the ambition to chill down beer to a nice 8 C, that's your generator pushed to its limit. Or perhaps even beyond.

Depending on your generator, you might have to choose, between TV and fridge. Which of course you know, hence you resolve in advance: Chill the beer well ahead of the match, switch off the fridge while your watching. With a good fridge, if you take care to open it sparingly, not to let in warm air, you've got two hours easy, no problem..."

Danylo goes on for quite a while. He's enjoying himself. It's great to talk about something familiar, for once. Cars and their engines and how they function, the generator at the neighbors datcha, what he said about the amount of fuel it needs and how much power it delivers, the knowledge is all there to share, and sure to be identical in Lagos.

The dots listened without responding so far, but now the purple one goes:

"Chamber, fuel, ignition, blast, power and exhaust, got it. You don't want to sit next to a generator, and if you inhale the exhaust, like for vaping, you drop dead. Got it. But I don't get the residents of Akintulu Street, the five guys who work there, and whoever did that washing. They're bound to suffer, from having the generators on their side. Why don't they send them right back across the green wall, towards the green house where they belong? Why inhale someone else's exhaust?"

Now this is one fucking good question. Green wall, green house, it's the same paint indeed, well observed. Four storey building, well kept. Multiple power lines, satellite dish, suggests solid middle class. Even before taking into consideration the two new looking cars in the courtyard.

Danylo has to speculate and opts for transparency:

"Wow, dear guest, excellent observation, you're really getting Lagos, aren't you? Congratulations. As we can't ask the people working on Akintulu Street, we'll have to use our imagination, to guess. I'll throw in mine first, to provide you with time to come up with a better one. Let's ask ourselves: Are the people on Akintulu Street victims of their posher neighbours living in the green house? Is this a case of oppression calling for class warfare, as the purple dot suggests?"

There might be a whiff of exploitation in the air, but then again, perhaps not. A dead end, with mostly walls on all sides. A couple of workshop sheds, no obviously residential housing. So how about this interpretation: Akintulu Street is like an outer courtyard, where you perform the more dirty or noisy jobs, where you hang your washing, not too close to the generators, and where you operate those generators, well away from your window, shielded by the wall.

We might well see a separation of living quarters and workspace, with one and the same people living there and working here. And then again, there might be a twist, as in only the household employees working.

Nice middle class building, pretty new cars. Who is to know if the madam herself did all that washing, or if she employs another lady to do the household chores? While she makes money at the hospital, perhaps as a lab technician, or a senior nurse, or even a doctor?

Appearances can be deceiving, we mustn't jump to conclusions. I'd rather ask the group of men up at the corner, preferably the guy with the mobile phone, about how things work, on and around Akintulu Street. A picture is said to tell us more than a thousand words, but in my experience, talking to people very much beats looking at them..."

Danylo would have gone on, warming to his topic, but the black, red and white dot write in such short succession all their comments show up on the screen at once. They read:

“No class warfare today?! What a pity. Don’t get your hopes up, Dany no boy. We’ll get there.”

“The guy with the mobile phone, he’s charging it through his long sleeved shirt, and that’s called a wearable, right? Nice flowery pattern! Are many generators being replaced by wearables? Is there enough sunshine in Lagos, to power let’s say a TV by wearing, let’s say a solar panel hat? Or do you need an umbrella? Or a whole tent? And what about the fridge? By the way, how do you make ice cream, in your fridge? Is there a special section, or a pot, for the ingredients? And how does the stick get into the ice cream? Do you eat that stick, or use it again?”

“You’re wrong, Dany Highfive, there is housing on Akintulu Street. How can you not see the guy having such obviously wonderful dreams, in the gazebo with the lovely yellow green and orange curtains? He looks so peaceful, so relaxed. Do you think he has been taking spirituality enhancing drugs, perhaps as part of a religious ceremony?”

Danylo at first struggles to understand what the white dot is writing about. But it’s true. What the dot calls a gazebo turns out to be the first and smallest shed, and there’s indeed someone laying on his back in there, on a white mattress. The person is clearly visible through the open door, face totally unblurred, against standard Google StreetView practice. A pair of blue flip flops parked by the doorside suggests this lay down was all planned and on purpose.

What the hell are those sheds for? There’s another one with an open door. It’s pink and turquoise with a yellow dot patterned curtain. No one visible inside. The third shed, the well kept blue one, is locked. There’s also a free roaming chicken, as if this was some village.

Danylo is totally out his depth now. Why the hell did he pick this bloody street, of all the thousands of possible Lagos spots? How could he fail to notice the person in the shed, and the breach of the most basic of privacy rules? And what the hell are those sheds for?

There’s of course one possible explanation. But in a shed opposite a school? No.

The red dot rescues Danylo by insisting on getting its stupid questions answered:

“Dany, thank you, but this will do with this section. We’ve seen the sheds, we’ve seen the sleeper. Not interesting, we’re done here. Now back to my question: I’ve got the generator, a good, strong one, I connect the cable to the fridge. What else do I need to do, to get my ice cream on a stick?”

Danylo is so glad to be allowed to talk about anything else than sheds equipped with mattresses, he readily jumps to the Wikihow page on ice cream making. He reads it aloud, all four methods, cheered on by both the black and green dot going thumbs up.

As expected, the red dot doesn’t get it. Danylo has to bring up pictures of different types of ice creams first, to provide it with a more realistic idea of the breadth of the concept. Once this basic bit of pattern identification is achieved and the red dot successfully manages to recognize each type of ice cream on new pictures, Danylo gives the wikihow a second try.

Proves hopeless. The red dot isn’t prepared to accept that what will become ice cream, cold, in the due course of a multi step process, first has to go on a stove, hot. This part of the recipe proves too counterintuitive, however simple Danylo’s attempts at explanation. A tedious process. On the upside, it’s suddenly 19:47, high time to close the session.

The response is mixed today, but less so than Danylo feared. Five applause icons, only two of which come from the orange dot, plus three thumbs up, from a group of ten dots. Not brilliant, but OK. If only Black hadn’t added “More class warfare and must have porn!” Such a mean comment. Whatever it’s supposed to mean. Porn. Disgusting. Never no porn on Danylo’s show.

He struggles to recover, from this particular session. Normally, he can’t swallow a bite in the two hours preceding his performance, but his appetite roars straight back as soon as this daily high-

wire-no-net act is over. Today, he can't let go. He's back on Akintulu Street, with the zoom on the sleeper. This is so intrusive. Even now, on his own, Danylo feels like the worst Peeping Tom. Execrable. Asleep, it's impossible to turn away, to avoid being captured by the camera. Being exposed like this, that's a terrible breach of basic intimacy. Danylo feels with the sleeper.

Outrageous, to be exposed like this, for all the world to watch. And not just the world.

One bloody bastard of a fucking Ukrainian, pretty much the last person expected to come and look at anyone on Akintulu Street, goes one up and brings in dots that might well be aliens, judging by their blatant lack of understanding of basic basics, like ice cream.

What if their intentions are not benign? What if they set out to capture that particular Lagosian? Would they have the means to find him? How good is their facial recognition technology? How large their database of Lagosians? Frontal portraits or profiles?

Danylo tries to blame Google. Doesn't work. It was his idea to look at Akintulu Street in detail, because of those stupid generators. It was him who brought in the aliens. A crime is never the fault of the weapon and its manufacturer, only the perpetrator ends up in court.

All the other faces are blurred all right. Not just the group with the long sleeved leader. When Danylo scrolls along into Bankole Street, there are more people at work, around televisions, or very large computer screens. There's more laundry, too, suspended on a metal fence. Further on, at Bankole Street 2, Danylo encounters another open shed with one more sleeper.

He's selling colorful ribbons of... Whatever are those? The labeling remains indecipherable at maximum zoom, the sachets might contain anything, in single portion doses. Candy? Cookies? Collector cards? Or would Danylo be a perfect idiot stupid enough to not even recognize what any local would immediately identify as condoms? He feels dreadfully inadequate.

Looking at this sleeper in his chequered shirt, with his blue flip flops parked outside his cabin, feels less intrusive. His face is properly blurred, no need to avert the eyes in shame.

Danylo wonders how much the guy makes, per day, and about his opening hours. Probably long, otherwise he wouldn't sleep in the shop. His pose suggests he's self employed. No sleeping on the job if you've got a boss. You have to pretend to be hard at work at all times.

Would the guy own the shed, or rent it? Rented shops, that's tricky. In a bad period, you might end up making less than you owe the landlord. On the other hand, if those ribbons are candy or cookies, the shop might do a brisk trade, just opposite one more school.

Checking out the colorful building, Danylo discovers it's one more Kliffon venture, a nursery and primary school. Whoever Kliffon is, he does all levels of education around here.

The more Danylo scrolls along Bankole Street, the more he wonders about how its people will have felt, when the Google StreetView car did their neighborhood.

What's it like, to get filmed going about your daily business? The lady in the colorful dress standing next to the grocery shop, would she be aware of the existence of Google StreetView? What was on her mind, at that particular moment? And the young man in the dirty green shirt busy working on whatever engine part he's holding on his knees, would he mind people seeing him in his workwear instead of his Sunday best? Or would he rather be proudly recalling this particularly tricky dismantling and reassembling effort?

Danylo feels like the intruder he is. But at least all faces are safely blurred.

He wonders if the residents of Bankole Street would mind, to feature in tomorrow's tour.

There's a lot to show here. People at work, shopping for groceries, chatting in groups, resting or waiting. Adults of different ages and shapes, and a few small kids. All this street life is happening among what only looks like a mess at a distance. Every bit of available space, every seemingly

random item has its dedicated purpose. No vehicle is too old to escape repair, and those cars that manage to roll have to fight the assorted businesses for enough space to squeeze through.

Housing on Bankole Street consists mostly of modern two or three storey structures with nice balconies. Some of the buildings are pretty recent, or at least recently painted. Walls and fences, often topped by barbed wire, the creative power line arrangements, the proliferation of satellite dishes and the cars suggest the inhabitants are wealthy. No reason for them to mind featuring on Danylo's Sunday tour, they've got a lot to show off.

Danylo doesn't manage to convince himself. This place is private. As a non resident, he can't take his dots to visit it, not without an invitation. He needs a more unambiguously public space.

It's getting late, he still hasn't eaten, and won't come up with a viable plan on an empty stomach. Time to let go, have a plate of cabbage and hit his own mattress, out of reach of any cameras.

Danylo's sleep is troubled. In his dream, he steers an enormous parody of a StreetView car, as big as a fire engine, painted in the same red and fitted with an enormous canon of a zoom lens, right into Akintulu Street. It's very narrow, only centimeters that feel like millimeters on each side, forcing him to drive very, very carefully. Crawling forward, he suddenly becomes aware of what should have been obvious from the beginning: Impossible to U turn.

He'll have to reverse back out. That's going to be impossibly hard. He starts to sweat. When he turns around, his predicament gets worse. He discovers an enormous, mean looking computer on the back seat, instead of a rear window. He can't see. Nor has he got rear mirrors. He's stuck.

At this point, he hears the first loud clang sound. It's followed by many more, suggesting his car is being pelted with stones. He panics, hits the throttle hard and sends his vehicles crashing into something metallic. One of the generator cages, or one of the sheds. The sky above his front mirror is dark with stones now, the sound infernal, the smashed camera lens comes crashing down, and he wakes up.

Danylo promises himself never ever enter to enter Akintulu Street again.

###

First thing Sunday morning, Danylo starts his laptop with one single aim in mind: He has to find a very public Lagos spot to show his dots. Somewhere so public no one can mind an intrusion.

In a blinding flash of better late than never inspiration, Danylo asks his search engine about CCTV in Lagos. It's a jackpot. Lagosians are highly protective of their wealth, and a page full of equipment vendors and service providers cater to their needs. And it's not just business owners that get targeted. Enterprise or private property, indoor or outdoor, as a protection against disloyal staff or intruding burglars, Lagos offers it all, on the cheap or with a serious price tag.

Danylo feels much better now. With Lagos wealth so fond of surveillance, and not one hint of any legislation that might limit the use of the corresponding equipment, Lagosians hopefully won't mind one more snoop. There's CCTV, potentially all over the place, and there are dash cams. Anyone venturing outside has to expect being watched, and if he's not aware, it's his problem.

Time to prepare a Sunday special for the dots, and no more dithering.

Danylo once again looks at the bigger picture on the map. He started his tour at the airport, on November 1. It's November 17 already, and he only covered a third of the distance to his destination, the Elegushi Royal Beach. It's a long way to Lekki, but he won't speed yet.

Today, he'll show his dots one more public institution. They've already seen the teaching hospital, they can't leave without visiting Lagos University a.k.a UNILAG proper. Its huge campus sits pretty straight to the east of where they spent the last few days, makes sense to go there now.

University road turns out to be nice, but boring. Better to start the tour right at the gate, a monumental structure fronted by one more well kept lawn with carefully sculpted bushes. Lagos officialdom can do an excellent upkeep job, when and where it wants to.

Danylo is worried for a second he won't be allowed inside, it's a serious gate. But the StreetView car rolled through unimpeded and Danylo gingerly follows its path.

Inside UNILAG, there's even more green, an alley of perfectly aligned, magnificent palm trees. Must feel good, to be allowed to study here. Looks a lot nicer than anything Danylo had the opportunity to attend. Posh cars on a perfect road, fancy buildings, palm trees, the occasional pretty young people. This campus could be mistaken for Florida any day.

Even the rare yellow Volkswagens that made it onto campus are in better shape than any of the public transport Danylo saw outside. A roller compactor suggests there are road works ongoing, which is odd, because the road is so smooth. Pretty much any other Lagos tarmac is in more need of roller compactor action, but the machine was sent here. Intriguing.

UNILAG is a huge complex, with it's own shopping center, gas stations, bank branches, and it all looks very Miami. Fascinating. Enviably fascinating.

Danylo has to go check the Faculty of Social Sciences, and there it is, one more nice main building flanked by smaller units of the same architectural style. Even his peers get appreciated, in Lagos, not just engineers and computer freaks. Impressive. Enviably impressive.

A poster on the gate suggests waste separation and recycling as a must have. This plus a line of freshly planted trees sustained by a water hose suggests advanced environmental awareness and a willingness to contribute to a more sustainable way of life. Very Western. This must be some kind of African Harvard. Lucky the students who attend such prestigious institutions.

Danylo would love to get inside, but the faculty for social sciences is better shielded than the teaching hospital, no StreetView car made it past its iron gate. Pity.

The more he circles the campus, the more envious Danylo gets. To study among palm trees, with the occasional ocean view, that's a much more lovely way to be headed for unemployment than the drab and chilly path he took. UNILAG also feels like the kind of place where even sociology students don't need to worry about job prospects. Such meticulous lawns right in the middle of a big messy metropolis, that smells of prestige and privileges. This is the lifestyle of connected few that don't need to queue.

The UNILAG website and further research doesn't confirm Danylo's guess. It's a splendid institution, it's hard to get in, but it doesn't make the top spot in the Nigerian ranking. Wondering about the selection criteria, Danylo learns two new acronyms, JAMB and UTME. The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board apparently came up with the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination to make sure students wouldn't fail at university.

Danylo feels with his Nigerian colleagues. Coming out of secondary education without much of a clue can happen, and you don't even need to be stupid to achieve it.

His own high school maths and physics teacher used to show up every other day, at best. And when he did make it, he barely managed to slur at the class which section of the book to copy, before dozing off at his desk. Everybody, staff and students, was in the know, and it wasn't just the biology teacher cracking endless ethanol themed jokes. Funny? Not really.

When Danylo encountered his first serious piece of maths at university, he crashed. And he wasn't even trying to understand Einstein stuff. A harmless lecturer trying to discuss probability and correlation assessments sent him blushing and sweating in despair.

Danylo spends the whole Sunday immersed in the Nigerian education system. He rewards himself for his efforts by pulling off two splendid consecutive sessions on the UNILAG campus, and how

best to get admitted. Even the black dot goes “Hey, Dany no boy, looks like we finally hit a topic you know more than dick about. Pissed [pants icon] and proud?”.

The black dot is disgusting, and it won't derail Dany. He calmly proceeds, until it's time to close the Monday tour with a serene: “Dear guests, thanks for your attention. As we have now reached the Aquaculture Unit at the far end of UNILAG, I'd propose to have a look at the Lagos Lagoon, and what is in there, tomorrow.” Big round of applause, happy dots, good day.

Danylo has no clue about aquaculture, maritime biology or fisheries. In the Lagos lagoon, the wider Gulf of Guinea or the big blue Atlantic Ocean. But his search engine does. By tomorrow evening, he'll have compiled enough material to fill at least one session. He'll still have to argue with his conscience because impostor, but at least he won't accidentally go Peeping Tom.

The unblurred sleeper on Akintulu Street is still haunting him.

With the day's work accomplished, Danylo relocates to the kitchen. He fills his plate and takes a first tentative bite of his dinner. This cabbage needs more salt. And some curry. And some pepper. Otherwise, it won't go down, hunger or no hunger.

Auntie Olga's cooking is getting ever more erratic. On some days, her cabbage tastes as if cooked in sea water, impossible to eat more than a tiny spec with each big lump of potato. Today, auntie Olga must have forgotten to add salt, for a change. Better that way, easier to remedy.

Danylo decides to award himself a beer at the student club. He's entitled to celebrate his success with the dots, today's edible cabbage and life in general.

At the student club, Danylo will look out for Morph. If the kid shows up, he'll ask him if he considered studying someplace nicer, like Lagos. Should be fun.

The place is packed, for a Monday night. No exams in sight yet. The first terms have settled in and are starting to get braggy. The more senior attendees sit in tight groups, pretending to ignore the loud presence of the novices. A group of three girls giggle at the bar. No Morph.

Danylo doesn't push to get hold of his first beer, enjoying the attention of the three girls instead. He's not into girls, sexually speaking, but doesn't mind the odd flirt. Share a little laugh, decline buying them drinks, duck questions about girl friends, inquire back about boy friends, there's a whole lot of harmless fun to be had with girls in a student club. Girls don't rape, and having been seen flirting keeps the man off the radar of homophobes.

Having finally gotten his beer and lost the attention of the girls to the noisy arrival of one of the mini-VIP local influencers and his coterie of admirers, Danylo retreats into his favorite corner to watch the crowd, sip and think. No Morph. Pity, but better that way. Too baby.

Danylo let's his mind slip into his favorite reverie. The basic theme consists of Maksym suddenly showing up once again, out of the blue, just like he did when they met. There are as many permutations of this reverie as there are locations.

Maksym at the bus stop. Maksym at the dentist. Maksym driving by in a metallic blue Renault, only to get stopped by a flat tyre, at exactly the right spot. Maksym at the neighbor's datcha, suddenly walking out of the woods as if he lived there. That one was awkward, because Danylo looked awful in his sweaty stained workwear. He discarded it at once.

Maksym at the student club is vying for the top spot of most practiced reverie with Maksym in the park. Today, Danylo settles for the Maksym at the student club variant where he shows up with a lady, elderly but elegant. This lady turns out to be Maksym's colleague. They've just flown back from China, hours and hours on the long distance plane. The lady is to meet her student daughter here, she left her car with her and needs it to drive home. Maksym gallantly accompanied her, because a student club is no place for an elegant lady to visit on her own. And look who's there.

Today, the reverie proceeds even better than usual.

Danylo might be an impostor with an ugly sideline in voyeurism, but that's still much better than what he was when he actually met Maksym. Attending the tour guide training had been his one activity in weeks, the hopeless job hunt had turned him into a lazy blob.

Now, he's busy, seven days a week. His job is weird. It pays so badly he'd rather get a teeth pulled without anesthesia than admit the number. He's prohibited from talking about his tours. But he's doing something. He's experiencing, on a daily basis, the dull stress of having to get his act together, the sharper thrill of having to deliver and the climax of being done.

There's a past, a present and a future, not just wet walls and cabbage.

