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THE UNTOUCHABILITY

Stooped in the crowd at the tram stop, Daniel proudly realizes it has been a year since he last felt the touch of another human being.

His body has become stiff and rigid, his movements slow. The processes inside him have acquired mechanical characteristics. His heartbeat echoes tinnily like the hands of a wall clock, the rumbling of his stomach feels like a spring being stretched apart.

A year ago to the day, a woman like any other brushed his hand with hers as she passed him by. She didn't stop. She walked on without looking back. To her their small collision was just a trifle not worth attention, an everyday clumsiness. An unavoidable ritual of walking through the city streets, when haste manifests itself as an accidental touch. An abstract warning to be careful, which has nothing to do with the person she has touched. In her mind, that touch was no more important than a chair she sat on or a wall she leaned against.

But Daniel stopped in his tracks. He turned around and watched her walk away. He rubbed his right hand with the left one and slowed down the touch in his memory. He saw her hand approaching his, her fingers gliding over the back of his hand, first her forefinger then her middle finger, followed by the emptiness of the moment when it all ended. The unexpected contact paralyzed him like the news so shocking that it is incomprehensible at first.

Awed by coincidences which bring people together, he wondered how it was possible that a touch could absorb his mind so much that a complete stranger suddenly became the only contact with the world. How many accidental encounters was he destined to have with the persons he couldn't envisage and how to prepare himself for them? He contemplated those questions in the private silence of a busy street, rubbing his hands against one another in an attempt to anticipate the encounters with passers-by. His palms were stiff from the cold and every movement was accompanied by the painful stings of winter's chill which crept under his skin.

In the days that followed, he tried to recreate that experience. He supposed it was not going to be easy to generate coincidences, but he didn't realize the impossibility of the task. Counting on the clumsiness of other people, he deliberately put himself in many situations in which being touched was virtually inevitable. He strolled down the city streets and squares, but the cold winter forced the people to hide inside the armours of fabric impenetrable to the cold of the wind and the

warmth of a human hand. He visited shops and pubs, but the distrustful, gloomy faces refused to grant him what he was looking for. There was always a thin layer of empty space between his and someone else's hand. The gap grew wider aided by the dogma of intimacy which inhibited everyone around him. Realizing it was impossible to create spontaneity, Daniel became aware that human beings are encumbered with the rules which serve to control unpredictability and he saw the barriers they put around themselves as mechanisms that delineate an existence independent of its environment.

The impenetrability of those barriers soon became a burden, leaving him drained and spent. The stale air of certainty choked his lungs in the moments of solitude, and for the first time in his life he felt a dense shadow fall upon him.

The alienation of other people flared up the anger that could be appeased only by a drastic decision. Rejected, Daniel wanted to be the one to reject. He decided not to touch anyone for a week.

The following morning, he left his apartment with his hands buried deep inside the coat pockets. He went to a nearby store and bought a pair of leather gloves, determined to take them off only when he was completely sure he was in no danger of being touched by another person.

He started to watch people in public places with caution. He appraised everyone in his sight and subjected them to a meticulous analysis. Their movements, their balance, the length of their strides, the flailing of their arms. He foresaw every move like a chess player whose goal was not to win, but to avoid every contact.

The week quickly passed and Daniel successfully avoided being touched, but the ease with which he managed it surprised him. He concluded that a week without a human touch was not a challenge big enough and decided to extend it to a month.

He had a thoroughly planned behaviour for every situation. In a shop, he wouldn't reach out his hand to the saleswoman to take his change, but wait for her to put it down on the counter and then pick it up. When he ran into an acquaintance, he greeted them with a nod, feigning a cold and a hand injury as an excuse for keeping his hand in his pocket.

He avoided busy streets and crowded shops, and he stopped visiting pubs and restaurants. For his walks he waited for the rainy evenings that would empty the streets, leaving only the smell of wet concrete in the air, which he inhaled cautiously like a seductive perfume of a mysterious young woman. The precisely planned movements created a routine which enabled him to face the

self imposed challenge with ease. Avoiding closeness became an instinct, and he was no longer tense when the month without a touch came to its end.

A strange sensation seized him. In the evening hours he felt the pleasant weight of accomplishment. The feeling of self-sufficiency spread its roots throughout the young man and started to deform his body in its firm grip. He liked it. The anguish of solitude was more acute than any touch he could remember, and he soon completely forgot the texture of the body of the other.