Danylo imagines Maksym's surprise at seeing him here:

"Hey dude, what the hell? How's good old Kyiv, what are you doing these days? You here means you did land that tutor job after all? Well done!"

Danylo had confessed part of his job predicament when he met Maksym. Normally, he wouldn't, not with a romantic target. In this case, he had to, because his intention to work as a BoomTours guide was situationally obvious.

He had to explain about his fresh diploma and the ongoing job hunt. He told Maksym he was expecting to land some gig contract tutor job, as first step towards a career in academia. Maksym bought this baseless story without hesitation.

He only urged Danylo not to settle for too small a beginners salary and went:

"Better to skip a bad one and hold out for the real thing, even if cash gets tight. Trust me, the rewards are worth a little suffering. You get your raises based on your starting salary, vital not to go in too low. Otherwise you'll never reach the peaks where the sun always shines."

Danylo bit his tongue. No need to introduce an engineer to the precarious ways of more lowly life forms who never land any well paying jobs unless through connections he doesn't have.

If and when they meet again, Danylo will have to tell Maksym about how his job hunt is progressing. Before November 1, he had been squeezing his brain for weeks, to come up with anything that would be both attractive and remotely plausible. In vain. Anything he had managed to come up with sounded lame when he listened in on the scenario.

Now, Danylo is as good as gung-ho and easily imagines himself answering:

"Hey dude, what the hell indeed, what brings you here, of all places? The Chinese buying into student clubs now, time for Kyiv to learn Mandarin? And who's the nice lady? Nice to meet you madam, warm welcome, friends of Maksym are my friends, always.

Maksym, believe it or not, I still don't make millions, hence my presence in this humble hut. Got myself a job all right, very IT, very globalized, very venture, love it. Only two downsides: It's so venture I'm not even permitted to reveal details, not even to you, and it's not the big bucks yet. Pays the beer, keeps me going, so I won't complain, but the Ritz is out of scope for now."

Danylo feels great. It's gorgeous, to imagine himself saying this, and he will not even be lying.

If the dots he's entertaining turn out to be aliens, he'll be in a very privileged position. He's one out of only 86 tour guides familiar with the ways of the visitors. He's potentially the one and only such expert in the whole of Europe. That's very venture, strategic, exclusive, you name it.

Danylo enjoys the next stages of his daydream. First of all, the elegant elderly lady gets found by her shrill daughter and they depart in a whiff of strong perfumes. Next, Maksym suggests Danylo accompany him to his hotel, the same one as last time. Just to check in and have a quick shower, to wash off the long distance flight, before celebrating their reunion in a fancy bar.

One more gorgeous night ahead.

###

Absorbed by his reverie, Danylo only notices Morph when his beer bottle runs dry.

The kid is just standing there, awkwardly single. Judging by the desperate look on his face, he must have been trying to make eye contact for a while. Getting finally noticed by Danylo lights him up like fireworks, and he immediately starts chatting.

Normally, Danylo would resent the interference. He can only rarely afford the student club, hates wasting precious minutes on meaningless chitchat. But tonight he already had his fun, and a particularly good run it was. He doesn't mind Morph.

Turns out Danylo found himself a fan. Morph seems to recall every instant of their first encounter as if it had only just happened, down to every tiny detail. He inquires about specifics of Danylo's by now as good as forgotten toe condition before offering to fetch new beers.

Feels wrong way round, to have the younger guy fetch the drinks, but Danylo's financial status has rendered him immune to a certain kind of awkwardness. He's happy to be entertained by sugar kiddie and will declare this a breach of convention, a progressive achievement.

It takes Morph nearly half an hour to reach the bar and get himself noticed. The poor kid glances back at Danylo from time to time, apologetically signalling despair at his lack of progress. He's really shy, and really gauche, which makes zero sense in someone who manages to look quite good in the few moments where his face isn't torn by troubles.

Danylo wonders if he ever was anything like that, in his novice days. Hopefully not.

Morph has gotten them four beers, wise move, plus one pack of crisps and one of peanuts, an expensive and very welcome treat. Now he struggles to fight his way back.

This kid must be awash with money. Danylo tries not to let this aspect influence his plans.

He congratulates Morph more warmly than necessary, for his perseverant struggle with crowd and staff, and especially for his four beer wisdom. Very good idea, with the place so packed, for a Monday night, and them sure to stay a while, because so much to talk about.

The warm words send the kid straight back to fireworks mode. Turns out he does indeed have an awful lot on his mind, and urges to share it with a patient Danylo who only listens in from time to time, to keep himself on the same page.

Morph's tale is the first term usual: University totally unlike school, weird and tricky to navigate and not going well at all. Student housing a disgusting calamity. They parked him on the so called extra bed, a mattress on the floor, in the room of a guy practicing survival skills for a no-water, no-soap, no-washing machines type of dystopian future...

Morph stays well clear of sensitive topics, to Danylo's joy. The kid is happy to have found himself an ear to talk into while Danylo enjoys beer and junk food with his lingering Maksym reverie.

If Maksym showed up right now, Morph's talkative presence would add spice to their reunion.

Hard for Danylo to guess Maksym's reaction. Would he see Morph as a competitor? Would he think lover at all, or default to a less intimate relationship? The kid is so kid, so unlike Danylo's hopefully mature gay presence, Maksym should struggle to think beyond harmless.

Morph is no longer talking, only looking at Danylo with big expectant eyes.

Did the kiddie raise a question? Did he say anything supposed to be considered provocative? Did he share anything special?

Impossible for Danylo to tell. Last thing he remembers was a long tale of a complicated recovery from what must have been a terrible accident. The tragedy as such impressed Danylo enough to stick. One moment, Morph was enduring the hardships of having fallen hopelessly in love with his so far unresponsive physical education teacher while riding his bike. He was the average basically happy teenager mistaking romantic travails for issues.

Next, the kid woke up in an intensive care unit. Numb all over, he drifted in and out of bizarre dreams, intermittent hospital, staff and parent awareness and occasional sharp pangs of pain for what felt like days and features on his medical records as weeks.

Morph had been hit by a bus, and the bus had won. A couple of broken bones did most of the hurting, but it was his head that had taken the hardest hit. Part of his memories were erased. Not just any recollection of his accident, but also some events everybody told him he used to be aware of prior to his accident. And the left side of his body had gone so awkward he had to relearn talking, handling a fork, walking, anything.

Danylo had let his mind wander at this stage, confident that what must have been years of rehabilitation would take Morph at least the rest of the first bottle.

But now the kid is staring expectantly instead. Fuck. Admitting what happened would be like kicking a puppy, and Danylo is proud not to be that kind of person. Hoping for the best, he goes:

“Life can be such a tough one, indeed.”

The kid is shaking his head in disagreement. Not a good sign. But at least he’s still beaming. Suggests whatever damage was done by an obviously misplaced remark isn’t severe. Danylo’s guess is confirmed when Morph goes:

“No, not really, not tough, not as such. Understand why you’d say that, because my accident must sound like a terrible ordeal. It was, in a way. You don’t want this happening to you. But it’s really great, not to worry about money. They have to pay me this pension, and it’s inflation adjusted, for as long as I live.

That’s so reassuring. I’m not rich. But if they don’t find me my own room, and if that pig of a roommate doesn’t improve his ways, I’d be able to rent. Nothing flashy, certainly not nearby, that’s why I’m holding out. But if I can’t take it any more, I can afford my own...”

Danylo is suddenly all ears. This kid is rich. Not the sociology kind of rich, but in an enviable enough position to qualify as his kind of rich. Whatever the monthly payment adds up to, it’s substantial. Kyiv rents for newcomers are shocking. Danylo guesses no number was mentioned, he wouldn’t have failed to hear that kind of sum, but Morph is rich.

While the kid is weighing the advantages and disadvantages of surviving a near fatal collision with a well insured bus, Danylo probes his readiness to be bought.

A lover with a wallet fat enough for two could improve his life, tremendously.

With his status and cash, Morph should long have gotten his own student apartment. One of the nice modern ones, specially equipped for the physically handicapped. Someone is playing foul. An experienced recent graduate at the side of the victim should be able to right the wrongs in no time. Casually informing the person in charge that Morph might not look the part, but has the means to have a lawyer check why his case isn’t advancing, this should do the trick.

By December 1st at the latest, Morph should reside in proper accommodation allowing him to entertain visitors. And, cherry on the icing, crisps with the beer, this nice one room flat would cost him so little he’d have plenty of pension left, to spend on shopping.

Alternatives to cabbage and potatoes start to dangle in front of Danylo's mental eye. Noodles, with tomato sauce, and a spoonful of minced meat, sharply fried with onions, for substance and texture. Chicken and rice, Asian way, with soy sauce. Goulash soup with garlic bread.

Envisioning the two of them enjoying a yummy dinner in Morph's modern flat, and the tastefully furnished place heated to a cosy 20 C, with any humidity confined to the bathroom, Danylo knows he's willing to be bought. More than that. He's keen, eager, as good as desperate for it.

Maksym might be the man of his dreams, but he makes a habit of failing to show up, except in his daydreams. Whereas Morph is right here, with his beers, and loving every second they spend together. Even before engaging in anything more than chitchat.

Danylo decides he has to make sure to get himself bought. A rival can show up any moment, to send him right back to auntie Olga's hellhole.

Hoping to appeal to Morph's more felt than visible black identity, to make himself truly indispensable, Danylo waits for the next pause in the kid's monologue to go:

"You're so brave, Morph. Someone else in your position might just declare this rehab business more than enough tedium for one life, and take advantage of that pension never to work again. But you go ahead to study for a career. Real brave, real ambitious.

But there's one bit intriguing me. No offense intended, hope you don't mind me asking, I just need to, for better understanding. A guy like you, with the means to study in many places, and fluent English, why opt for Kyiv? It's my university, I cherish it, sure. But it's neither the only one out there, nor..., how shall I put what it's not? Never mind, guess you can guess what I'm hinting at, you're the one stuck in a sordid room because dysfunction.

As I happen to have come across some pictures of the campus of the university of Lagos recently, it's located right next to a lagoon, palm trees all over the place, looks full paradise, I can't help wonder why a black guy would prefer Kyiv. You told me about all that despicable racism. So why stay? I of course like you here, I'd really miss you, but...?"

If Morph was the kind of black Danylo sees when entertaining his dots, his face wouldn't turn darker when heated with embarrassed bliss. The kid is blushing like a debutante asked for her first dance. Danylo is succeeding in making himself indispensable.

Over the second bottle of beer, Danylo discovers he hit Morph's softest spot.

Turns out the kid has been longing to visit Angola ever since he was told to go back for the first time, in primary school. His father, or any other family, proved impossible to locate. Either the man vanished from the planet shortly after the birth of his Ukrainian son, or the name on his passport was false. Morph spent his teen years knowing even excellent grades might not suffice to make him rich enough to afford a trip to Africa. He hated it, and studied hard anyway.

This routine got smashed by his accident. On the downside, his brains were no longer as outstanding as they used to be. His doctors were also dead against any undertakings that might upset the barely reestablished stability of his body. Trips to tropical locations with haphazard health care are not recommended for people using a metal plate for part of their skull. On the upside, Morph was awarded a lump sum and that pension. Substantial money, not just by Ukrainian standards. If his bloody African forebear had been from pretty much anywhere except oil rich Angola, Morph would have been considered rich by local standards.

Danylo is no longer merely trying to get himself bought. This kid has years of advance on him. Morph might not qualify as black by sub Saharan standards, but he gobbles up and regurgitates anything Angolan like the kind of football fan who will tell innocent bystanders the shoe size of the past, present and potential future strikers unprompted and is still discussing that 81 minute semi final bloody fucking injustice of a penalty twenty years after the insult.

Morph might be a solution to some of Danylo's Lagosian troubles.

For example the abductions Morph has been moaning about for the last ten minutes. With hindsight, they make sense. Very poor people living in the vicinity of shockingly rich people, plus an administration prioritizing its efforts the Ukrainian way, that's bound to trigger a hunt for shortcuts. Desperate people, desperate means. Makes a place desperately off limits to people rich enough to be worth an abduction effort but not to afford protection.

Danylo learns about travel warnings and extortion practices. Morph provides so many scary and sordid details he's starting to wonder how the merely wealthy kind of people he observes on StreetView manage to look so cheerfully busy. They walk and drive around as if unimpressed. Living against their kind of odds sounds impossible. Sooner or later, harm will come their way. How can they not give up? How come they don't let themselves die of despair?

According to Morph, his fellow Angolans, as he insists on calling them, are of a much more optimistic mindset than Europeans. Above average hopes, expectations set to bright by default, this sunny disposition is supposed to keep them going. That's why he'd love to live with them, hoping for a contagion that would cure his unnatural and recurring blues.

Danylo wonders. Real difference or the nicer variant of racial stereotyping?

Morph's idea of his beloved 'fellow' Angolans happily frolicking through one hell of a nightmare sounds too simplistic for comfort. They're both missing something.

Danylo prides himself to be well aware of the worn witticism about the psychologist, the sociologist, the historian and the engineer stuck in the dark. The psychologist talks depression. The sociologist blames dysfunctional social structures. The historian points out continuity through the ages. The engineer goes find a replacement light bulb.

Danylo aspires to be the engineer with a sociology degree.

Hearing Morph waffle reminds him of his own incompetence. He says as little as possible when talking Lagos to his dots, to avoid stating obvious bullhsit. He's flying blind, but so is this kid, despite years of research. Morph went through the trouble to learn Portuguese, he has collected a mountain of facts, but the picture he's painting still feels like soeme Disney cartoon. Too sweet, too pink, too smooth, too fairy tale. But Morph is convinced to know Angola. He states his heap of stereotypes with confidence, blind to his blind spots.

Danylo has only been at this for two weeks, his concept of Lagos is one big blind spot smattered with specs of potentially incomplete or wrong information, but he's at least aware of his incompetence. He has no idea what it is like, to be the student at the UNILAG bus stop or the sleeper on Akintulu Street, and not because of the color of his skin. Whereas Morph is convinced his teint automatically delivers some kind of intuitive familiarity.

Danylo's professional conscience suggests he should comment, relativize and enlighten. The vivid mental presence of auntie Olga's cabbage shuts him up. Hard to beat, that abomination of a smell, taste and consistency, This is not the right time to go contrarian, not yet.

The two of them stay until the very last minute. A grumpy bar man throws them out, together with two heterosexual couples groping each other and one completely pissed girl who staggers five steps along the wall before stopping abruptly to vomit against it. Shocked by this disgusting sight, they briefly praise each other for their comparative sobriety and part ways.

Danylo is already regretting he didn't suggest to meet again the next day, out of stupid bloody pride, when a breathless Morph catches up with him to ask for exactly that, anxiously. His wish is of course granted, magnanimously.

###

Danylo's week started well, and it keeps it up.

His dots can't get enough of UNILAG. Danylo has to scroll along each and every road on the campus, and slowly. The dots make him stop and zoom in on each and every single sign. He has to jump back and forth between the StreetView and the map to check which buildings belong to which faculty. The dots behave just like excited first term students. If there was a way, they'd have him take pictures of their dot selves beaming at the camera in front of their favorite institute.

Danylo is comparatively at ease. The department names are self explanatory, UNILAG offers the usual wide array of options typical for a major institution. Social sciences and arts, environmental studies and computer science, engineering and management, it's all there. Sports facilities, assorted lecture and exam halls, the main library, student housing, not hard at all to talk about those, for a recent graduate, whichever his Alma Mater.

There's the occasional odd moment, like when they encounter a cabin painted for jungle camouflage. There's a logo, something geometric, titled 'Man O War'. What the hell is this? Would a Lagosian be familiar with the logo?

Danylo has learned to react to Google StreetView going awkward on him. Having zoomed in on the cabin, he asks the search engine about 'man o war' while going:

"Dear guests, may I point out this interesting feature? A cabin, well kept, fenced off by means of dedicated tyres. Now why would our guide zoom in on this particular cabin, you might ask yourselves? Plenty of cabins in Lagos, why look at this one? Let's find out together.

May I point out the particular design of this cabin? While its basic construction is just like that of the many other cabins we got to see, there's one outstanding feature attracting our attention. Your average cabin, it may be green, or blue, or gray, occasionally even a brighter red or yellow, and more or less freshly painted. There might be some ornaments, like mock windows, but the basic design is unicolor. Whereas here, we've got three colors, and a distinct pattern.

This, dear guests, is a case of camouflage. Not obvious at all, this function, against the tarmac in front and with the sea as background. But when I change the perspective like this, to allow us to see the cabin against a background of trees, the rationale becomes evident. This cabin is designed to be hard to notice against a jungle background.

Now why would you want to hide your cabin, in a jungle? Your cabin, that's where you put your stuff. Wouldn't you want to make it easy to find it, by painting it a nice bright red?

Depends, dear guests, very much depends on the context. Making it easier for yourself to find your cabin, by having it stand out, will also make it easier to notice for anyone else. You might not want that. You already know there's a cabin, you put it there, you'll find it. Whereas anyone else, they might only know there's bound to be a cabin, someplace, but they have no clue, concerning its exact whereabouts. Why alert them? If you're on a hunt, you don't want to alert your prey.

Hunters use camouflage, to stealthily approach their prey. And soldiers, the military, they use camouflage to make themselves as hard as possible to see. Where there's snow, they'll dress up all in white, and use white face masks. In the dark, they wear dark clothes. In the desert, they wear sandy colors. For jungle combat, they wear shades of green."

The longer he talks, the more confident Danylo sounds. Small wonder. The tiny screen of his phone already features the Man-of-War Nigeria website. He by now knows what he's talking about, can switch his laptop to that same website while going:

"Now why did I tell you all this, dear guests? Because I want you to understand what this cabin is about. What you see on your screens now is the website of the organisation that owns the cabin. Here is that same logo, 'Man O' War Nigeria' it says, and below 'Build the man, build the community'. And what looks like some random geometric shape on the cabin, because it was painted with a broader brush, turns out to be the stylized sail of a ship. Now please allow me to quote from the website, to give you an idea what this organisation is doing..."

Danylo is getting real good at this kind of situation. With his tongue on autopilot and his weaker left hand moving the StreetView to suggest activity and give the dots something to look at, his brain can focus on the tiny screen of his phone. He types the questions for his search engine with his stronger right hand and uses his higher mental functions to interpret the results. With this skill developed, he needs much less preparation.

That's important, because he has much less time now. He spends the better part of his days helping Morph navigate his student life. The kid has made a real mess, and not just of the housing aspect. That turned out to have been a misunderstanding.

The university administration wasn't at fault. They had assigned Morph exactly the kind of housing a handicapped first term student from the troubled zones was supposed to get, a nice modern one room flat. But a squatter, a wild eyed guy with shock hair, had broken into it over the summer holidays, ready to get himself thrown out at the start of the term. Dropouts with nothing much to lose, they'll risk prison for a shower and one night in a proper bed.

One look at Morph, very much out of his depth on arrival, had convinced the squatter to stay just a little bit longer, by means of a fairy tale about new arrivals getting the spare bed. One look at older and more resolute Danylo sent him packing.

It took Danylo and Morph two days to clean the place. They used most of a bottle of the strongest detergent they could find on anything that could be scrubbed, and one can of insecticide each on the mattresses and the curtains. The place ended up smelling like a morgue, an improvement they celebrated by having burgers at a diner followed by beers at the student club.

With Morph's housing issue sorted out, Danylo was ready to tackle the much bigger issue, his academic schedule. The poor kid, too proud to ask for advice, had signed up for far too many courses and lectures, across three faculties, psychology, geography and history.

None of this made sense, for a first year. No wonder the kid was feeling lost. After a thorough assessment, Danylo had to tell Morph to drop it all and attend two introductory courses in geography instead. Probably too late to catch up, he'd have to reattend from the beginning in the next round, but at least his first term wouldn't be completely wasted.

Morph moaned at first. He made lots of unhappy noises about having to quit history and psychology. Something about having to deal with the fate of his black ancestors and his own mixed race travails. First years can be hopelessly naive. Danylo had to go resolute, to save his sugar kiddie. He told Morph, in very unminced words, about non-existent job prospects, and about pensions, even substantial ones, not covering needs that grow with age.

After some sniveling, Morph accepted geography as his most promising option. Not an obvious winner, like computer science or engineering. But with the right specialization, well paying niches may become accessible. And if that fails, it's a good base for gigs in tourism, anywhere.

Spending most of his day with Morph, Danylo hasn't eaten one leaf of cabbage this week. This alone keeps his face stuck in stupid grin mode. With his sugar kiddie at his side, he'll have to start watching his weight at some point, but right now he's just enjoying this land of plenty.

They're going it slow, just chance acquaintances in process of becoming friends. Danylo has decided to avoid anything more intimate than a high five, to allow himself to settle into having been bought. Once he's done with his dots, a mere week from now, he'll find the strength to move on to unambiguous whoring. He's lucky, Morph is too timid to push.

His physique isn't the problem. Morph is quite pretty, especially when beaming or talking animatedly. This hides the slight asymmetry of his face. He wears his hair extremely short, to avoid looking too obviously African to strangers. "It's bad enough to be seen limping, and carrying my arm at an awkward angle," he would say, "the last thing I need is one more feature shouting 'looking for a victim? please pick me!' at the next nazi passerby".

Morph is attractive, in the very general sense of being neither obscenely fat nor obviously ugly in any other way. He also has his witty moments. What he calls a limp is a hint of an uncertain gait, barely perceptible except when he uses the handrail to steady himself when tackling stairs, like an old man. Morph is a fine boy, outwardly. But Danylo will never fall in love with him.

Morph is odd. Something got shattered, along with his skull, and the metal plate didn't fix it.

Danylo has to tell Morph to shut up, for example. He just doesn't know when to stop talking. Nor what to stop himself from revealing, because one just doesn't. Nor when to abandon a topic, because more than all has been said. Being no stranger to awkward moments, Danylo wonders how the poor kid manages not to die of shame. Morph is slightly weird in his standard first encounter timidity mode. And he's off scale weird once he warms up.

Like now. It's Saturday, November 23, half past four in the afternoon. Danylo picked up Morph at eleven, to do some grocery shopping together. Next they cooked, for lunch, baked white and red beans, with bacon. Then they had their lunch, followed by strong tea, to digest it.

And over all this time, Morph has been talking about fish. Fish roaming rivers. Sea fish. Sea mammals mistaken for fish by less educated people. Free and farmed fish. Aquariums with exotic fish. Small fish caught as bait for big fish. How fish can be fried and cooked and smoked. The merits and issues of industrial scale fish farms.

Danylo let his sugar kiddie proceed for once, out of sheer curiosity, to find out if he does ever stop by himself. Four and a half hours in, the result is: No, apparently not. Once Morph's mind has picked its topic, in this case provoked by Danylo wondering how anyone could afford the ludicrously expensive smoked trout on display at the shop, it stays with it.

What Morph says makes sense. He talks animatedly. He occasionally pauses, ever so slightly, to give Danylo a chance to weigh in. There's nothing obviously wrong. But talking fish for four hours is rabidly mad, and some aspects have been mentioned three times already.

As Danylo has to leave, he takes advantage of Morph's next pause to throw in a witty remark about fishbone patterns and diagrams worth mentioning. His sugar kiddie agrees, wholeheartedly, without even the tiniest hint of irony identification. Weird.

On his way to auntie Olga's, Danylo wonders how long he'll manage to keep it up. Once he enters the flat, he knows. He can keep it up forever. As long as they don't do cabbage.

###

It breaks Danylo's heart to leave UNILAG. The place has been such a wonderful safe haven, for a whole week. But today, he has to take his dots someplace else.

All had seemed to go well, yesterday, right until the end. Him scrolling along UNILAG streets, talking about the buildings, the palm trees and the occasional glimpse of the lagoon. The dots, mostly the orange dot, asking him to zoom in on particular features. Business as usual. Rewarded with the usual round of applause. And then, the green dot went: "Thank you so much, for so much UNILAG, Dany. Tomorrow, some more real Lagos, OK?".

Danylo has been working as a handyman often enough to recognize an order when he hears one. He confirmed at once. As they had been near the high rises on Abdul Karimu Street, he went:

"Sure, dear guest, your wish is my cooperation. How about meeting right here tomorrow, and jump right across the canal, to see how people live on the other side?"

His proposal was readily accepted. It got more applause than his tour.

Danylo has decided to risk the promised jump unprepared. He's getting awfully good at dot tours. He still didn't need any of his emergency get out phrases. They won't sack him now, after three weeks off good hard work. He can do this. And if anything goes wrong, he'll multitask.

This idea had felt much better when he granted himself another round of sleep in the morning. With a mere twenty minutes to go, Danylo suddenly needs a sneak preview. With his laptop ready to go for the webex, he performs the preview on his phone.

Holy bloody shit. One look at Aderupoko Street brings back Danylo's panic mode. After a week spent on the orderly UNILAG premises, Lagos street life comes as a messy shock.

No problem with the neighbourhood he discovers. It's doing well. Nice cars, most of the newish. TV antennae and satellite dishes. A ravel of power lines above and generator cages below. This is one more middle class realm. But it's so crowded.

Different types and sizes of houses are stacked against each other. Impromptu extensions, created for all kinds of more or less obvious purposes, with whatever materials were at hand, grow into courtyards and out onto the street.

Laundry can hang or stand pretty much anywhere. The cars are parked so tightly, along the mostly open gutter, often on both sides of the street, Danylo wonders how the Google StreetView vehicle managed to squeeze through. Poor driver.

There's no sidewalk for the pedestrians. People have to walk the middle of the road, and they do. Girls and boys, men and women. More people on this one street than in the whole of UNILAG. At least their faces are properly blurred, the worst voyeurism is avoided.

It's time to perform. Danylo waits until all dots are visible before taking a deep breath and going:

"Warm welcome, dear guess, thanks for joining me once again today, and in such a timely manner. Yesterday, I promised you a new neighborhood. Now, it's time for that jump. Please steady yourself, fasten your seatbelts, figuratively speaking, of course, and join me for the Lagos warp. Here we are, on Abdul Karimu Street, in front of Highrise B, green. To our left, behind the trees, the sea. Behind us, Highrise C, red. Up ahead, Highrise A, blue.

Now let's drop out of the StreetView to look at the map. On the right side, our UNILAG campus, bordered by the Lagos Lagoon with the third mainland bridge to its right, and the fat blue line of a river-canal type of waterway to its left. And now, we jump that fat blue line to have look at, brace yourself, hold your breath, voilà, Aderupoko Steet. Amazing, isn't it? Let's have a look..."

Danylo is surprised to feel himself going strong. He's actually glad for the change. Much more for the dots to look at, much more for their guide to waffle about, on Aderupoko Street. And it gets even better when he moves on to Balogun Street. More people, more stalls, more workshops.

Danylo scrolls along fast, randomly picking features to zoom in on. A bunker of a three storey high rise standing out among the smaller houses. A fan next to an empty laundry stand. A remembrance poster. The flashily dressed lady selling flip flops and hair extensions under a yellow umbrella. An battered yellow VW bus next to the partly wheelless wreck of an even older one.

Scrolling, zooming and talking fast feels good. Much more grove in this neighborhood than on the orderly university campus. Danylo is glad to have come.

Until the purple dot goes: "You make this sound like a fun place, Dany Highfive. But doesn't it get awfully hot and sticky, under all these ribbed roofs? Especially if you're cooking?"

Danylo checks the weather on his phone, and true enough, right now it's 32 C in Lagos. Only 66% humidity, well below what he has learned to identify as thunderstorm conditions, but you'd be sure to sweat. He concedes as much and gets rewarded by a thumbs up from the purple dot and a volley of flower bouquets from the orange one.

Before Danylo manages to resume his tour, the blue dot goes:

"If it was me living there, I'd prefer the UNILAG highrise. How about you, Dany?"

This is a surprise. The blue dot isn't prone to spontaneous writing. It does send the by now customary one final applause icon, on most days, and that's it. Never would Danylo have guessed that this taciturn dot would be the one to raise a tricky question.

As rehearsed many times, Danylo shoots back:

"Can understand why you'd reach your conclusion, but you need to be careful. We only see a tiny part of the picture, there's more to life than what Google StreetView can show us. Are the taps dry or running? Is there mains or generator power? Can you afford to waste some of that power on air conditioning, or is it barely sufficient to keep the TV on, to watch that football? So many parameters at play, when it comes to comfort. As for me personally, I'd rather be rich than poor, pretty much anywhere. If you're rich, there are ways to make yourself comfy."

Danylo speaks this truth as confidently as he feels it. A man who very much enjoyed baked beans with bacon instead of cabbage for lunch, a man who tries to look forward to his first night in a well heated student flat because he's currently shivering under his blanket and -4 C Kyiv weather is only to get worse over the coming months, such a man is entitled to state such a truth.

The blue dot seems to agree. After what is a long latency, for a dot, the thumbs up it sends in response shows up on the screen. Satisfied dot, incident resolved. Or is it?

Danylo resumes scrolling along Balogun Street. He has barely thanked the blue dot for its feedback, and exhorted all dots to raise any questions they might have on their minds, because that's what a guided tour is for, when the purple dot weighs in once again:

"Honestly, Dany Highfive? You'd rather be rich on Balogun Street than poor on a prestigious campus, amid nice lawns and palm trees? Inside UNILAG, you'd be poor right next to the sea, plenty of fresh air and a constant breeze to refresh you. On Balogun Street, you'd be rich next to open drains. People discharge all kinds of..., let's call it garbage, for the sake of polite language, into those open drains. Bet this smells. Come on, Dany Highfive, honestly?"

Danylo has learned to pretend to read dot comments slowly. No one, not even a pretty omniscient alien hiding behind a Webex dot, hopefully, can look into the mind of a human, to check how long it takes him to read a paragraph. Danylo reads fast, takes his time to think, and once he's done thinking, he reads the last sentence aloud, to signal he's done reading, before answering. Makes him look like an imbecile, but better than the sack.

In the particular case of this snob bullshit of a remark, no thinking is required. Danylo goes:

"Quote 'Come on, Dany Highfive, honestly?' unquote? Well, dear guest, first of all, thank you so much for your question. Very much appreciate all questions, and this one in particular.

We're touching a very important aspect here. A lot of what we already saw over the last three weeks, a lot of what we have yet to see, over the coming days, all this won't make much sense as long as you don't understand the rich-poor dichotomy.

Not talking the nuances here, no yet. Just the rich-poor basic divide.

There's of course a difference between abjectly poor, proto-dead, sick-and-or-starving, precarious survival etc. one the one side, and basic poor on the other side. Basic poor, that's any combination of substandard income, housing, food, health and access to healthcare, education and social participation. The more of these boxes you tick, the closer you get to abjectly poor.

Sorry for the social sciences slang, it's just to give you an idea, won't delve deeper into this. My point here is to highlight that the poor in general do live, they don't just survive. Live as in choose, between power for the TV or the fridge, having a beer or a haircut, that kind of choices.

There's of course also a difference between the well off, the very well off, the outright rich and the grossly, abjectly, decadently, impossible-to-spend-it-all rich. There's always a more flashy car, the

next bigger house, in a posher area, and more exclusive food and drink to buy. There's a more prestigious university to attend, a more highly rated hospital to pick for your planned surgery. It's perfectly possible to divide the rich into categories, and they do it, a lot. Usually to talk themselves down, compared to the grossly rich, to pay less taxes.

Many nuances, on both sides of the rich-poor divide, but, dear guests, the good news is: We don't need to care about such details. To understand any big city, not just Lagos, a very simple differentiation will suffice, to get the feel. For the sake of simplicity, we focus on income only, and we draw just one line to separate the population into two groups. It's called the median income. A bit of a specialist term, 'median', not to be confused with 'average'.

Let me explain the difference. Let's assume, for the sake of simplicity, that we've got a population of just ten people. Let's assume further that as a group, this population of ten people makes ten coins, ten coins is their collective income as a group.

If this collective income of ten coins was distributed equally, each of them would make ten divided by ten equals one coin, exactly the same as the average.

But with real people and real coins in real life, you can bet they won't make one coin each.

It's far more probable that one of them will make four coins. One will make two coins, adds up to a total of six. Three will make one coin each, adds up to a total of nine. Two will make half a coin each, and three will make no coins at all, perhaps because they're babies.

The average is still one coin, ten coins divided by ten people.

The median works differently. It requires half of the people on each side of the income divide.

With a total of ten people, half of them is five people. So we want the five making more on the rich side, and the five making less on the poor side.

Who will be on this poor side? The three people who make no coins, obviously, plus the two making half a coin each.

And on the rich side, we'll have the one guy making four coins, the one guy making two coins and the three guys making one coin each. Interesting, isn't it?

Gets even more interesting when you go on to calculate the average income on both sides.

On the poor side, a collective income of one coin distributed among five people means an average income of a fifth of a coin. Not much, especially not when compared to the average income of one coin for the whole group we started with.

Whereas on the rich side, a collective income of nine coins distributed among five people means an average income of 1.8 coins. Quite a lot. Nearly double the initial average of one coin.

And guess what: The three guys who actually make that one coin, they won't feel rich.

If you call them rich, they'll go 'Me?! Rich?! Are you mad? Look at the two coin guy, never mind the four coin guy, that's rich! Me, I'm just your hard working average fellow, OK?'

It all depends on your perspective.

Now why am I telling you all this, dear guests? And thanks a lot for letting me proceed with this very convoluted explanation, much appreciated. What's the connection, what's this got to do with whether I'd rather be rich on Balogun Street than poor in a UNILAG highrise?

Well, let's just look at the Pill Box Pharmacy in some detail, shall we?

It's on Balogun Street. Not the poshest location, OK. The building across the road from the pharmacy has been demolished, only rubble and some sections of the front wall left, plus a line of fridges and freezers, not exactly scenic. Bet there's a story, but Google StreetView won't tell it. Let's just note that the immediate surroundings of the Pill Box Pharmacy don't look pretty.

Now let's focus on the pharmacy. Nice pink and white building, freshly painted, ground level plus two upper storeys. Orderly balconies on each upper level, official looking power line connecting the building to the mains, air conditioning unit. Pretty place. Not surprising to read the inscription calling it 'Ahmed Tijani Adele Villa'. Someone is proud of this house, and rightfully so.

And on the ground floor, the jewel, the pharmacy. Everything is neat, new and clean. The actual shopfront with its shiny windows. The caged space in front of it, with its modern ribbed roof, a potted plant for ambiance and a back-up generator. Even the poster inviting you to get your blood pressure checked looks like it just came out of the printing press. And, last not least, the drain is properly covered, by a block of concrete. There's an equally solid bridge allowing you to drive your car into the courtyard behind the large metal gate.

Nice building, nice pharmacy. This place wasn't cheap to build, maintaining it costs a packet. Whoever lives and works here has every reason to be proud. Must feel nice rich, to be able to step out of that air conditioned living room onto the balcony, to look down on much smaller and less fancy buildings, the passersby on the street and the people in the adjacent courtyards.

Well, chances are whoever stands on this balcony is one of the one coin people in my ten people example. He's rich compared to the poor side. He might even employ a fraction of a coin person from the poor side, to do his cooking and his laundry. But he's making just a little more than half the average on his side. Not much at all, by the high standards of the rich side.

That's why I do indeed say I'd rather be rich on Balogun Street than poor on the UNILAG campus.

Just imagine the fate of that one poor student who got in on merit, with a grant barely covering his food expenses. There he sits, right now, with his grumbling stomach, in his room on level five of the high rise. He struggles to concentrate, and knows drinking more water won't help. His next meal will be tomorrow's lunch. Does he look at the sea and enjoy? You bet he doesn't..."

Danylo would have gone on, with all the rage of someone who had to survive in auntie Olga's spare room and on her cabbage. Other students had rooms where they could take an acquaintance. They made friends over delicacies he's only starting to discover.

Danylo doesn't get it all off his chest. The black dot goes: "[Chinese flag icon] Revolution!".

This first comment triggers a whole series of responses. The white dot goes:

"But the student, in the highrise, they'd never let him starve, right? He would have to have committed some wrong, to be left short of food, and so he only has himself to blame. If you are clever and behave, you will be rewarded. Only the bad go hungry..."

The red dot picks it up, and goes one up, two sideways:

"... correction, not exact, something amiss. Only the bad and the dieting go hungry. If you are stupid, or bad in any other way, like driving a car without a license or failing to brush your teeth in the evening, you get punished by being forced to go hungry, for lack of food. If you are pretty, and a lady, because they seem much more affected, your brain will go wrong, making you diet. That's the price to pay, for an attractive outside, the inside fails more readily..."

There really isn't anything the red dot will fail to get wrong in some way. This is getting messy.

The green dot must have reached the same conclusion as Danylo. It goes:

“Hold it, everyone. Dany has just provided us with a valuable clue - thank you, Dany, well done. Let’s not bury this lead under an avalanche of chitchat. We really need to understand what Dany is trying to tell us, to make sure our project achieves what it is supposed to achieve.”

The black dot isn’t easy to shut up. It goes: “Time to piss [pants icon], Dany no boy.”

The green dot ignores the interruption and asks: “Rich on Balogun Street, Dany, really?”

Such a short, harmless sounding question, but Danylo feels caught. He’s suddenly anxious to get it wrong. The green dot is important. It doesn’t do small talk, and never no stupid remarks. Normally, it lets him proceed, only intervenes to calm down the others, when they get too rowdy.

Why does the green dot suddenly make a fuss? What’s the right answer?

Danylo would wish he wasn’t so clueless, about Lagos, and what it feels like, to live there. This whole impostor situation is so bloody demeaning. One moment, he’s going strong, because explaining median income, that’s so no brainer, for a sociologist. The next, his pulse is racing. What if there’s something wrong with Balogun Street, something every Lagosian would know?

Danylo is staring into the abyss, and hating it. He’d love to evade the green dot’s question. He should never have brought in his personal preference, not in a Lagos context he knows dick about. Too late for that kind of wisdom. He has to defend his choice and goes:

“Rich on Balogun Street, yes, that’s my preference. And please don’t read too much into the Balogun Street bit. This is a much more general preference, and the details are too personal to spell out in a professional context. Have to cut this short, sorry.

Let’s just say that if, when and where there a sharp differences, I’d rather be rich on the poor side than poor on the rich side. This is less about the material aspects, because smelly overflowing drains do suck. Not hard to imagine a moment where I’d long for a bit more of a breeze. Smelly drains do suck less, when you can go one floor up, but it’s not an ideal solution.

My preference is more about how I get treated, by my fellow people. As the rich guy on the poor side, I’m calling the shots. People will respect me, leave me alone when I want to be left alone, greet me in a courteous way. All those little details add up to dignity. I eat well, I live well, and I get treated with respect. Whereas on the rich side, I’ll struggle, and get looked down upon...”

Danylo feels uncomfortable. This isn’t a nice rant to hear himself utter. He isn’t even convinced that this is his preference. He’d love the clock to say 19:45 instead of 19:32.

The purple dot smells a rat and goes: “You’re not sure, Dany Highfive. Your voice tells me you’re not. What are you trying to hide? You’re rich, aren’t you? You’re rich. Only question that remains to be resolved is whether it’s the outright or the grossly, abjectly kind of rich. Dany?”

Danylo doesn’t even get to enjoy the relief. The orange dot rides to his rescue, going:

“Sorry, dear, dear Dany. So very sorry! Please don’t let this bother you [bouquet of flowers icon]! It’s OK to be rich. You’re the OK kind of rich. [smiley] [smiley] [smiley] No bad vibes [smiley].”