A month became two months, and winter turned into spring, spring into summer, summer into fall. Suddenly, the city found itself again in winter's embrace. Now, a full year after the last touch he can remember, other people are just intangible outlines, shadows that appear and disappear depending on the time of the day. Who knows, maybe someone has accidentally touched Daniel in the last twenty-four months, like that woman who still hovers in his memory. But it is no longer important. In his mind, a touch has become something impossible, something so distant that it seems an apparition, something similar to a vague, unfathomable notion. Daniel's life is now governed by the precision of solitude which offers him the unambiguous sensory input he then arranges into the simplest equations of his existence.

He considered leaving the city for a place where a savage landscape would mirror his feeling of alienation. A place where solitude has a physical shape which forms human beings, reshapes them and obliterates them. But like many other things in his life, he soon abandoned that idea. In addition to numerous, purely practical problems, his lifelong aversion to wide-open spaces decided against it. Deep inside he always knew that city was the cathedral of his soul; the place which both motivated and hindered him; the place he was a slave to and drew strength from.

It was too late for him to forgo the belief that endless series of square volumes were the building blocks of his world. A room, a kitchen, a bathroom, an office, a supermarket, a post office, a bank. Cages arranged on the regular grid of paved streets, in which he found refuge. The precise combination of mutually parallel and vertical lines sharpened his gaze to perfection, making him blind to everything that didn't intersect at the right angle. Little by little, abstract shapes of nature became a deformity to be despised and distrusted. He was long aware of the dimensions of his existence, but now he came to understand its purpose as well. His escape would be locking himself inside a cage; a private journey that would take place inside him; a road along which the landscape remained the same, but the traveller changed.

At the beginning of his withdrawing, the presence of other people filled him with a

debilitating anxiety, but as months passed, the feeling of unease disappeared. It was easy to get rid of the shallow acquaintances. Ignoring them in the street was enough to put off those longing for closeness. But firm relationships were more difficult to cut.

He stopped answering his phone. He listened to the monotonous ringing and counted the number of rings before the phone went silent. In the beginning it used to ring six or seven times, but the patience of the caller grew shorter and shorter with each passing day. Five, then four, then just three rings before the silence. When a week passed without a single call, he unplugged the phone.

And when he happened to run into those who considered him a friend, he was forced to resort to lies. In order to get rid of them as quick as possible, he agreed to the meetings he had no intention of going to. Sometimes he even suggested them, without any qualms or feelings of guilt. He soon abandoned false scruples and his honesty chased away the few people who refused to be put off by his pretence and lies.

An acquaintance proved more persistent than the others and wanted to know the reasons for such behaviour. He came to Daniel's door demanding an explanation for his refusal to see him. When he heard the doorbell ringing, Daniel pretended he was not in, but the young man kept pressing the bell.

– I know you are home! I followed you and saw you enter the apartment!

Realizing that the confrontation was unavoidable, Daniel came to the door and coldly said:

– If you ring my bell again, I'll call the police.

When he was certain that the man had left, Daniel opened the door and disabled his doorbell with a screwdriver and a pair of pincers.

He cut all ties with the people who knew him, but the distance between him and the others continued to grow. Now that he was free of the nausea of a direct contact, the very presence of other people became a burden, a heavy weight that warped his perception of himself. Refusing to accept the fact that the people around him were aware of his presence, he soon became obsessed with the idea of becoming invisible.

And while many would have been discouraged by the abstract nature of that unattainable goal, the infantile idea turned into an obsession in his mind and he easily convinced himself that the

outcome of his plan depended solely on his own determination. In the shortest possible time he came up with a plan he considered foolproof.

Burdened by the height and strength of his own body, he started to deform it. He no longer stood tall, but with his knees slightly bent to be a few centimetres shorter. When he walked, he kept his arms pressed to his sides, to prevent them from flailing around. He bent his straight back into an arch and lowered his head to his chest.

He ate less, sometimes even starved himself to lose weight, and he soon emaciated his strong body. His face became anaemic and he was no longer a sturdy young man, but a feeble creature of delicate health.

He was very satisfied with the progress of his transformation. He changed to be unrecognizable and as unnoticeable as possible. Once he got away from other people's gazes, he decided to deny them his attention as well.

He avoided looking passers-by in the eye. His head was bent, his gaze fixed on the ground a few steps ahead, and other people soon turned into the shadows gliding over the concrete on sunny days. He was as far from them as from the clouds high up in the sky and he could no longer tell the difference between them.

He blocked out the sounds as well. Refusing to listen to his surroundings, he declined to understand the voices around him until they began to sound like a strange buzzing. Little by little they became incomprehensible and then fell silent, like the hissing in the ears that bothers you at first but after a while becomes obliterated by monotony and consigned to oblivion.