Danylo feels like crying with one eye while laughing with the other. He made a mess. The sound of his voice conveyed something was wrong. And what happens? A bunch of stupid dots pretend to unmask him as rich. Being wealthy, the one fault he’s sure never to have committed, and that’s what they go for. Just because he’s tired to be everyone’s lackey. Yes, he longs to be a boss, just once. It’s not a worthy aspiration, he’s ashamed of it, hence some of the vibrato in his voice.

He’s also scared stiff to be found out as not Lagosian at all. But he probably shouldn’t be. The dots are so obviously, outstandingly stupid, they’ll never guess. Accusing him of wealth?! Anyone getting him that wrong can be fed auntie Olga’s mashed potatoes as yellow caviar.

The red dot picks exactly the right moment to add its particular grain of salt:

“If Dany is rich, do we need to, you know...? Do to him what we talked about doing, to certain people? This feels a bit... extreme? Like when the one guy gets to shoot one of the other guys who will fall flat dead? That’s very tough punishment, for not having done much.

It’s not really his fault, with only one ball for twenty two people. I can understand why he refuses to run around and just stays between the goal posts to wait for it. Not right, to shoot him, just because he refused to stand with the others, in my opinion. I think we really need to think, before we, you know...? I mean, he’s our Dany, and doing such a good job...”

“... without ever getting red hot mad at stupid clients like you, which is really, really hard. Shut up [skull and crossbones icon]!”, goes the black dot.

The clock says 19:44. Danylo is torn between longing to end the session and a flash of curiosity.

The red dot might be on the verge of revealing something important, judging by the reaction of the black dot. Whatever the secret is, it’s bad news for rich people. This is... interesting. Danylo is dead certain to be able to prove he isn’t rich, if ever the need arises. He’s safe.

“Guys, let’s all calm down and call it a day, shall we?” goes the green dot.

This remark is not intended as a question, as clarified by the same green dots next sentence:

“Thank you, Dany, for a very interesting session indeed. This median income approach, to get two groups of equal size, very interesting, lots of potential. You’re clearly a facts and numbers person, and I think I can tell you, on behalf of the whole group, that we do appreciate.”

If the green dot is happy, so is Danylo. He barely looks at the series of applause icons before closing the session with his customary good bye formula.

Bots, people or aliens? Danylo has been asking himself this same question so often, over the course of the last three weeks, without ever getting anywhere. Tonight, he tilts towards aliens.

No one ever mistook him for a wealthy guy. No one ever will. Unless he wins big on a lottery and goes big bling. But he doesn’t even play, unlike auntie Olga. Never would people mistake him for rich. Same for bots created by people to impersonate people. He’s poor. All his forebears were poor, epochal and circumstantial variations of his own status. He’s primed to stay poor, despite his level of education. He’s not brainy enough to reach poverty escape velocity.

Unwrapping himself from his blanket to immediately slip into his coat, this fucking fridge of a room sucks so bad, Danylo wonders. Aliens, an alien presence with an interest in social differentiation, would this suggest upcoming... change? Are those aliens mighty? And if they are, would this be more of an opportunity, or a threat? On a personal, more exactly his own personal level?

###

On the way to the student club, Danylo refuses to get his hopes up. The aliens might be mighty. They might side with the poor. This would be quite a change. But auntie Olga’s tales of the mixed blessings associated with the last major upheaval don’t bode well.

By the time he reaches the student club, Danylo has made up his mind. Aliens about to proclaim the next revolution are none of his business. He’ll keep doing his job, collect the second tranche of his pay, and wait for it. No need to alert anyone.

If he was rich, he would have a reason, to notify whichever relevant authorities of potentially upcoming trouble. But he isn’t. Nor is his country. Even Nigeria is richer than Ukraine. Why should he care? No reason to risk confidentiality agreement trouble.

Morph is there, waiting for him, in their corner. Anxiety all over his face, until he finally notices Danylo's approach. Always takes him a while, with his partial eyesight. But once he starts beaming, you'd never guess he does anything but brightest bright.

When Danylo hurries back to auntie Olga's, it's a clear -6 C. He refuses to wear earlaps or a bonnet, for style reasons, and his exposed head hurts. To distract himself, he starts planning his next tour.

Today's approach worked well, in principle. Provide a reason, whichever reason, to jump someplace on the map. Go StreetView, scroll fast, zoom in, zoom out, jump again. Give the dots too much to look at, chances are they won't come up with questions.

By the time he reaches his room, Danylo is so cold the barely 8 C feel like warmth. That's not going to last, he has to brush his teeth and get tugged up for the night fast. He has barely made it inside his clammy bed when he jumps out again, to rush to the kitchen and make himself a hot water bottle. It won't help one bit against the bloody fucking humidity, nothing ever dries in 8 C, but nearly burning his toes will distract him from this issue.

Once he's roughly comfortable, Danylo dares lift his sheets a bit, to be able to operate his laptop. On past form, he'll sleep better with a tour plan for the next day ready.

Where to go from Balogun Street? Danylo needs a major axis, he intends to cover some ground on Monday. Owodunni Street looks promising on the map, and the StreetView confirms. More multistorey houses, more traffic, better tarmac, that's tomorrow's first stop all chosen.

Owodunni Street leads to Iwaya Road, which in turn leads to Church Street. Next stop Makoko Road. That one didn't make it onto StreetView, but no problem. Danylo will inform his dots of this fact and jump on, as if this was the most natural and unsurprising of events.

One more jump to reach Herbert Macaulay Way. A major thoroughfare with good tarmac. Sculpted plants grace the separator between its two lanes in both directions, adding a nice touch of green. The Lagos way of infrastructure upkeep, sporadic but intense. Sometimes Danylo scrolls along the blue StreetView ribbons for minutes without glimpsing any sign of maintenance efforts. And then it's all new all at once, road surface, signs, lights, roadside greenery.

The name 'Herbert Macaulay' sounds promising. Some kind of local Herbert Hoover, as in 'Hoover dam' and 'Hoover, the US President' perhaps?

Danylo's subsequent search is rewarded by lots of Wikipedia to quote from. 'Olayinka Herbert Samuel Heelas Badmus Macaulay', that's his impressive mouthful of a full name. Born in 1864, he was indeed a contemporary of the US Herbert. He just died earlier, in 1946. Wikipedia calls him 'the founder of Nigerian nationalism', no less.

Danylo wonders how the Nigerian Herbert would feel, about a Ukrainian talking about his Lagos. Not hard to guess he wouldn't be a fan. Danylo has been feeling uncomfortably light skinned before, but never so sharply. He decides to make amends by praising the victim of his musings. He'll also throw in a bucketful of colonizer bashing, as a kind of homage.

Scrolling along Herbert Macaulay Way, Danylo reaches the Clinic Road junction where he has to decide whether to rush to his island destination fast, by hitting the third mainland bridge.

Tomorrow is November 25 already, there's isn't that much time left. But he's scared to arrive early. As long as he's behind schedule, the dots can't mind the occasional random jump forward, they hopefully won't notice how he does those when he struggles to interpret what he sees. Safer for him to stay mainland for a little longer. He decides to take the slower road.

Past the junction, Herbert Macaulay Way is smaller. It's also one way, in the opposite direction. Feels stupid, to scroll against traffic. Danylo reconsiders and jumps onto Clinic Road.

It's a highway as expected, except for the odd pedestrian trying to get himself killed crossing or traipsing along high speed lanes. They probably live in the two very distinct types of housing bordering Clinic Road. Four or five level blocks on the right, less permanent housing on the left.

Danylo jumps onto Glover Street for a closer look at the blocks. Lots and lots of identical four storey buildings, grey, brimming with satellite dishes and air conditioning units, behind a wall, grey, too. Some kind of gated community, pretty affluent, judging by the cars.

Trying to make sense of the barely readable sign at the main gate, and to discover who would be entitled to rent or purchase here, Danylo discovers the website of LSDPC, Lagos State Development and Property Corporation. He has to share this treasure trove with his dots.

The FAQ alone would fill a full session easy, they're like a how-to guide for the residential expectations associated with a Lagos middle class way of life. Or rather upper middle class, higher end. Once Danylo has converted the price tags of the properties LSDPC is currently advertising, he swallows hard. Not used to such dizzying heights, and with his preference for being rich among the poor suddenly rekindled, he quickly jumps to the other side of Clinic Road.

Doesn't work, Makoko Road phenomenon reloaded. The StreetView car didn't do all of Lagos. There's just a bit of a glimpse of the area visible, mostly low, cabin style houses. Living in one of those should be more affordable than the gated community.

Not really expecting a result, Danylo asks his search engine about Makoko. To his surprise, it's prominent. That is or was the slum on stilts he encountered at the very beginning of his research. There was this picture, of white people in white clothes ferried around the mess in a white boat.

Danylo decides he'd rather not be rich among the stilted housing kind of seaside poor. Pronounced humidity is just not his thing. He jumps back to the LSDPC side of Clinic Road, to find himself some streets to scroll along.

It's a very diverse neighborhood, worth showing his dots. Some very nice, well maintained multistorey houses. Some new ones under construction, a couple of dilapidated ones beyond repair. Not that many shops, the area is more residentially focused.

Danylo settles on Lagos Street. The name is both easy to remember and suggestive of past developments. There are some interesting properties, like three tiny houses next to one big multistorey bunker. Suggests urban planning isn't the local speciality. It's well past midnight when Danylo declares himself well prepared enough and shuts down his laptop.

###

Danylo and his dots end up spending Monday to Wednesday in the selected area.

Scrolling along Lagos, Glover and Simpson Street Danylo becomes so familiar with the area he even learns its name, Adekunle. There's a lot to see, in this mostly residential neighborhood. Tiny houses barely larger than a cabin stand next to modern multistorey buildings proudly displaying satellite dishes and air conditioning units. There are some empty plots, too, suggesting some obsolete stock was destroyed to make way for state of the art housing.

The area is upmarket enough to have made it onto property agent websites. Their pictures allow Danylo to discover what the modern kind of Adekunle residence looks like on the inside.

Some of the flats he gets to see would send auntie Olga weep with despair. She's a last century kind of person, associates Africa with thatched huts. If anyone showed her the roomy salons with the shaded balconies, the state of the art built-in kitchens and the fancily tiled bath rooms currently trending in new Adekunle residences, she'd be at risk of suffering her next stroke.

The prices are steep, though. The Nigerian minimum wage clearly wasn't defined to afford modern housing on Lagos mainland. Even someone making ten times as much, and forfeiting

food to blow it all on cool accomodation, wouldn't manage to rent at the rates on display. Auntie Olga would be oh so familiar with the feelings triggered by this mismatch.

In the course of the week, Danylo gradually gains in confidence.

His dots are the cheerful kind of mostly quiet, they let him get on with it as he pleases. No more hot debates, no more threats. They raise the occasional question, mostly simple and obvious to answer ones, even for an uninformed foreigner, and reward his response with a thumbs up icon. A good final applause from at least eight of the ten dots signals they're happy.

Doing so well, Danylo once again dares leave StreetView to share some of his research findings.

The pictures of the Adekunle flats and property developer descriptions of the area are well received. The dots seem to be as curious as he is to catch a glimpse of the indoor lives of the people they see on the streets. They let him spend many precious easy minutes on ads.

Danylo takes care to alert his guests to the selectivity of the online flat rental offer and the steep rates for the upmarket kinds of modern housing. He warns them that the kind of occupations on display, selling nail polish at a roadside stall, or petrol by the can from a handcart, or sweets from a bicycle basket, won't deliver no fancy apartment. This kind of statement triggers the occasional quip from the black dot, but nothing vicious, no more dot brawls. Whatever happened, during or after his median income lecture, he's being trusted by the majority.

Danylo stays well on the positive side, in everything he says. Very aware of his intrusive role as voyeur in chief, he'd never utter anything that could be misunderstood as condescension, about the people on display on StreetView and their way of life.

Comes easy. Compared to seasonally permafrost Kyiv, Lagos street life is paradise.

Good looking people ambling around, or just hanging out, in colorful summer clothing, that's a gorgeous ambiance. When he ventures out to meet Morph, Danylo encounters haggard oldies hurrying past, ducking into bulky layers of clothing against the chill. He feels himself looking old, too, and not just because of the ugly second hand parka he has to put on because he can't afford a stylish coat. The weather and the darkness kill youthfulness even in the young.

Danylo is forever waxing lyrical, about Lagos street life. He honestly loves the nice houses, the fancy cars, the beautiful people and the alluring displays at the roadside stalls. He greets every single palm tree with a hurray because it's so gorgeously permagreen, so very unlike Kyiv's pitiful life- and leafless skeletons with their promise of more chilly hardship.

Yesterday, Danylo's enthusiasm led to as close to an incident as this peaceful week got.

Trying to jump back to Lagos Street, he aimed badly and landed on Abeokuta Street instead, in front of a primary school flanked by a particularly tall palm tree growing right out of the sidewalk. Danylo had to point out the valiant vegetation. In reponse, the purple dot went:

"Oh come on, Dany. Yes, it's one more palm tree. Yes, it's tall. But it's just one more palm tree, no need to get all excited, it's not that nice. Next thing beautiful potholes, or what?"

Danylo had to think fast, and he did, pretending once again to be a slow reader. The dot had a point. It wasn't interested in anywhere but Lagos, and one more Lagos palm tree was no big news. Trying to sound casual, Danylo went:

"Of course, dear guest, point taken. One more palm tree in Lagos, no news. You're right, it's the kind of tree where you can say 'seen one, seen them all', because of its characteristic basic palm treeish way of looking. Not happening much, over a lot of long empty stem, until suddenly, at the very top, her comes the palm frond. One more palm tree, point taken. But if you happen to be fond of palm trees, you'll always rejoice to see one. It's in the eye of the beholder, as we say.

And this, believe it or not, does even apply to potholes. Let me jump back to the gate of the College of Medecine on Fagbenro Street to explain. Here is this big pothole. It must have been raining just before the StreetView car passed, it's filled with lots of water. If you're one of the people we see walking, you'll stay well clear. Such a street level expanse of water is a threat. A car driving through it, you get all splashed. Bad ugly pothole, as you assume them to be.

Now we look at one of the nice houses, opposite the gate, number fourty. Very nice property, very good place to raise a family, bet there are some kids in this house. Let's imagine one of the kids, six years old. The street is quiet, which is hard to imagine, but for the sake of the thought experiment, we do. Our kid is playing on the street. To the kids imagination, this expanse of water is a lake. The kid can sail ships on this lake. It can drown them. Lots of stories to imagine and to act out, by means of this lake. This is a beautiful pothole. Can you see it?"

Danylo was rewarded with applause, and glad not to have lied outright. He's a fan of palm trees, because he's a fan of anything suggestive of a warm climate. He's an impostor, but he prides himself on his ability to remain as truthful as possible, under the circumstances.

###

With only three more sessions to go, Danylo feels ready to leave the mainland for Victoria Island.

He'll start today's session on Herbert Macaulay Way only to immediately jump to Oyingbo Road, the Ultra Modern Market mall and the bus terminal. A crowded, very active kind of place, with lots of roadside stalls and a mangle of people and cars. Lots to look at.

Next stop Lagos Terminus. The area is surprisingly quiet for a main station, or the StreetView just doesn't get close enough to where the action is. Danylo will only mention some more stalls with alluring produce before taking the big jump to Ereko Street on Lagos Island. Lots of densely built streets to scroll along, no more suburban greenery, the houses are getting forever bigger.

The tour flies by. Not one awkward moment. Forty five minutes of smooth performance, rewarded with unanimous applause. Danylo is starting to regret this stunt will be over soon. What stressed him out over the first couple of days has become a rather pleasant evening ritual. Especially the final appreciation, that's a moment he'll miss. There are bots performing this kind of good vibe service, one can register for a daily dose of praise, but that's just not the same. Real, alive dots caring for a real person, live, that's the real thing. The brain knows the difference.

For the Friday session, his next to last, Danylo plans to provide his dots with the full Gulf of Guinea Gotham experience. They'll look at Lagos and Victoria Island, at seaside high rises and posh residences surrounded by gorgeous palm trees. He'll scroll his dots along roads far more suggestive of Miami/Florida than Lagos/Nigeria. Bourdillon Road will tell the dots about rich.

And on Saturday, their last tour, Danylo will take his dots Lekki. He'll show them some of the many building sites and explain about development phases. He'll mention how some of the buildings should already be completed, because of the Google StreetView time lag. It feels important, to make this aspect transparent. Same for the lack of completeness of their trip. They only visited tiny bits of Lagos, most of the immense agglomeration remains hidden.

Danylo has decided to make his dots grasp this glimpse aspect by analogy. He'll provide them with his estimate of the number of people they've seen on the streets. A couple of hundreds, at most a thousand Lagosians featured on the scenes they visited. But there's a contentious double digit number of millions living there. A comprehensive tour of a location as big, complex and diverse as Lagos is impossible in thirty times forty five minutes. They've spent a total of less than twenty four hours in Lagos, they can't have seen it all. A year of tours, Monday to Friday, fourty five minutes per day, that might work, to get someone properly acquainted with Lagos.

Danylo has decided to pitch this follow up project. The dots like what he's doing and he's hating it less and less these days.

The early sessions were a nightmare, with him bleeding with Lagos incompetence, and only starting to develop virtual tour management skills. But by now, Danylo is doing well. There's still the occasional hot flush of angst, for lack of the practical kind of familiarity with his subject, but overall, he's on top of events, knows his map and how to lead his dots. A year of this, at the same minimum wage, that would be very welcome. He'll try to trigger a corresponding desire in his dots, just in case they're able to make it happen.

Having taken a while to build up the courage to leave his den of blankets and expose more than his nose to the freezing conditions of his room, Danylo is on the point to rush to the bathroom, to get himself under the hopefully slightly tepid shower before his poor body vetoes the whole painful project, when his phone emits the most welcome alert.

Incoming cash? Already? Danylo checks at once, and there it is, ahead of time, again.

He still has two more tours to perform, but technically, his bosses no longer got the means to force him to deliver. The World Bank just transferred the second and final tranche of his tour guide wage to his account. At this uniquely successful point in time, he must be the richest jobless sociology graduate in the whole of Ukraine. Not counting the jerks with rich parents, of course, because their kind don't count. Not their success if they eat and drink well.

Powered out of his bed by the warm glow of his achievement, Danylo proudly proceeds to the bathroom, only to get his mood shuttered back down to more adequate levels by the absence of hot water. No problem for brushing his teeth and shaving, but the rest of his morning routine has become a challenge. If he was one of the first person shooter kind of physically brave men, he'd take a shower anyway. But he's his less meaty self, and might faint under the impact.

Danylo opts for his customary compromise instead. Pyjama off, one quick step into the Soviet era metal bathtub, a deep breath to better endure the impact of having to sit down, tender bare skin against freezing metal, wet the washcloth with the ice cold water and the minimum amount of soap, scrub himself clean one section at a time, fast.

With his teeth clattering, Danylo so envies Lagosians. Right now, he'd give anything for a warm climate. Lagosians are sure to endure their own unfair share of hardships, but at least they get spared freezing their dicks off while cleaning the man. This is one hell of a big privilege.

###

When Danylo reaches the kitchen, he's greeted by an excited auntie Olga. The place smells much better than usual, too, there's a whiff of true coffee aroma in the air. Turns out his nose is right. Auntie Olga went for her equivalent of a bottle of Dom Perignon, half a spoonful of real instant coffee to pimp his cup of the usual. Big news are in the air.

Turns out they're celebrating a letter, for Danylo. It arrived two hours ago, by courier, a form of delivery so novel to auntie Olga she mistook it for a telegram. As there's no one left to die in the family, she's convinced the white envelope with its neat typing and sender logo is bound to mean good news. Danylo is sure to know better. He takes care to have his coffee before opening the message from DataAlcon. One of the companies that never reacted to his online application.

DataAlcon do advertise a lot, online. They pretend to need hordes of staff, graduates only, in a market research context. Theirs are the kind of misleading ads that suggested to Danylo's former, naive self, that the corporate world had only been waiting for him to get his diploma. He sent his full electronic application at once, never to receive any response.

Enjoying his coffee, Danylo wonders how disorganized and awash with cash a business has to be, to be able to waste funds on a courier delivery of a rejection. Unless this is no rebuff. Could this be the jackpot, after all these months? An invitation to an interview, that would be...

With auntie Olga watching him closely, like a dog wagging its tail in expectation of a treat, minus the tail, Danylo takes care to control his own facial expression before opening the envelope. He uses the clean knife provided for this purpose. Never does one tear open an envelope in auntie

Olga's presence. If it's cut open neatly, she can use it for her next correspondence with a pension agency prone to payment delays and miscalculations. With the recycling-friendly opening performed, he gets to unfold and read this letter:

[DataAlcon Header]

[His own name and address, spelled correctly]

Sir, we are pleased to inform you that we are considering your application favorably. You sound like the right person to join our data evaluation team. Please call Tamara Tashenkova on [local phone number] for details.

Kind regards,

[Illegible signature]

Oleg Orugov

HR Analytics & Service

[DataAlcon Footer]

It takes Danylo three quiet rounds to assess what he's reading. Pretty nicely worded, for one more trap. Surprisingly sophisticated, too. To send a real business style hardcopy, and by courier, that's style. He takes his last sip of coffee to soothe his voice before reading the letter aloud, for the benefit of auntie Olga. Her head goes all red with enthusiasm in response. Fearing an imminent cerebrovascular accident, Danylo quickly adds:

"Auntie, easy, please don't go all excited. Let me explain: They only make it sound so nice because they want to sell stuff, just like the letters from the lottery chaps. The ones that talk all about winning cruise holidays, and cars, and houses. There's just this snag, you've got to buy a ticket first, and oh, goes the fine print, you can't be sure to win. You get those, all the time.

Well, this AI data business, and AI, that stands for artificial intelligence, by the way, very computer kind of way to make lots of money, when I call them, they'll probably go: 'Oh hello, dear sir', they always call you sir when aiming for your money, 'of course we've got a job for you. Just sign up for this bit of fancy training. Costs you a mere one thousand Hryvnia, sponsored rate special offer, we're as good as giving it away, just for you, dear sir. Do that, and we might hire you...'"

Auntie Olga is following Danylo's explanation at maximum attention. She's back to pride and devotion, concerning this exquisitely learned nephew kindly sharing his posh people knowledge. Paying for her meds restored a status temporarily damaged by joblessness. Danylo decides to grant her an insight into his world and goes:

"... I'll call them now, auntie, right here, in your kitchen, to give you an idea how they proceed. Back in a second, just fetching a pen in case I need to write down anything. The odds aren't good, but if there's job opportunity in there, I'm making sure it's mine."

When Danylo reenters the kitchen armed with his job application folder, pen and paper, auntie Olga is sitting all ready at the opposite end of a kitchen table she must have wiped clean afresh, for the safety of his paperwork. She's back to joyous anticipation mode, like a one person audience looking forward to watching the stage play of the season. Danylo sits up straight and puts on his business face, as if he was in a real job interview. That's supposed to help, with audio job interviews, says the internet, makes one sound business. No need to hush auntie Olga. She's the kind of person who knows when to shut up tight.

Danylo dials the number listed in the letter, carefully and slowly, tries not to hold his breath and waits for the dialing sound.

It only has confirmed ringing twice when a soft and practiced female voice goes:

"Thanks for calling DataAlcon, Analytics and Services, data evaluation department. Tamara Tashenkova speaking, how can I be of assistance?"

Danylo's letter is in Ukrainian, but this voice is addressing him in English. Four weeks back, he would have been at high risk of stuttering, for lack of practice. Today, he's at his fast response best. After minimal hesitation, he goes, in English:

“Danylo Denerov calling, nice to me you, miss Tashenkova. I’m calling about the job opportunity with the data enhancement team, following your letter. Would love to learn more.”

Hearing himself feels good. He sounds like the right level of interest, neither too keen, suggesting despair, nor too casual, signalling lack of ambition. The Tashenkova person should be impressed. Her response confirms Danylo’s self esteem:

“Well, mister Denerov, congratulations, first test passed, and with merit. A coherent English sentence, pronounced in a way intelligible to a native speaker, this is a nice surprise. You wouldn’t believe how many people write ‘fluency in English’ into their résumé, only to hang up in panic when I answer this phone in English. You didn’t, and sound like English language job experience. Would you mind telling me about it, to give me an idea of your person?”

This is one of the obstacles Danylo fears most, because of his blatant lack of anything deserving to be called job experience. But he did make some cash, using his English language fluency, and both his dots and auntie Olga consider him an accomplished professional. No harm done in talking his feats up a bit, that’s not lying. Making up his pitch carefully, he goes:

“Well, yes, I’ve done a couple of gigs in English, and this experience by the way suggests I should now say ‘please don’t hesitate to call me Danylo’, because this is the anglophone way.

I only graduated this year, as you will sure have noticed, didn’t have much opportunity to practice my profession in spoken English yet, won’t hide my peak skills are in reading and writing it. But as a trained and certified English language tour guide I did dozens of English language events. I’m used to entertain clients, and you can’t imagine the questions they come up with. There’s nothing people won’t ask, during a sightseeing tour, a guide gets to talk about everything...”

Danylo pauses ever so slightly, after each group of sentences, as practiced with his dots. The Tashenkova person gets her chance to cut in. If she doesn’t, he’ll keep talking. He’s got more than enough material all ready to share.

‘Dozens of events’ qualifies as the most truthful kind of bragging. Twenty eight tours with his dots is more than two dozens, and it’s easy to phrase his anecdotes in a way suggesting they took place in Kyiv. Lagos or Kyiv isn’t the point now, this is about his fluency in English.

Danylo keeps going, retelling anecdote after anecdote, still pausing after each to allow for comments. He’s right in the middle of his median income lecture, now rejigged to sound like a response to a question about the obvious differences in wealth in Kyiv neighborhoods, when the Tashenkova person takes advantage of one of his pauses to go:

“Thank you, Danylo, and please do call me Tamara. The jobs is yours, provided you want it...”

Still under supervision by a dumbfounded auntie Olga sure never to question his superiority again, Danylo does a passable job of negotiating the details of his next gig. Because it’s of course a gig, not what real academics call a proper job. But it’s paid work all right, and stunningly easy.

Danylo will work from home, no commute to an office for him. He’ll get a DataAlcom stand of the art laptop he’ll be allowed to call his own after having handled his first one hundred cases to the satisfaction of his supervisor, and will be paid five Hryvnia per case.

His gig consists of bot supervision. DataAlcom are a local subsidiary of a US company, name not to be divulged, running customer interaction bots.

Such bots are still prone to get customers seriously wrong, which negatively affects the client-provider relationship. Whenever abysmal feedback signals lack of satisfaction on the customer side, DataAlcom gets a case. So called data evaluation operators, Danylo’s new title, listen to what happened. They tick boxes to record what went wrong, if it’s a typical kind of bot mistake, or to alert second line bot supervision, if it’s a new one requiring more analysis.

Danylo doesn't hesitate. He'll sign up online right after the call, to fetch his DataAlcom laptop later today, from a computer shop on Kyrylivska Street cooperating with the company.

When he informs auntie Olga what just happened, right before her eyes, her nephew getting himself recruited by an international computer business, she's too awed to comment. Such a lot of alien talking, with such mighty consequences, at her kitchen table, that's a lot of event for an old lady who never gets past the first sentence when trying to find out what kind of drugs the doctor has prescribed, and not just because of her obsolete glasses.

Suddenly aware she might brag, and thereby alert neighbors and other foes to a sudden spike in wealth, Danylo urges her to keep this to herself. Turns out he wouldn't have needed to. Auntie Olga might be partially literate, but this never stopped her from being clever.

Two hours later, Danylo carries one amazing beauty of an as good as new laptop to Morph's flat. In return for signing up for his new gig online, he had been provided with a code that he was able to exchange for the DataAlcom gadget at the store, as promised by Tamara.

The guy at the store, one more recent graduate, didn't hide his envy for the lucky fluent English speakers landing those cool well paying gigs. DataAlcom turned out to have a reputation to pay on time, unlike the computer shop prone to running late, especially in the lean season. And they apparently never run out of cases. "You can make real big money, if you're prepared to drive yourself hard," went the nerd, "acquaintance of a friend of mine, he put in the extra hour, and he's driving his own car now. There are rumors of visa, too...".

Danylo didn't fall for that last one. There are always rumors of visa, the more far fetched, the more readily shared. There's always someone knowing someone who is making it big in the US, Canada, Australia, the UK or some obscure place in non English speaking Western Europe. And it all started with some perfectly accessible opportunity. If there was any truth in such rumors, Danylo would barely recall the smell of auntie Olga's spare room by now.

But the laptop in his bag, that's real. And a mere one hundred cases from now, it will be his, as confirmed in the duplicate contract in his pocket. At this stage, he will be able to sell his old one. That alone means serious money. People don't lie when they say that more money comes to those who already made some. Danylo is living that proverb, and it feels great.

Morph was equally impressed by his idol's newest feat. He reverently shut up, to watch Danylo power up his new device for the first time. Fast, stand of the art machine, current operating system, even two pronounced non geeks recognize good news when they see them humming.

Danylo of course logged into the DataAlcom platform at once, to find himself his first case. No shortage indeed, not at all. He's glad for the suggestion feature, without it he would feel overwhelmed. Keen to find out how long processing a case actually takes, he accepts the first suggestion, marked category HMO, duration six minutes nineteen.

The exchange between bot and customer might have taken minutes, but Danylo knows what went wrong after the first twenty seconds.

The customer, his voice weepy with terminal despair, informs the bot he's withdrawing his application for emergency chemotherapy funding because his oncologist just informed him there's nothing more to try. In response, the bot rewords the withdrawal for confirmation, OK. Next, it thanks the customer for finally accepting the wisdom of selective drug refunding practices, less OK. Next, it pitches the newest policy option, a saving account that will fund one week of spa treatment every year after three years of latency time. Totally absolutely not OK.

Danylo listens to the whole sorry miscommunication, for the sake of diligence, and it manages to get even worse.

When the poor customer restates his dire situation and explains he wants his fellow sufferers to get access to any money they need fast, the bot switches his sales pitch to a shockingly expensive drug refunding diamond policy option.

A more sensitive person than Danylo would be at risk of shedding a tear over this six minutes nineteen masterpiece of a tragedy.

Proves real easy for Danylo to pick the matching issues from a nine item list. This clearly qualifies as 'lack of empathy' and 'pitch misfit'. No need to bring in second line bot supervision by ticking box number ten marked 'other, please specify'.

Once Danylo has clicked enter, the zero in the header, next to his currency symbol, switches to a five. A novice data evaluation operator just made his first bucks.

It's three in the afternoon. If he stays at Morph's and keeps going until 18:45, he can make enough for a celebratory beer for both of them tonight. It will feel good, to pay, for once, and thereby ease the sugar kiddie feelings that have been nagging him more badly than usual since Wednesday. Morph doesn't mind being exploited. Not at all, he's often hard to stop spending. It's all in Danylo's head. He's no prostitute material and his pride suffers.

With just two more dot sessions to go, and his wage safely in the bank, Danylo decides he can risk to ask Morph to listen away while he gets done with his dots.

The kiddie would never talk about what he's going to see, for the simple reason he doesn't have anyone else to talk to. And even if he did, he's only going to understand half of it. Danylo talking about an African city, to whichever 'dear guests', details never mentioned, that's bound to please Morph. He's sure not to find this odd in any way, and will probably love it.

###

Danylo makes another forty five Hryvnia, his target sum for this first day, well before it's time to cater to his dots. The guy at the computer store was right, this is easy money. No human with passable oral English would manage not to get what went wrong.

It's rarely the language processing side. The bots are real good at identifying words, provided the callers speak slowly and with a minimum level of articulation. They are less irritated by what might be the famous southern US vowels than Danylo. But they don't get or react to emotions. Not hard to guess what this human data evaluation is about. The code guys are trying to teach the bots to identify and respond adequately to emotions. They've got a long way to go, and will let Danylo and his colleagues make loads of money before getting anywhere reliable.

Back with his dots, Danylo feels the pressure of live interaction compared to the more leisurely work ambiance of post action assessment. His tour proceeds well, though. No raising of complicated questions. No need to restrain the red dot and its tendency to talk the more about topics the wronger it got them. His dots sit on his screen nicely aligned, tidy and quiet, except for for the occasional icon of approval. Lots to see on Lagos and Victoria Island, happy dots.

With the clock standing at 19:44, Danylo draws breath for his see-you-tomorrow sentence when the green dot goes: "Thank you, Dany, well done, once again. Always a pleasure to tour Lagos under your competent supervision."

By the time Danylo has managed to read this compliment, the other dots have started to join the eulogy. The screen is updating fast, in a mess of applause icons, bouquets of flowers, a mob of smileys from the orange dot and a single Nigerian flag from the black one.

What the hell is going on? Danylo has managed to recheck the date. Today is still Friday, November 29, as he had correctly assumed since waking up this morning. The calendar confirms there is a November 30, as there should be. What the hell is going on?

Danylo is still pondering his reaction, the screen is still updating massively every other second. The white dot took a while to join the melee, but now it's active, and it has come up with a very original kind of praise. It's sending palm tree icons arranged in a pattern that comes pretty close

to looking like a thumbs up. There was effort involved in creating this personalized thank you, research effort at the least. Danylo is touched and finally comes around to say so:

“Thank you so very much, dear guests. This is absolutely overwhelming, just lost for words here. Absolutely overwhelming. Never would I have dared hope you were this satisfied with my humble contribution to your visit. Totally overwhelmed, lost for words, thank you so much...”

Danylo keeps repeating his new overwhelmed mantra for lack of an idea about how to ask the obvious. Is there or isn't there going to be a final tour tomorrow? It doesn't feel right, to react to an avalanche of praise by inquiring about contract fineprint.

In face-to-face service jobs, the service provider, a.k.a servant, has to make the service recipient, a.k.a customer, feel good, at all times. Mandatory to display the kind of joy that supposedly can't be bought, as in smiling like a donkey with a toothache, throughout the interaction. The servant loves to do the customer a favor, it's his greatest pleasure, with or without making money. In such a relationship, certain things can only be thought, never said.

After what feels like an eternity and shows up on the clock as the difference between 19:44 and 19:47, Danylo gets saved by the green dot going:

“Thank you Dany, and calm down, please, you're making too big a deal.”

The black dot adds, and this comes as a relief to Danylo, for once:

“Calm down is the polite way of saying shut up, Dany no boy. Shut up!”

Danylo does as told, glad to be allowed to stop behaving like an idiot. He was starting to feel like a DJ, scratching his own voice into an unnerving endless loop of exaggerated gratitude.

The red dot takes advantage of the pause to shoot:

“Because you are entitled to having November 30 off, Dany, because that's when you join your union, and they have been laboring for this since May Day, and it is our duty to respect, and...”

Danylo holds his breath in a resurgence of terror. How could he omit to check this? He quickly asks the search engine on his phone about Nigerian public holidays.

No problem. Nigerians celebrate May Day and call it Labour Day on the first of May in a nice touch of Africo-European coherence. Workers of the world, unite!

Nigerians have got a National Independence Day on October 1, plus a nicely titled Democracy Day, to celebrate the end of military rule. This one used to be on May 29, to commemorate the swearing in of Olusegun Obasanjo on May 29, 1999. It was switched to June 12 in 2018.

Nigerian politics, definitely on a par with Ukraine, concerning dynamics. Auntie Olga would be surprised to find out how much she has in common with an auntie Ogo of the same age, if ever they managed to meet and find themselves a Ukrainian-Yoruba translator.

By 19:48, Danylo has overcome what felt like a spike of fever, his body's reaction to the imminence of finally being exposed as a cheat, after so many lucky streaks. The screen is still updating with an avalanche of red dot bullshit. Danylo is getting tomorrow off, that much is clear. But why, and who decided this, remains a mystery. Trusting the green dot to sort things out when and if the red dot ever stops posting, Danylo stays mute.

He longs to get rid of the dots now, as fast as possible. Never should he have come up with the stupid idea to pitch for more of this. If he makes it through these last minutes, he'll never ever again participate in any virtual tours of Lagos, except perhaps as a customer keen to find out what the place really is like, from the point of view of a connoisseur.

The green dot has been very patient today, perhaps curious to find out if the red dot would ever stop by itself. Not for a long while, obviously. When the red dot once again reaches the character limit for each individual chat, the green dot cuts in:

“To sum up a very long and probably confusing tale, dear Dany, you get the day off tomorrow. This is, or rather was, our last tour.

Two of your guide colleagues kindly informed their participants, independently of each other, but in similar terms, of all kinds of traditions around paid work. They mentioned six day weeks, the weekend concept, paid leave, special rules for pregnant women, that kind of stuff. They also invoked a presumed right to organize and strike, to enforce adherence to traditions.

I’m sure you know more about the concept of labor laws than we do, so I’ll spare you details of the conflict. In the end, taking into consideration the forty-five-minutes-a-day specifics of this job, arbitration declared that we owe you one paid day of leave per month. As you never asked for any leave and all tour guides are entitled to the same benefits, you get your day off tomorrow.

Thank you, Dany. It was a pleasure to tour Lagos with you. Fare well!”

And they disappear. It’s 19:49, all dots are gone and Danylo is done. Never again will he have to be Dany tour guide Highfive. Never again will he hold his breath in terror, expecting to be asked about the Lagos background he doesn’t have next. Never again will he have to rehearse what he would have countered, his exit phrase: ‘Sorry, dear guest, no personal details. This wouldn’t be professional. One needs to keep one’s person out of it, to deliver an objective impression’.

Danylo has been dreaming countless variations of the ultimate dot tour calamity. The questions they might have come up with. His ways to fail answering. Them insisting on a proof of his location competence, ever more robustly. The shame. An abyss of shame.

Danylo has spent the last weeks in fake tour guide purgatory. Sometimes, following a rowdy session, he’d wake up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, to check there was no sign of having gotten sacked in his inbox. Or he’d stop brushing his teeth in mid action, suddenly aware that a question raised three hours earlier might have to be answered differently, in a Lagos context. Danylo has suffered to the core, for his one month of minimum wage.

And now he’s done. Danylo jumps up. Raising both fists in a boxing match victory pose he yells “Done, done, done!” at the walls in ecstasy. A surprised Morph looks up from whatever he was busy doing on his own laptop, beaming.

“Done!”, goes Danylo once again, before quickly sitting back down.

Something in Morph’s way of looking at him suggests a precise idea of what to do in celebration. Danylo is suddenly very aware that raising his fists high while wearing a well fitting shirt over low waisted trousers exposed his navel, a strip of naked flesh and the elastic of his red briefs. That’s were Morph’s eyes went, with relish.

No way. This sugar kiddie won’t make him jump to physical, not even now.

Morph seems to understand his eyes just broke a taboo. At his most submissive, he goes:

“Your English is so great, Danylo, just like the guys on television. I could listen to you for hours. Just how you say ‘sank you’, with the th sounding neither like a t or a d nor like an s or a z, just like the guys on television, that’s so perfect. When I try to say ‘sank you’, it always sounds like ‘sank you’. Ha, hear sat? I just did it again...”

That’s better. Danylo relaxes. Morph praising his English, that’s nice to have. He’ll let him keep it up for a while, perhaps even for the rest of the evening.

His language prowess is a proven safe topic, low risk of mutating into romantic allusions. Low risk. Not zero risk. Morph’s unconventionally wired brain is prone to surprising associations. He’s

able to ramble on about seaweed for an hour, what types there are, where it grows, if it's edible or can be used for any other purpose, loads of utterly harmless bits of knowledge, only to suddenly describe what it feels like to have your legs and lower body entangled in floating tendrils.