He stopped talking too. He no longer expressed his thoughts in words and his world soon lost its foothold in them. Refusing to grant a linguistic determination to his environment, he turned it into a combination of senses, a series of nameless obstacles which he avoided like a dog moving through an unfamiliar space.

His own words sounded distorted in his ears and their meaning became incomprehensible and repulsive through the incessant repetition. Words were no longer distinct from animal calls, and the everyday hubbub of voices turned into the soundscape of a wilderness.

Suddenly nobody spoke to him any longer, and he no longer clothed his rare requests in words. Measured gestures were his way of communication in situations imposed by urban life, and the city he walked through was empty and mute.

Having created a world without a touch or a sound, he decided to impose laws and limits to it. Numbers were his replacement for a contact with another human being. Instead of talking to people, he communicated with numbers. In his mind, they were a firm foundations of rational thoughts he then divided into their smallest components. His world became an infinite sequence of numbers.

He spent hours reading the newspaper, not to inform himself about the current events, but to count the number of letters in words, sentences, paragraphs. When he went out for a walk, he counted every step he took on the journey only a few would have the time or the patience to follow him on. He counted the bricks in the walls, the tiles on the roofs. Little by little, he turned everything into numbers. Footsteps, buildings, clouds. His own breaths, heartbeats, the time itself.

That is why today, after a year since he last felt the touch of another human being, Daniel does not content himself with the number 365. In his mind it is by no means a sufficient proof of the uniqueness of his accomplishment and the oldness of the newly found world. Dividing days into hours and multiplying the number of hours by the number of minutes in an hour and the number of minutes by the number of seconds in a minute, he gets 3.153.600 – the number of seconds that have passed since his contact with that lady in the street. 3.153.600 is a far more appropriate number.

The sun has been hidden behind the winter clouds for weeks, and the languid greyness of the sky threatens with the first snow of the year. Daniel feels the cold furrowing his pale cheeks with wrinkles. As he waits for the tram, the only thing he hears is the wind pushing its way through the numb crowd at the tram station. The ominous warning whistle which marks the arrival of winter.

When a tram pulls up at the stop, Daniel is the last one to get on, giving way to other passengers. At the beginning he used to avoid public transport, but the indifference he now feels towards everything and everyone around him has eliminated every fear and feeling of threat. Now that he has dug a deep chasm between himself and the others, the world has become something he keeps at bay. A private performance which doesn't interest him, so he refuses to participate in it.

Eerily calm, he watches other people at the tram stop and calculates in his head. Most of them will board through the back doors, which means that the crowd at the front ones should be smaller. The tram has five doors, and he is waiting in front of the second one from the front of the vehicle. That position enables him to keep an eye on the traffic at the first and the third door. It takes him several seconds to appraise the situation. Seven people are waiting to board through the first door, six through the second and the third; five people get off the tram through the first door, four through the second, seven through the third. In several quick steps Daniel moves to the third door where the crowd is smallest.

During the tram ride, arithmetic is replaced with geometry. Daniel's position in the vehicle is the result of the carefully considered positions and movements of other passengers. For a person trying to avoid every contact, the position in the centre of the circle with the biggest diameter, where they would be equally distanced from all the nearest passengers, would be considered optimal by most people. But Daniel is not of that opinion. Devoting more time to that task than others, he realized the danger of the kinetic energy of the passengers when the tram sped up or slowed down. And when he added the possibility of sudden braking, he concluded that rather than in the centre of a circle, the best position would be in the centre of an ellipse with the minor axis along the width of the tram and the major axis along its length. For that reason, Daniel's position in relation to the other passengers in the tram is that of the Sun in relation to the Earth revolving around it – a comparison which made him laugh during a recent ride. Recent! What an inadequate word! Daniel has long parted his ways with clumsy imprecision. Three months, two of them with 31 days and one with 30 days, two weeks and three days – or 108 days altogether – have passed since that tram ride when he carelessly laughed thinking about his own ingenuity. Since then he has laughed from the heart nine more times.

There are exactly 729 steps from the tram stop to his workplace. He doesn't count them every day because he already knows very well that it takes 244 steps to the traffic light and another 563 to the news-stand. The precisely measured course fills him with the sense of serenity and allows him to think about the tasks that are unavoidable in his everyday life.

The future, no matter how certain, is something Daniel can think about only when he is completely sure that the present is under his control. His decisions are the result of the preciseness with which he strips his life of unpredictability. In his case, numbers are the basis of the precise patterns he attempts to imitate in all segments of life, convinced that coincidence is but the consequence of incaution. The semantic distinction between *coincidence* and *incaution* is something

he no longer discerns.