On second thoughts, Danylo prefers to stop Morph before he switches to praising his voice. This has happened, and felt too intimate. Forcing himself to think of Morph as the cute little brother he never had, Danylo puts on his most appreciative face and goes:

“Agree, this job went very well indeed. And tonight, the two of us celebrate it's done. Our beers are one me, and don't you dare try talking back. My English made me good money, and I'm going to share the spoils with you. Let's go, shall we?”.

This sends Morph beaming so hard, throughout their walk to the student club, that the Kyiv November evening struggles to maintain an adequate level of chilly darkness. No streetlight is a match for a sugar kiddie finally getting himself invited back.

Danylo hadn't been aware of how obvious the cash differential angle of their friendship is to Morph. He promises himself to pay the beers once a week. He should have noticed earlier, how awkward the situation feels for his little brother, but his income didn't allow such empathy.

The student club is packed, as befits a Friday night. Such a lot of kids, and they're all babbling and laughing at once. Having helped Morph secure a nice spot with a bit of wall to lean on, Danylo frays himself a passage towards the bar to get them two bottles. Two, not four, and no crisps or peanuts. He's a data evaluation operator, not mister Zuckerberg.

Unlike Morph, Danylo is served at once, and back at their spot in no time. The kid has to shout to thank him, prompting Danylo to tell him not to strain his voice. This sends Morph laughing and explaining, for what feels like the one hundredth time, how he doesn't have to fear a sore throat because of some nerve damage that occurred during the weeks of artificial coma and machine supported breathing that followed his accident.

On past form, Morph will keep shouting until his voice fails him, painlessly. Danylo let's him proceed with his routine. He tells his own mind to come up with one more Maksym reverie.

Doesn't work. No Maksym for Danylo, not today, his pretty face fails to show up.

Danylo sees dots instead. He's done with them. Good. But what the hell are they?

His inner data evaluation operator insists the dots can't be bots. He handled ten bot mishaps earlier today. These bots, despite talking in nicely pitched voices, were much less alive than his dots. Even though his dots only communicated in writing, at inhumane speed.

Real bots are robotic, formulaic, as devoid of personality as the next circuit board or spreadsheet. The service jargon is there all right, bots can utter it in perfectly articulated English, but when their voice tries to sound mellow it only feels creepy. Bots are bots.

Whereas dots clearly aren't. No programmer would manage to make a bot as cheerful as the orange one. Nerds just aren't that kind of people. They'd perhaps manage to code sarcasm. But the black dot and his 'time to piss [pants icon]'? Not plausible. Same for the mind loops of the red dot. A bot, it gets things wrong in a far more straightforward and logical way.

Danylo wonders, more seriously than ever before, now that he no longer fears the sack.

If the dots aren't bots, and can't be people, because why the hell pay them? To make fun of Danylo, and eighty six Nigerian Danylo kind of guys? Come on?!

If the dots are neither bots nor people... The alien dot hypothesis looms large.

Danylo would love to liaise, with his now former tour guide colleagues. Two of them must have managed to meet and plot. This demand for paid leave, it was synchronized, obviously. You don't

come up with such a demand on your own. There's not even a Nigerian legal basis for the request. Danylo once checked the labor laws on Wikipedia, just in case. Two tour guys managed to meet and decided to try their luck. He'd love to hear their best dot guess.

The more he thinks about it, the more Danylo becomes aware of his own disadvantaged position. The other eighty six tour guides, most probably genuine Lagosians, or at least familiar with the place, they had much less to fear, over the last four weeks. Some of them will also share a non English language allowing them to communicate discreetly. What if...

Morph selects this perfect moment to shout his readiness to fetch the next set of beers. Danylo nods, eager for the half hour of privacy this move is going to provide. Once Morph is on his way towards the bar, struggling to convince people to make way for him, Danylo takes out his phone and asks the search engine to translate 'alien' into Yoruba. 'Ajeji' goes the phone.

No, no #ajeji on Twitter. Danylo had taken care not to go there, over the last month. The lower his profile, the less danger of being exposed, went his reasoning. With such precautions no longer necessary, to safeguard his cash, he feels liberated.

Morph has made it to the bar, and is failing to attract the attention of the bar man. More than enough time for one more search. How about 'aliens'. 'Awon ajeji' goes the phone. Interesting pattern. If ever Danylo finds the time, learning Yoruba might be an option.

Yes, yes indeed, #awonajeji is being discussed, by a number of people, since November 2. One @ajejinator, an account created on this same November 2, started the conversation, by asking, in plain good old English, if anyone else happened to have landed a job catering to #awonajeji.

"The #awonajeji with the minimum wage?", asked one Uzoh in return.

"Me too, minimum wage, virtual visit, #awonajeji," went one Richard.

Even more explicit, the_other_girl contributed "Naija #awonajeji tour guide [thumbs up]."

Danylo feels like a perfect imbecile. His colleagues got away with discussing what is supposed to be a big dark secret in broad Twitter daylight.

No, not in broad Twitter daylight after all. Scrolling through the discussion, Danylo discovers some of his colleagues must have switched to direct messages, phone calls, face-to-face meetings or whatever other means of communication. Some public exchanges stop abruptly, only to resurface a couple of days later with allusions to agreements that must have been reached somehow. He has not been the only one taking precautions.

Danylo wonders if he could risk sending a DM to one of his presumed colleagues. He'd struggle to word it. "Hi, I'm an Ukrainian impostor who snitched one of the Lagos tour guide jobs. Do you think the dots represent genuine aliens?" pops up, viciously reactivating his fears.

Morph did it, he's on his way back. Tenacious, incredibly, superhumanely tenacious, that's him. Makes him occasionally awkward company, but it delivers the beers. Probably saved his life, too. He's so stubborn, Danylo easily pictures him refusing to die, hour after hour, day after day.

Danylo reaches a decision. His dots might be aliens, but that's somebody else's problem. He's done with them, good riddance, best to forget this whole episode.

When Morph reaches their spot, they clang their beer bottles once more, carefully.

Later, Danylo will accompany him to the front door of his flat, to make sure he gets there safely. He's a guy with a light limp and curly hair. Some weekend toughs might go for him, if he walks alone, just for the fun of it. Then Danylo will walk to auntie Olga's, fast, because a strong stride and flat hair might not deter all kinds of weekend toughs. He's not obviously gay, but still...

Danylo is done with his dots and landed a permanent gig. So far, so good.

###

It's getting hot and smelly, in the meeting room on level seven of the World Bank headquarter in Washington, DC. Expensive aftershaves, deodorants and body odors mix in an unpleasantly sweet fog, They've been at this for over two hours. They've got one more hour to go, according to their schedule. And zero chance to get some of their time back. Not today.

The initial presentation by the evaluation consultant went well, he did his thing fast.

They spent exactly as much as planned, per participant. Their ludicrous cover story was challenged even less than assumed, no one withdrew his application. All eighty seven applicants signed up and stayed the course. Five cases of one respectively two days of sick leave, one unexcused failure to show up, once, everything else on time.

Only one glitch, but a big potential showstopper of an unfortunate one: They had aimed for one hundred and fifty participants, but only managed to recruit eighty seven. That's a catastrophe. No serious professional will be prepared to derive percentages from a cohort of less than one hundred. Project Helicopter Money is both a resounding success and an abject failure.

On the success side, all indicators point to increased self esteem and activity. Providing recent graduates with a mere month of employment works wonders. They strive, they perform, they regain confidence, they use the little money they make to unlock other opportunities. It's amazing, how a tiny sum manages to improve their lives. More than half of the cohort are working in December. Mostly in precarious jobs, they won't be starting no families on this basis. But compared to October, they're on track for a bright middle class future.

Also on the success side, the trajectory of the cash. Most participants spent most of what they made right away, in their communities. No losses to graft. Some of the cash was turned into alcohol and other recreational drugs, as was to be expected, with young people. But a surprisingly big amount went for sensible basic purchases, like better food. Similar spending patterns at a larger scale, with a targeted number of ten thousand participants, can be expected to deliver benevolent and self sustainingly positive effects on the communities.

On the failure side, just that one big blob of a bad surprise that has been haunting the team for two months now, ever since it became obvious their offer wouldn't attract enough takers. With so many jobless recent graduates out there, it should have been easy to attract one hundred and fifty participants. They had even prepared apologetic rejection messages. Instead, they ended up reposting their initial tweet, against protocol, to still attract too few participants. The wording clearly needs to be reconsidered and rephrased, for phase two. If there is a phase two.

Whether or not to recommend a phase two, that's the ongoing debate.

At the beginning of the third hour, the meeting has reached the five-people-eight-nuanced-opinions stage of confusion. They're talking in circles, and will keep going as long as the chairperson, a guy as firm as a marshmallow, is prepared to let them.

Joyce has seen this kind of blockage before. Civilians, about as good at decision making as they are at handling guns. You can't trust them with either. She'd love to intervene, to force this mess of a group to make up whatever collective mind it hides under hours of talking. "Phase two, yes or no?" is what she'd love to shout, to have them raise their hands in favor or against.

But she can't, absolutely not. That's not her role. She talks as little as possible, and no initiatives. She's the IT presence, only here to comment on e-aspects of project Helicopter Money. A tricky cover story. Joyce's IT skills don't amount to much more than the ability to read and write emails or use the NSA HR portal to apply for her annual leave. She knows dick about coding, and dick to the power of dick about bots. The less Joyce talks, the safer.

Bill is telling Ben, again, about the dramatic improvements that can be achieved by giving young graduates in a high youth unemployment area their first job. Earlier studies have shown it, project

Helicopter Money proved it, minus that scientifically irksome less than one hundred aspect no one ever fails to mention, again and again and yet gain.

“Give them just one job, for just one year, and watch them take off like rockets”, goes Bill. According to him, hope, deliverance, chocolate cake and the future of Africa depend on just one action, to be repeated until the last graduate has completed his one year on a minimum wage. Whatever the issue, from teen pregnancies to water wastage, it will all be resolved by this one magic wand, the first job, writ large.

Joyce likes Bill’s stubbornness. How he keeps charging, as single minded as a bull hypnotized by a red flag, that’s refreshing. And he sticks to one clear goal. Bill aims for one year on the minimum wage for as many African graduates as he can get away with.

Normally, Joyce is no fan of do gooders. Too soft, too reluctant to face up to harsh realities that don’t just dissolve because of some bleeding hearts. But this one wears a suit and punches above his weight. She’d rather like him to get the money.

Ben the banker, a professional background no one failed to notice because he starts every second sentence with a rather haughty sounding “in my capacity as a banker” doesn’t give a shit about the unemployed, be they young, old, smart, dumb, African, American or both. He wants to publish, preferably something that will earn him a Nobel prize in economics.

Ben is behind the project name. He wants to try a helicopter drop of cash on a much larger than eighty seven recipients scale, to prove the potential of something he calls ‘Post-Keynesian Micro-Macro Cathalytics’. It already comes with an acronym, PoKMMC, just in case. Sends Joyce thinking Pokémon, which by some weird mind process makes the acronym stick.

Having had the opportunity to try to make sense of Ben before, Joyce has done her research.

Economists actually do use the term Helicopter Money. No airborne hardware involved, but the distribution of cash they have in mind is about as targeted as if you’d fly a heli over DC, throw out bundles of cash and let chance decide who finds it. ‘Take a big sum, blast it out and let it roll’ is considered, by some economists, as the most sensitive way to avoid or end an economic bust.

It’s also a perfect way to trigger a riot, in Joyce’s experience. She hates bankers, for pretending to know all about money without ever having carried a gun to protect it.

Ben the banker wants a second stage, and to distribute millions. He’s fine with targeting the jobless graduates Africa provides in adequately large numbers. So far, so aligned with Bill.

What Ben doesn’t want and only accepted reluctantly even for stage one is all the hustle with providing jobs. He’d rather find the graduates, get them to provide their bank details and transfer the cash in exchange for no action whatsoever. Ben is afraid they’ll struggle to recruit enough applicants, and that the administration involved in them getting to do something will burn too much cash he’d rather distribute. “The bigger and the more regionally focused the drop, the easier to monitor the effects,” he keeps saying.

Joyce is young enough to know Ben’s recruitment worries are misplaced.

They only need to find themselves a good influencer, not hard with the buckets of cash available, and let him do the rest. Ten thousand graduates easy.

Joyce was actually surprised that eighty seven applicants managed not to let themselves be deterred by Ben’s hopeless video. Never, not even at her lowest finances hour, would she have reacted to that creepy tweet. She was stuck tight enough to embark on a military career, but Ben and his aliens, that’s for the terminally desperate.

An influencer posing against some fancy Lagos background, whatever that may be, a catchy slogan, ten thousand recruits easy. And if Joyce is wrong, a free air time lottery will do the trick.

People like her own baby brother forever waste money clicking on anything tagged FREE. Should be possible to make them earn some by the same approach.

Ben's recruitment worries are misplaced, but Joyce can't say so. She's supposed to "sit tight, look diversity and listen hard", according to her brontosaurus of a manager.

A spymaster asking her to listen hard, instead of recording the meeting, shows how little clue he has, around the practicalities of her current assignment.

This is the World Bank, not the the Chinese embassy. Top notch security is for superpowers and tech giants making money, not a cosy institution wrestling with the challenges of spending it.

No one asks about phones at reception, nothing stops you from recording details of your visit. You get asked which meeting you've come to attend. Next, you get a badge saying 'visitor', and advice on how to reach room 701 located on, surprise, surprise, level seven. By means of an elevator accessible right from the hall, now who'd have guessed.

Joyce spares one more drop of heartbleed for the pretty boy stuck at the reception desk. A live greeting robot, how demeaning. Does the permagrin hurt? Can he switch it off at the end of his shift? Or will he treat his mom, girl, or boy, to that same face?

Joyce isn't proud of her role, but she's better off than reception boy. She gets to sit, he has to stand. She can get herself a formerly chilled coke from one of the five eight bottle containers, one for each participant. Reception boy is sure not to eat or drink without taking an unpaid break. She can blame racism for her woes, he failed to take advantage of white privilege.

Ben is nearly done. He has been repeating his mantra, "Let's just get that money out there" twice. The third round is always the last. He'll boom the phrase once again, this time with a telltale pause at the end, as if he was just refraining himself from adding "for fuck's sake!". Or perhaps "for God's sake!", in a believer context. Ben will let the sentence hang there, unfinished, take a deep breath, sit back and look at the participants one by one, a bit longer than necessary.

Pretty good rhetorics, but this won't distract Joyce from hating bankers.

Bill is already wriggling on his seat, with one hand raised. He's poised to shoot back "yes, but...". No fancy speechifying to be expected from Bill. He'll just bang on, about one thousand and one ways of young educated people to "take off like a rockets thanks to their first job". The job, the activity, and the pride associated with it, that's what counts, according to Bill.

Joyce likes Bill, but she's far from convinced. If you're broke, you need money. Getting it comes as a relief, and allows you to do things, surviving and more. That feels good, makes you hopeful, provides you with the drive to act. Whether you got the money through luck or work, easy or hard, more or less legal, that's so secondary as to be irrelevant. If you're broke, you need money.

Bleeding heart Bill doesn't deny the importance of money. But he's very much into the feelings side, once again banging on about selffulfilling prophecies, virtuous circles and the rest. Sounds like he will be going for another ten minutes, with a new list of examples.

Joyce checks the chairman for signs of upcoming interventionism. Mister Nangosuthro Ng'anmanimwa, according to the business cards he took care to distribute, doesn't display any.

Ever since his opening words, the chairman has been sitting there quietly. He mostly does listen, or at least look at Ben and Bill taking turns talking. He only occasionally checks something on his smart watch, briefly. The chairman looks on board, but chair he doesn't. Joyce hopes the watch will help him notice when their time has run out.

The evaluation consultant is in stoic acquisition mode. His face is set to eager professional. He'd obviously rather eat his light blue silk tie than display one sign of impatience.

Joyce wonders how much blue tie making. If the World Bank is anything like her own employer, the most juicy bits never go to the in-house public servants. They're destined for private companies with fat basic salaries and even fatter bonuses. This white sir, because that's how he'd be used to be called, judging by his polished manners, plays the humble servant to three black World Bank managers, but Joyce would bet her risk premium he's making more than any of them.

"... providing them with a job worked, we know it did. We get ourselves professional help to scale up recruitment to ten thousand, we run stage two just like stage one, and we'll know, once and for all. Just imagine ten thousand young Lagosians taking off like rockets. If the IT can do it, and our fantastic IT lady nodding tells us it can, we have to do this. We need to know. Stage two, just like stage one. Come on, everybody, this is a no brainer."

By the time bleeding heart Bill is done, Joyce has recovered from the burst of adrenaline. She hadn't been listening, was lucky that her reflexive nod fitted in well. It's correct, too. There's no IT challenge associated with stage two. Ten thousand WebEx sessions, that's a mere rounding error of no capacity bottleneck in a world of millions of streamed movies.

The room has gone quiet. Bill is looking at her, expectantly. Same for Ben. Would he be hoping for her to shy away from the scale? A banker should know IT guys better than that. They never shy away from scale. They go big. And whenever big doesn't work out, they'll next go "oops, just a tiny performance glitch, consider it fixed." Joyce hesitates for one more fraction of a second. Shutting up worked well so far, no need to switch strategies yet.

The chairman joining the expectant faction, that's a trigger. Joyce clears her voice and goes:

"No IT bottleneck, we can do stage two, at whichever scale you fancy. Recruit one thousand we do one thousand. Recruit ten thousand, we do ten thousand. Recruit one hundred thousand, we do one hundred thousand. We can do stage two, at whichever scale, any time."

Bill loves it, he's nodding along enthusiastically. Ben has raised an eyebrow in doubt. He doesn't say "one more IT brag", he makes do with thinking it as visibly as possible.

The consultant nods ever so slightly, to join the winning team.

The chairman looks at his watch. Visibly pleased with what it tells him, he goes:

"Stage two it is, then, starting April 1. Bill, you liaise with procurement to find us someone to recruit ten thousand Lagosian graduates. No amateur video clips this time. To reach that kind of numbers, we need a proper so-called influencer running a proper online campaign. If the regular guys at procurement don't know what you're talking about, look out for any intern they might have. Promise him a two year contract for delivering the numbers. He'll be glad to get things going in a way that attracts enough young people.

By the way: No mention of aliens this time. We've been lucky so far, but confidentiality will never work at scale ten thousand. If we stick with that creepy cover story, it's sure to leak. Call those bots guests, visitors or customers, deeply committed fans of Lagos with a preference for anonymity, that'll do just fine. We'll have the kids sign the shut-up paperwork, of course, but no need to emphasize that aspect. Regular professional procedures, period. Anything else?

No, perfect. Thanks for your time, happy holidays, and good luck to all of us in April."

Joyce quickly heads for the ladies, to deny the other participants any chance to force her into a round of small talk. Her shambles of a cover story wouldn't survive a sustained attack.

Ben the banker cornered her once, in the elevator, and she had to resort to impromptu flirting to evade his questions. No way she lets this happen to herself again.

###

Joyce takes her time in the privacy of her cubicle, catching up on her private life.

Her red cap neighbour asks her to join his shooting team for a charity event.

A dog shelter needs a new roof. Not hard to guess the neighbors intentions. If he only wanted a veteran on his team to improve the score, that would be acceptable. Joyce couldn't care less, about dog shelters, but no problem. But there is a far more problematic angle. Red cap is the kind of guy who loves to brag about black friends he doesn't have, to justify his racism. Joyce would rather shoot him than help with that. Picking extra polite words, she claims a scheduling conflict.

Joyce's flat mate announces a date. This is important news, calls for action.

There's a one in five chance of Maria showing up with a guy in tow. Such an additional presence in the flat forces Joyce to wear at least a bathrobe whenever she leaves her room. She has to check the whereabouts of the bathrobe, and reposition it to remind herself to put it on.

There's another one in five chance of Maria calling Joyce to rescue her, around midnight. She'll have to pick a long movie and stay clear of booze and mist, to be ready to drive at short notice.

Last not least, there's at a three in five chance for the experiment to end in sobs. Joyce has to check if there's enough booze to soothe such sorrow.

Having put Tequila at the top of her shopping list, Joyce tries to recall the contents of their fridge to figure out what else they need. Technically, it would be Maria's turn, to go for groceries, but her bastard of a boss once again didn't pay on time.

Dreamers really have it bad these days, and not just because of ICE. Everybody feels entitled to take advantage. Maria really needs someone to wed, to get herself onto the safe side.

So far, the marriage material she managed to unearth wasn't any. She's as ready for old, fat and ugly as she has to be, under her circumstances, but this isn't sufficient. Smelly boozers with a psychopathic angle and a criminal record, that's the deal of the day.

It's an ugly world. Joyce has to remind herself of the odds she herself is fighting, to avoid feeling privileged, and adds diet cheesecake to her groceries list next. She'll have to run a dozen extra miles, to work off the extra calories, but that's fine. With stage two of project a Helicopter Money decided, she has a lot of thinking to do. No problem to jog for hours.

Joyce's favorite casual wear online store is doing a Black Friday reloaded special. Cool bit of marketing. They pretend to misinterpret the black in Black Friday, only African American models on display. A bling themed hoodie Joyce has been noticing for two weeks has been subjected to a ten percent rebate. She'll look cool in this. The savings she had planned to waste on a third business jacket gets repurposed. Prioritizing and decisive action, her forte.

Lots of social media notifications to scroll through, but nothing worth more than a glimpse. No events upcoming. She might have time to go and say high to Jay this weekend.

Her favorite former team mate has been stuck at the VA Medical Center for eight weeks, undergoing rounds and rounds of surgery, to fix what is left of his "lower limbs and more", as he puts it. Can't even use his wheelchair in his current condition of stitch up, the poor darling.

Joyce only just stops herself from announcing her visit. "Don't commit too fast", her PTSD shrink taught her, to avoid burnout risks, and what a valuable teaching that is.

Checking the time, Joyce is surprised to see she has spent nearly half an hour on the loo, doing nothing work related whatsoever. Her job really has its perks.

Walking down the stairs, to avoid bumping into anyone who might talk to her, Joyce decides to drive to the nearest Walmart. She has to get her debrief done in her agency special features SUV, to make sure no one listens in. That looks least odd on a Walmart parking lot.

The drive is surprisingly smooth and faster than expected.

Once she has secured a corner spot on the parking lot, Joyce decides to do the extra diligence and listen in on some of her recording of the meeting before calling her manager for debrief.

Blue tie did a good job. He makes perfect sense in audio only mode, no need to see his slides to get the message. The picture he paints is surprisingly complete and accurate, too. He doesn't have access to the comprehensive kind of material Joyce's back office gathered, had just a couple of observations and questionnaires to go by, and he got there.

How blue tie describes the participants, not just statistically, also by means of telltale anecdotes, that really brings them alive.

Like that geology graduate. He pitched his sisters interior design baubles to the dots, right on his first day on the job. The guy made two applause icons and one "nice". He went on to proclaim those same baubles "appreciated by the most sophisticated of international visitors" on Twitter, got his Tweets boosted, sold some of his sisters stuff, used his earnings to start a web shop, sold a lot more stuff and is by now considering to expand beyond Lagos, provided he manages to resolve some delivery and payment issues.

Joyce pauses the recording. Lagos, Nigeria. The place is starting to haunt her.

She had never heard of Lagos, had to check the location on a map when she got this assignment. She's well travelled, like most veterans. She did her fat share of Kabul and Baghdad, both via Incirlik, plus one stunt each in Tallin, Cairo and Okinawa. She has been all over the planet. Mostly to military bases, of course. But she still got a feel, for what it's like, overseas.

Joyce's career carried her to many faraway and exotic places, but never to sub Saharan Africa. She wonders what it would be like, to be able to change into civilian gear and walk the Lagos streets looking just like the locals. And they even speak English.

When she accepted the assignment, Joyce didn't think twice, about postponing her university aspirations once again. What was not to like, about a low risk occupation delivering degree level money and excellent healthcare without the need to engage in a laborious study process first? She was glad to get spared the effort, busy enough getting used to the everyday challenges of civilian life, like having to organize her own housing, food and transportation.

Joyce is still comfortable with her choice, but...

When she signed up, she had no idea what she would be doing. A jump into the dark. That's the idea, with the so called Intelligence Community. She was fine with dark. Someone has to check, for threats, to minimize the use of the armed forces. This kind of checking is best done without fanfare. She signed up happily, and spent her first year not doing much, from home.

Her manager explained that other novices had to undergo a basic drill, usually at some military facility. But with her coming straight from the armed forces, there was no need for such a phase. She was told to internalize the SOPs at home, and wait for her first assignment.

The SOPs were basically the same old, with a little extra emphasis on confidentiality.

The first assignment that materialized soon enough involved a lot of reading. Someone or something, most probably some kind of software, was monitoring online chat rooms for signs of militant radicalism. Joyce's role was to join selected chats as a mostly silent member, under an alias suggested by the software, and report her impression at least once per week.

She guessed this might be some probation period, and worded her reports with care. It took her longer to research official government speak to describe the assorted loonies she was getting to observe than the actual listening, but hers was the right move. Her editorial effort greatly pleased her manager. He even called her, to praise her diligence, in the kind of appreciative words that suggested he had been expecting less, from a female POC. A good start.

Joyce would have loved to keep monitoring online madness from home, but this happy phase only lasted for a couple of months.

One fine Wednesday, her manager once again called her. He at first inquired about her job satisfaction, which she of course confirmed. He went on to ask if she felt field operations ready, which she of course confirmed even more enthusiastically.

Audibly pleased, her manager explained he wouldn't normally select a novice, especially a female POC, for the more dicey kind of job. But they were facing an emergency, and a POC would fit in more easily, because the very particular setting swarmed with Africans.

Joyce ended up in project Helicopter Money because of her race. Because of the twisted racist mind of her manager. She's convinced a real IT expert, or a real development expert, would do a much better job, regardless of his or her race. But that's not something to tell a manager.

She got the assignment. It's her duty to keep going as best she can.

Visiting Lagos, to find out what it's really like, that would be nice. She has been straining her brain for an excuse for such a business trip, but there's no viable rationale so far. As long as what she has to call 'undefined entities' doesn't do anything more aggressive than ask to spend loads of money on Lagosian graduates and engage in onscreen games, she's stuck.

Joyce checks the time and discovers she has been in this parking lot for more than an hour. She better hurry now, to be ready for whatever evening surprises Maria's date might entail.

She fast forwards to the end of the meeting. No need to listen to bleeding heart Bill versus Ben the banker again, she has heard enough of this today. She'll just check the closing statement of the chairman, to make sure she didn't miss any nuance.

Never would she have guessed Ng'anmanimwa to come out so top.

Bill, that's the kind of African American professional Joyce would like to show black bad neighborhood kids, for role model. Like Barack Obama, minus the politics. Perfect.

Ben less so. But he made it into to upper echelons of the lily white banking world and wears his fancy suit with style. Pretty presentable, in his weird money man way.

Whereas everything about Ng'anmanimwa suggested failure. How could anyone be expected to take seriously some old chap with an unpronounceable name and sagging eyelids, not hiding his obesity under a dress code more reminiscent of night than business wear?

Joyce was and is stunned by the prowess of the chairmen. His backward looks hide a smart mind. He did listen after all, and he did make sense, and he did reach the right conclusions, down to the influencer angle. A proud moment, for African savvy. Makes one wonder.

Joyce calls her manager. He answers by the third ring, as usual. Not much to do, her personal brontosaurus, if he can keep himself in standby throughout the day. She doesn't waste time on niceties, as per her usual, always the straight shooter, and goes:

"Stage two has been decided, sir. Starting April 1, scale ten thousand. Same procedure, basically, just an upgrade of online recruitment, to be performed more professionally. No more mention of aliens. Less emphasis on confidentiality, too, but we use the same paperwork. Shut up for most of the meeting, as per your orders, except for confirming IT feasibility. No incident."

Her manager doesn't sound surprised, he never does, when he answers:

"Well done, Joyce, good girl. You're definitely a natural at field operations. Remind me to recommend you for more of the same, if and when we are done with this fucking..., with our beloved undefined entities, may they continue to be as harmless as the next tourist. That'll be all

for the moment, well done. Do stay put, keep yourself in standby, and some IT security cover story up to date, in case anyone calls for a meeting before April 1. Happy holidays.”

And gone he is. Joyce hardly believes her luck. She’s getting paid for not doing anything at all, for the next three months. What a jackpot. Excited, she exits the car, to buy two bottles of tequila instead of one. Plus two T-bone steaks. With a little luck, Maria will be done with one more hopeless candidate fast. Then they’ll have steaks. With plenty of chips and hot barbecue sauce, no weight watching. And then they’ll get as drunk as only tough girls can get.

###

On January 2, Joyce is once again doing the groceries at that same Walmart when her phone beeps in the way reserved for emergencies. This sound means she has to drop whatever she’s holding, access a safe spot, as in her bugproof car, and call her manager.

Never one to skimp, Joyce leaves her half filled cart in the diaper and toilet paper section where it will hopefully wait for her to resume her shopping. She hurries out, across the parking lot and into her vehicle. Barely a minute has passed when she dials her manager’s number.

The idiot in charge of her career rewards her diligence with suspicion, forcing her to confirm she’s in a shielded spot. No one should be forced to work for idiots. If it wasn’t for the money and the health care, Joyce would so love to quit. Until she gets to hear what the fuss is about. The idiot has a point. This conversation can’t leak, unless they want to start a global riot.

They’re getting serious. The presence formulary referred to as undefined entities has graduated to interference, Inf for short. Joyce’s manager still refrains from calling the Inf the enemy, but the sound of his voice suggests this won’t last.

The Inf came up with what any commander hates most, a surprise. A big, nasty one.

All nukes are offline. Luckily, all really means all. All the nukes, all over the world.

No advantage gained by any major power. The Russians, Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis, Brits, French and North Koreans have been confirmed to be equally affected. The emergency mutual information and conciliation protocol devised to prevent a nuclear war at the penultimate second worked well, to everybody’s relieved surprise. The Israelis were forced to admit they only have decoys, but this glitch will be remedied, once control has been regained.

Right now, everybody has lost control, and is clueless about how the Inf are doing whatever they are doing to take the nukes offline.

This shocking predicament is of course top secret. The last thing the concerned armed forces need, on top of the military emergency, is a crowd control assignment. The potential mob, a.k.a the general public, civilians or the people, needs to be kept in the dark.

The Inf don’t seem to intend to use the nukes. Nor are there any signs of any alien battalions in the sky. No disturbance of global business as usual, including the ongoing armed conflicts performed by conventional means. The usual mess keeps chugging along, all over the world, blissfully unaware of the sudden collapse of the underpinnings of the precious little order there is.

On January 1, 00:01 universal time, the Inf once again did their thing, same procedure as same time last year. A very important screen went blank, long enough to freak out the operator, short enough not to get the POTUS alerted. Next, the screen displayed a short message:

“All nukes deactivated. More deactivations to follow unless compliance. Meeting see list attached in Lagos on January 22, standby for payment 1% GDP due April 1.”

Joyce’s manager quotes this Inf message verbatim. Next he goes:

“That list attached, should have reached your inbox by now, it states fifteen familiar names. We haven’t seen the last, of some of our precious bloody Lagos tour guides.

A full ten ladies on the list, only five guys, whysoever. The eggheads are poring over the selection, so far without getting the rationale. Can’t be the favourites of the Inf, otherwise the fat bitch with the pink hair and the big filthy mouth wouldn’t have made it onto the list. And, believe it or not, your favourite bloody Russian cheat is on that list, too. Getting Dany-High-Five and Next-Oga guy, the one in the Greek camp, to Lagos is going to cost us, in tickets, expenses and effort.

Peanuts of course, compared to whatever the Inf mean to tell us, with their ‘standby for payment’ demand. 1% GDP, that’s serious cash, whichever the country of reference. Let’s just hope it’s a small African one, that kind of sum can be taken care of without too much of a fuss...”

Joyce’s manager is unusually chatty. Loosing control of all nukes took its toll, higher up.

From her own point of view, the Inf did well. Ever since she understood how promotions worked, she had to force herself not to worry, about weapons of mass destruction. She resented the risk of ending up as acceptable loss back in her active days. She’s even less keen on becoming collateral damage in her current veteran status. More than enough harm can be done by conventional warfare, nuke kind of maximum mess is an exaggeration.

With her manager not yet telling her to pack for Lagos, the obvious and very welcome next step, Joyce has a look at the list he sent her while he keeps chatting.

Sister Gaga does indeed feature, and right at the top. If this is an order of preference, the Inf are doing splendidly, taste wise. Sister Gaga is great. No respect for no undeserving man, and very outspoken. The type of lady that does well in the armed forces.

Joyce had the duty, to listen in on recordings of all two thousand six hundred and ten tours, and Sister Gaga was a treat. Whichever the StreetView scene on display, she’d always come up with an anecdote featuring at least one pompous man oh so cleverly handled by at least one strong lady. Very entertaining, very empowering. Joyce is looking forward to meet Sister Gaga in person, to share a drink and some anecdotes. She has got a couple of good ones all ready, from her soldier days. Many fine comrades in arms, but the few rotten apples took some handling.

Joyce is less convinced of the merits of the other nine ladies the Inf selected for the face-to-face meeting. Very feminine lot, in their occupations and life styles. Lots of caring and nurturing. Needs to be done, absolutely, lots of vital tasks involved, sure. But why not leave them for the guys, for a change? Sister Gaga would know what Joyce means. The others might frown.

The five selected guys are a more mixed bunch. A rapper, a visual artist, a media strategist, a geologist and, cherry on the cake, the Ukrainian cheat. Ukrainian, not Russian. One really has to be as antique as her stupid manager not to know there’s a difference, nowadays.

Joyce likes Dany High Five, for winning her a bet. Her manager was convinced he’d fail, fast and with a flash. He was even anxious the undefined entities, as they were called then, might take offense. Whereas it took her only one look at Dany’s bio and financial status to know he’d pull this through. He had to. Joyce bet on him, she won, and now it turns out he’s even liked by the Infs. To come thirteenth out of eighty seven, that’s a big achievement, for Dany.

Her manager is still rambling on, about how well the Chinese are handling the North Koreans, as opposed to the British messing around in the Pakistano-Indian theater in a shockingly amateurish way. Luckily, both governments proved responsible and circumspect enough to ignore the former colonial power. They talked directly and agreed to refrain from any maneuvers, even scheduled ones, for the next three months.

Joyce has never heard her manager talk such a lot, and so excitedly. If this is what something as benign as no more nukes all round does to the upper levels of her hierarchy, she can’t help wondering about the effects of any serious setbacks. How is morale going to evolve if the Inf proceed to serious interference? Are they mighty enough to change the world?

Joyce has heard fear often enough not to miss the telltale signs. No need to see her manager to know he's scared stiff. She wonders if and when she'll start sharing his apprehension, because currently, she doesn't. Bit of a surprise. Normally, she's no hero, and proud of her survival first approach to combat. The idea is to win, not to get maimed or killed. Fearless = stupid.

Joyce prides herself to be able to fear what should be treated with caution for vital reasons, be it the grenade launcher or the grenades. No such response to the deeds of the Inf yet. If anything, she's experiencing the opposite. The Inf disarming all nukes and appreciating Sister Gaga, this rather triggers... This feels more like... Would she be experiencing...?

Having probed her response, Joyce finally grants herself permission to hope.

Not her kind of feeling, not the big kind of hope. May there be no parking ticket, may the phone be default back to English settings, that's Joyce's kind of hope. Not may there be world peace, never no more racism and chocolate cake all round. That kind of hope is for believers. She prizes herself for her realism, for targeting and achieving the feasible. But the Inf disabling all nukes and liking Sister Gaga, that's so suggestive of a potential for a brighter future...

"... be that as it may be, we're not into geopolitics. Joyce, there's no way to break this news gently, so I'll just say it: You're off to Lagos, Nigeria, on the double. No nice way to start a New Year, very short notice, but hey, that's what we signed up for, that's the fine print behind that fine pay cheque. We need you there, on the ground.

Secure premises have been defined. HQ of an oil major located in some, let me look that one up, one Lekki place, that's supposed to be guaranteed to count as Lagos. The oil people have agreed to host as many meetings as we need, as long as we don't mention them in any dicey context. You'll have to brief the tour guides accordingly, especially the local ones. I'm sending you the details of the aforementioned HQ now. There's an assistant, one Alice, part of what they call the conference package. She's supposed to be considered an asset, which might even be true. You'll still have to brace you for a mess, in that kind of place, but if they manage to extract and export oil, they should be able to get done a couple of small meetings..."

Joyce reverts back to listening with half her brain only. She's boiling with anger. This is supposed to be a manager. He has been in charge of this not exactly low key project for months. It's called Helicopter Money, because of the cover story they needed to act on the first demand raised by the Inf, but everybody involved knows it's actually Project Lagos. The bean counter handling the cash even got himself reprimanded, for calling it such in writing. And this overpromoted imbecile of a manager doesn't even manage to find the time to familiarize himself with the Lagos map?! If the Inf with their pronounced Lagos fixation find out, they're in trouble.

With her manager still rambling on, about logistics, without much of a clue around must haves and nice to haves for an overseas deployment, Joyce does the sums. She got herself the travel paperwork, vaccinations and take along meds for a trip to Nigeria back in May 2019 and has made sure to keep everything ready to go ever since. She needs an hour to recover her cart, finish her shopping and get home. Another hour to get her luggage ready and check it for completeness. Assuming her manager stops blabbing in the next hour, she can easily make the evening flights to Lagos via New York, even in bad traffic. Tomorrow afternoon, she'll be meeting Alice the asset. Arriving on a Friday is perfect, she'll have a whole weekend to get used to Lagos, before starting to get any serious work done. Joyce is so thrilled to leave DC.

With her manager still talking socks and underwear, must have been seriously traumatized by a business trip where he ran short on those and ended up - pause for gasp - washing them, Joyce wrestles with the big question of the day. Whether or not to trust Maria with her car, that's a tough one. Her driving is OK, especially considering how little practice she gets. She'll be safer in Joyce's Toyota. But if she ends up in an accident, they're in trouble.

By the time it takes her manager to explain how he once got a hotel receptionist to send someone buy him fresh boxers, and how wrong they got his size - no intent to brag - Joyce has settled her big question. Maria gets her car keys with an exhortation to use them sparingly.

“... so tell me, Joyce, ready to be a good girl and take that flight? It’s an ASAP kind of situation...”

Joyce so preferred the straightforward way of the military, where an order was an order. Her manager’s fake questions and unfinished sentences are far too ambiguous for her temper. She shoots back, a bit more forcefully and ironically than necessary, or polite:

“Sure sir, as good as on my way, if we’re done talking. Assuming priority fast tracking booking, I’m on the evening flight to New York followed by an overnight transatlantic to Lagos. First report from secure Lekki office tomorrow noon, would that qualify as ASAP, sir?”

Joyce’s manager must be pleasantly surprised by her proposed schedule, otherwise he would balk at her insubordinate undertones. Instead, they’re done and she’s off.

The first phase of her plan proves to be the most tricky one. She has barely recovered her half filled shopping trolley, and is in process of adding an extra packet of her brand of female sanitary hygiene products to take along, when she get approached by a tall guy in the kind of mock uniform beloved by so-called security outfits, a.k.a diligent citizen harrasseries.

The guard is most polite, but intransigent. Someone saw her abandon the trolley, leave the shop and come back. This is supposed to be a sure sign of shoplifting, an oh so unfortunate habit. Perfectly understandable, the can’t pay, won’t pay attitude of some poor people, but it just can’t be tolerated by any shop intending to stay in business, because bottom line...

All the guard’s speechifying culminates in one demand:

“May I please search your bag and pockets, ma’am, and have a look inside your car?”

Despite all Joyce’s best efforts to comply fast, it’s not her first shopping while black impromptu search, going through the moves takes the two of them half an hour. Once they’re done, she gets praised for her compliance with shoplifting prevention efforts, and a voucher against any grudges, but no apology. The guard might want to say sorry, he’s sure to be familiar with driving while black impromptu pull-overs, but he can’t. Not when wearing his uniform.

By the time she makes it to the airport, the last passenger to hand over her one suitcase before the counter closes, Joyce is in a strong let’s-get-out-of-here-and-good-riddance kind of mood. That stupid search is still haunting her. Such occasions always do, for days. Her grudge keeps getting stronger after this kind of insults, for hours. This type of suspicion is so wrong. No amount of courtesy can hide the fact that whoever denounced her was acting on a disgusting stereotype. It’s gross, to be forced to share a country with such bastards. It’s demeaning. They’re failing her US. She’s failing her own dignity by playing her part, as if this situation was OK. It isn’t.

Aboard the plane, Joyce’s mood lightens fast. She’s in business, with the seat next to her occupied by one darling of an elderly Asian lady who insists on sharing a quick bottle of bubbly, to celebrate her survival and imminent return to her peacefully empty New York flat. No small feat. Compared to this sweet granny’s tales from a week of presumed seasonal bliss with her son-in-law, daughter and grandson, a tour of duty in Syria is a package holiday.

Joyce gets praised for not falling into the family trap and does feel that pride more strongly than usual. The angry hum from the packed budget rows behind them, the occasional shrill anguish, the grim grins on the faces of the stewardesses headed for the holiday mob, all this reminds her she’s doing great. By the time she parts ways with her fellow gender role rejecter, Joyce is in a splendid mood. As soon as she reaches her seat on the plane to Africa, she falls asleep.

When she wakes up, slightly disoriented and very thirsty, it takes Joyce an instant of deployment anguish to recall this is no troop carrier, just a harmlessly civilian Airbus.

She’s in economy, this leg of her journey wasn’t booked enough to land her in business. But on long flights she’s entitled to get herself whatever onboard comforts are available for purchase.

Time to call the affable steward, get herself a bottle of water and a midnight snack, and find out about in-flight wi-fi availability. It's that kind of flight all right.

Joyce digs into her phone for her virtual security checklist before going through the moves that will deliver the maximum kind of privacy her job calls for. She would have gotten everything right without the checklist, but an SOP is for implementing, under most circumstances.

Alice the asset turns out to amply deserve her title, and she does work long hours.

Joyce will be picked up at the airport by a company driver who will ferry her to the office where Alice will be waiting to provide her with everything else she will need for her first Lagos weekend. She's already booked to stay at nearby the Oakwood Park Hotel. Alice will accompany her there, to make sure check-in proceeds smoothly, and explain everything else face-to-face.

Joyce is agreeably surprised. Being ferried around and organized, that's neat. Just like being back in the army, but at the higher echelon level of comfort. Nice and neat.

Taking care not to disturb her deeply asleep seat neighbor, an elderly executive type of guy, Joyce takes advantage of her corridor seat to stand up to walk to the rest room. She doesn't really need to go. This is more to stretch her legs, wash her face and restore her makeup.

Walking down the aisle, Joyce notices the racial inversion, compared to other civilian flights. Back in her army days, she was surrounded by a lot of black faces. On the three occasions she took planes for private purposes, the onboard crowd was mostly white. On the way to Lagos, this pattern is broken, she's once again with the majority. Looks promising.

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Remembering jet lag, Joyce checks the time. What feels like the middle of the night is indeed bright daytime in Lagos. Explains why a number of her fellow passengers are having coffee, they're trying to get preadjust. She might as well join them, and try to get some work done.

Home base is busy coughing up scenarios of potential next Inf actions, but she'd rather not waste time on these. On past form, the analysts have no clue. Neither did they anticipate the Inf to stick to their preference for Lagos, nor did they expect anything like the nukes move.

Joyce will skim through the scenarios reading the headlines only, for the sake of diligence, and quickly move on to the fifteen tour guides she'll have to shepherd, perhaps for quite a while. The Inf insist on meeting these guys again, that's the one certainty on offer. They are important, she has to revisit what is known of them and their circumstances.

As per NSA standard practice, this adds up to one hell of a lot of material. With no real clue about what is going on, where this mess is headed and what kind of information will be needed, the data collectors grabbed anything they were able to find. The fifteen dossiers add up to over one thousand pages of banal information, a big pile of mostly rubbish.

Checking Sister Gaga's dossier, Joyce can't help wondering how twisted a brain needs to be, to consider a shoe size of 9/40, same as her own, worth reporting, in a first contact context.

Did whoever wrote this down expect Sister Gaga to kick alien ass, and worry about the availability of suitable protective footwear? Might make sense with a size 5/36, like her early army days friend Bo. No fitting boots for her, she had to wear three pairs of socks to compensate. But a size 9/40, that's so perfectly mainstream, why bother?

There's also a dress size, or rather a dress sizes range, a chronology of hair styles and colors, and a long list of locations Sister Gaga visited over the last five years. Her whereabouts were reconstructed by analyzing her social media trail, a heap of pictures with embedded date and location information. Whoever compiled this must by now know his Lagos island map.

Sister Gaga looks as good as she sounds confident, no surprise. She doesn't mind her picture being taken, with whoever is around. On some pictures she's surrounded by a whole group of people, on others she's with just one person. Very practiced selfie taker, but why?

Joyce makes a mental note to ask her manager to have someone sort those fifteen tour guide dossiers into something useful, with one set of structured information, like in a CV, for the quick benefit of the tired field operative who doesn't have all night, day, whatever. Pretty shocking, to get such a heap of rubbish intern output thrown at oneself when on a vital mission.

With her body clock convinced they have no reason to stay up beyond 02:00 and should shut eyes, now, as in at once, no more delay tolerated, Joyce is at maximum effort just to stay awake. Not thinking straight, it takes her a long while to discover, accidentally, the search function that would have been obvious in better hours.

Turns out the data compilers did a proper job after all. There's a fine selection of attributes, divided into neat groups, allowing her to extricate the CV type of information she's keen on.

Looking at Sister Gaga through this prism, she's a twenty eight year old lawyer dividing her time between raising money for an organisation called Citizen Gavel and helping to defend its more or less lost causes, pro bono. She still lives with her parents, a geologist and a pediatric surgeon, in an affluent neighborhood.

Checking Sister Gaga's address on StreetView, Joyce discovers the kind of meticulous long and high wall only interrupted by a CCTV guarded gate she was brought up to associate with filthy rich white people, a.k.a the natural enemies of black meritocracy. Someone just like her, if a bit better looking, getting driven through this gate by a chauffeur, that's...

Joyce experiences a mix of feelings.

There's a tinge of envy, of course. Who wouldn't want to live like that, and be spared the daily grind, if only for a couple of tasty years of youthful freedom? Sister Gaga lives the good life, she didn't need that tour guide gig to keep herself afloat.

But there's even more satisfaction and pride. Sister Gaga's parents and their neighbors, that's so unlike the one Obama family for millions and millions stuck in dead end gigs and shithole digs they're always at risk of losing over the next rent rise.

No one will dare subject Sister Gaga to a search just because she interrupts her shopping for an urgent phone call. And if anyone dared and found nothing, they would apologize, profusely.

Joyce is so looking forward to Lagos, and hoping for a long stay.

Applying her CV criteria to the other fourteen tour guides the Inf selected to attend the face-to-face meeting, Joyce discovers a lot more of the same. Very different online personae hide a surprising amount of biographical similarity.

Unlike Joyce, who is making do with High School and her military achievements as basis for her career, most tour guides have been through tertiary education and have at least one diploma to their name. The others are either at advanced stages of getting there, the younger ones, or interrupted their studies for family planing failure reasons, the two married ladies.

Except for Dany High Five who needed every Kopek he managed to make, the successful tour guides didn't get on the list by fighting hard and desperately. They might be jobless, and seriously pained by the humiliations associated with having to rely on parental support at their age, but judging by where they live, they can't be considered poor. Joyce wonders how much boredom was involved, in their decisions to sign up and stay the course. Curiosity alone doesn't feel like a sufficient explanation, the Inf aren't enough of a thrill to meet and read.

By the time they cross Guinea, Joyce has had more coke than she usually drinks in a month and worries how hard this bunch of spoiled kids will be to lead. The future of planet earth might depend on their performance. As of now she lacks a plan.

Not trusting her manager to provide the kind of guidance she needs, Joyce opts for the tried and trusted. "When in doubt, in team matters, because no orders available or orders very obviously obsolete, figure out what an NBA coach would do, adapt and implement." That's how she learned to proceed in her two week leadership course, that's the one advice that stuck.

Assuming the Inf to be as mighty as their nukes stunt suggests, Joyce's team is facing bottom of the league kind of odds. Makes sense to check how the coaches of the Golden State warriors and the Atlanta Hawks talk oomph into their beaten troops.

Turns out strong words are one possible approach. "Flush it down the toilet", hard to beat, in the not mincing ones words section, unless you tell your guys they played shit.

Joyce envisions herself Inf front of the assembled tour guides and going "The Inf, they can smash us to pulp, if and whenever they feel like it. You guys made enough of a mess of your tours to make them switch off our nukes. We're one wrong move away from the Inf using those same nukes against us. You watch your tongues and play that safe, understood?"

Joyce isn't satisfied. Nigeria and Ukraine don't have nukes. Talk of 'our nukes' could be misinterpreted as an attempt at a joke. Switching nukes off is also so unlike firing them, so much less aggressive even her US self struggles to consider it dangerous. If it wasn't for her managers reservations, she'd still be inclined to consider the new nuke status progress. And the Inf like those fifteen guides the way they are. Joyce has no right to cramp their styles, just because of her dislike for spoiled brats. Not their fault, to have been born into privilege.

There's another, more positive approach. Talk up the one outstanding player and his fabulous cooperation with another one expected back after an involuntary break. This translates into Joyce urging her team to keep up their strong work, with special mentions for the outstanding performance of Sister Gaga and Greecany Man, number two on the list. Feels better.

Joyce spends the rest of their descent towards Murtala Muhammad International Airport rehearsing and refining her future pep talk. Her team is going to live up to the Inf challenge, whatever it might turn out to be.

Two hours later, she sags into the passenger seat of the pleasantly air conditioned company SUV. As promised, Alice has sent a driver to pick her up, and Joyce is glad to be done with being in charge. It has been a long eventful day. She got here fast, and herself through immigration, and she managed to retrieve her suitcase, now she needs a break.

The driver is chatting enthusiastically. Having made sure it's her first visit, and that she really is a genuine American without local family ties, he announced they'll take the scenic route before starting to pitch leisure activities for the upcoming weekend. It's a broad range he offers, sightseeing, beaches, shopping malls or clubs. They all involve him driving Joyce, in this fine vehicle, for less than the price of breakfast at her hotel, super extra bargain flat rate. Depending on the type of activity, he will further provide appropriate muscle and company, to keep her safe, again at extremely competitive rates, especially compared to what hotel staff will push.

As per Alice's advice, Joyce stays in the same stoic mode that worked well at the airport. She's the prey here, the supposedly exorbitantly rich foreigner. People fighting hard to make a living are entitled to pitch and pry, at all times, under all circumstances. If she shows any sign of either enthusiasm or irritation, she only has herself to blame for things getting complicated. Friendly stubbornness, as signalled by a noncommittal smile, that's the attitude. Easy.

It's funny, to see this tropical city unfold for real. Joyce has watched more than enough tours to be oddly familiar with some details, like the road design and signs, and the general look of the place. But no StreetView image will ever be able to convey the full feel of a location. A screenful of Lagos

compares to the real downtown like a first person shooter to actual combat. Stills might look a lot like Florida, but this completely misses the dynamics. That's not how you drive, in Florida.

When the traffic moves, and they're still making good progress, no inch or second gets wasted. Outwardly, Lagos drivers look and sound like disagreeing a lot, to put it mildly. But they share at least one strong conviction: Wasting road space is a crime that must be prevented at all risks.

Where the average US driver would stop and wait or swerve, because things are getting too close for comfort, the Lagosian driver hits the accelerator to grab what he considers a big fat juicy slot of empty road space. All cars do it, all the time. And wherever four wheelers won't fit, a swarm of two wheelers will rush. Once the melee has managed to block itself into a moment of standstill, pedestrians dive into it, to get somewhere or sell something. A mobile mall of loud vendors.

The obstacles often blocking the right lane, second line parking is very much in fashion beyond the highways, provide ample opportunity for maneuvers that add up to substantial progress, over a trip that takes a good two hours. Joyce understands, but she doesn't mind to be spared active participation. If she stays long enough, she will acquire the local attitude towards collateral traffic damage. Without it, her driving downtown would mean going nowhere very, very slowly.

By the time they reach her local HQ, Joyce is thankful Alice picked her a nearby hotel. This is one huge city indeed. It's nearly 19:00, on a Friday, the sun is down, but the traffic doesn't feel like winding down for the weekend yet. The shorter her commute, the better.

This is one huge site they drive into, but Joyce doesn't get to see much. They stop very soon after entering the premises, in front of a comparatively small box of a two storey building. Most windows are dark, just one active office on the second floor.

They're barely parked when an enthusiastic lady in meticulous business attire with hair like modern art reaches the car and opens the door. On seeing Joyce, she pauses ever so slightly before greeting her with a forceful:

"You made it here fast, good job! Got all your luggage out, too? Well done! Just leave it in the trunk for now, next stop your hotel. Guess you'll first want to tell your folks you've landed, so let me show you your office. Not exactly the exec suite, but your predecessors didn't mind. Sound and surveillance proof, as specified, and no one much around, most of the time. We use this building for external staff, like IT consultants, and it houses our back-up servers and some archives. Your badge only provides access to this one building, actually, no offense intended..."

Alice the asset manages to walk briskly in high heels. They make her look taller than Joyce, but she's roughly of the same height. They're the same age, too, no longer young but not seriously old yet. And they share an outspoken temper.

By the time they reach Joyce's workplace, Alice has admitted to have been surprised, in a nice way, by discovering she'll be chaperoning a black lady. She didn't get on too well, with the kind of white guys that showed up to use this particular office in the past. Not exactly condescending, not really problematic, but not fitting in well, either.

Glad to be told the reason for the pause she very much did notice, Joyce admits in return that she's thrilled to be awarded a break. Being the lady professional among mostly guys is enough of a challenge for her, no need to top this up with a white majority aspect.

As Alice seems interested, Joyce tells her her favourite white fragility anecdote.

She had awarded herself a one week holiday in Hawai and splashed out on a fancy resort, to celebrate her first anniversary in a well paying civilian job. Her room neighbors, a white couple, mistook her for hotel staff and asked her to clean their bathroom more thoroughly, in strong words. She didn't mind much at first, just corrected the misconception. Next, the couple went all aggressive, accusing her of having acted just like staff on purpose, to set them up and accuse them of racism. She was supposed to apologize, for having hurt their feelings.

Alice is as aghast as anyone hearing this anecdote should be. But she's also a professional, knows when to stop chatting. Joyce has her job to perform, Alice has her own business week to wrap up, in a different building. She'll pick Joyce up at 20:00, to deliver her to her hotel.

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There's a power plug adapter on Joyce's new desk, she doesn't even need the one she took care to bring along. Proves that this workplace has been used with US equipment before. Suggests it will be as safe as advertised. Won't stop Joyce going through her secrecy moves. Longing for a shower doesn't qualify as an emergency.

Ten minutes later, she's chatting with her manager.

Home base hasn't been sitting idle while she was travelling. Pending her review and approval, the wording for the invitation for the chosen 15, c15 for short, is ready for deployment.

The tour guides selected by the Inf for the next round having been awarded a code name signals advanced action mode. Joyce is proud of her frontline role in something that big, and thrilled to get to review and approve. She ends the call by thanking her manager for valuing her input and promises to send her feedback at once, to allow the invitations to go out today.

Reading the draft invitation reveals Joyce can't approve, no way.

Whoever wrote and reviewed this missed a couple of details. Joyce replaces 'Gentlemen:' by 'Dear Sir or Madam:' and 'Lagos, Nigeria' by 'Lagos'. That's the easy and obvious amendments. Changing the header and rewording the actual message is going to be more tricky.

Currently, the draft is an NSA order. Even US citizens would balk at being bossed around by a federal agency that doesn't even bother to explain how and why it got hold of their contact details. There isn't so much as a mention of the World Bank and its project.

Joyce can't just rephrase this mess. She highlights the header and impossible sentence instead, and writes her boss: "Clarification needed for sender (not World Bank?) and wording highlighted below (order?!). Permission to draft alternative once sender confirmed?".

Joyce is so tired her vision blurs when she moves her head fast. If her offer gets accepted, she won't be going to bed any time soon. Stupid fucking diligence. She occasionally wishes she wasn't so good at ruining her life. Why the hell does she care? Just because mighty aliens might invade in case they fuck this up? So? What would a man have done?

Joyce is still hating her propensity to acquire additional assignments, without demanding a pay rise, when Alice knocks. Time to shut down her laptop and find out what a hotel in this neighborhood looks like. If it's anything like this site, she's in for a treat that will provide a good strong shower and a mini bar with some sweets against her fatigue.

On the way down, Alice explains that Joyce can't walk outside company premises or her hotel. Can't as in can't, period. If she feels an urge to walk or jog, the treadmill in the hotel gym will do just fine. Her personal car and driver are at her disposal to shuttle her back and forth as often as and whenever necessary, this mobility package is part of her office deal.

The car is still parked where they left it over an hour earlier. The smug driver looks like not minding this kind of overtime at all. Remembering his earlier offer, Joyce asks Alice about rules for a shopping trip to a mall, or a little sightseeing. This question is visibly welcome.

Alice readily confirms that the mobility package can also be used for private undertakings. Joyce has to cover any extra costs the driver will gladly specify in advance. As a model employee he's going to get her as good a deal as possible, in an expensive location.

Joyce doesn't fail to notice how Alice raises her voice, to make sure the driver hears her. She wouldn't have needed the warning conveyed by the particular look. Eager to show she's no idiot,

she too raises her voice to ask if it's OK for her to check with Alice, if ever anything felt disproportionate. Absolutely no offense intended, she does trust the excellent driver with both her life and her wallet, but foreign lands can be disconcertingly alien... No need for any winks.

By the time this exchange is completed, they're parked in front of Joyce's hotel. Explains why Alice felt the need to actively prohibit walking. It's a perfect distance for a stroll. Feasible even for exercise averse people, never mind for a sporty ex soldier. Assuming Alice knows her stuff, and she feels very competent, the security situation must be dire indeed.

This is one flashy hotel, that much is evident even in the dark of night. Joyce's expectations are amply met. She's very much looking forward to make ample use of a pool she didn't dare hope for, on a business trip. And she loves the art gracing the walls. Very nice accommodation, no problem for this to last. A couple of weeks would be welcome, months even more so.

The ambiance is gorgeous, too. The receptionist has been expecting her, all formalities are done in a blink. Joyce gets an executive suite, no less, and it turns out to deserve its name. Generous room with a real desk, complete with a swivel chair. The Wi-Fi is fast, too. As long as she doesn't need to make phone or video calls, this will do fine, no need for the office at Alice's.

She tells her chaperone as much, and proposes to celebrate with a quick drink at the bar.

Alice is all in favor of drinks, in no hurry to move on to whatever else she usually does, on a Friday night. But she'd rather take advantage of the room service. Joyce gets the hint and agrees. If Alice is worried about radar ears, so is Joyce. She'll have her work cut out defending the horrendous sum room service is sure to cost, but so be it. Being a lady will for once work in her favor. Not even the most wary of bean counters will accuse her of entertaining prostitutes.

The service level at this hotel is outstanding. Never would Joyce have expected