Step number 729 brings him in front of the city Glyptotheque, where he used to share the office with three colleagues, until the feeling of unease created by his presence urged his boss to find a more intimate working space for him.

With Daniel's consent, the small storage room at the bottom of the corridor was emptied and furnished with a desk, a chair and a filing cabinet. But his alienation from colleagues went further than that. Because of his aversion to accidental encounters with his co-workers, he filed a written request to work in the afternoon hours when everyone else has left for the day. The reasons he gave were his chronically fragile health and the fear it might be contagious to his co-workers. His request was approved without anyone asking for a further explanation.

Now he enters the office and takes off his gloves. The tiny room perfectly suits his needs. When he first moved into it, his desk faced the window, but then he decided that the view of the street in front of the office had nothing to offer him and rearranged the furniture to be turned away from it while he works.

It is hard to say what his job really is. He is responsible for the formal, dry letters that various institutions address to each other and for the series of numbers that an institution addresses to itself. Day in, day out he deals with endless rows of incomprehensible words and numbers with forced meaning, and he is excellent at his job.

In the unbearable silence of his office, minutes and hours pass as if along the spiral shaped by his stubborn absence. The passage of time is measured only by the slow fading of the daylight behind his back. He scrutinizes the documents in front of him for hours, without ever lifting his head from the papers or losing focus for even a moment. From time to time, he writes down a short note.

After several hours of sitting motionless, his aching back forces him to stand up. He leaves the office and strolls around the exhibition area.

The forgotten Glyptotheque attracts a small number of visitors, and he is alone as he walks among its exhibits. The stale air and the dead silence feel like a caress, soothing his tense spirit. In the silent forest of plaster castings and stone inscriptions he joins the sad procession of men and women made of bronze and marble. He stops in front of the sculptures and for the umpteenth time inspects them with the innocence of a child facing an unknown object.

Though a man of precise analytical mind, he cannot tell the number of times he has met the cold gaze of the brave military commander or caressed the palm of a patrician woman. This is the one place where the calculating Daniel disappears. In the empty halls of the Glyptothèque, he reaches out to make up for the touches he avoids in the crowded streets.

Shyly, he approaches the bronze sculpture of a sleeping woman. He thrusts his fingers in her curls of copper and tin, and covers her eyes with his hand. He runs his finger over her face, nose, lips, chin. The bronze is soft and smooth. As soon as he touches it, his palm beads with perspiration, and a fine layer of moisture forms between his hand and the carefully shaped surface. He wraps his hands firmly around her neck. He strokes her breasts and her belly. He runs his fingertips between her legs and down her thighs. Inciting caress requires a gentle touch. He holds her ankle and her heel with both hands. Trying to coax a reaction out of her, he tickles the sole of her feet with his forefinger, but the bronze woman remains motionless.

He knows the texture of each stone, the curve of each sculpture. The pale alabaster, the dry limestone, the rough sandstone, the strong granite. The gentle arch of a woman's back, the sharp lines of a man's jaw.

He circles around a warrior in *contrapposto*. He carefully wraps his fingers around his straight, vertical nose. He caresses his firm cheek and strong jaw. He runs his palm down his chest, shoulders, arm. He closes his eyes as his fingertips glide over the stiff muscles of the ancient conqueror. He runs his fingers along the veins on the back of the warrior's hand and up his forearm. He can almost feel the hot blood under the cold stone. He admires the strength of the motionless arms and thinks about the futile power that accepts its imprisonment.

The empty eyes of the ancient warrior offer the comfort of a familiar gaze. The safety of recognition. The closeness one feels with a masterfully carved piece of stone is like the delicate intimacy of a distant friendship based on arbitrary memories.

As he stands motionless facing the sculpture, he holds his breath in an attempt to adopt its stillness, but the life running through his body always works against him. Every heartbeat sounds like betrayal. Defeated yet again in an impossible test of strength, he quietly says:

– Life pulls us along. Life rips us apart – he says, afraid of the sound of those words and their meaning. And then he slowly moves away from the sculpture, reassured by the certainty of another encounter.

Back in his office, he resumes studying the documents in the cramped room which slowly falls into darkness. With the last rays of daylight, he strains his eyes over the letters and numbers before they disappear in the tunnel of night. He doesn't turn on the office light. The street light is barely enough to outline the silhouettes of the pieces of furniture, distinguishable only by the intensity of their black colour.

Here, too, he looks at the world around himself through the net of squares and cubes that make him what his is. In closed spaces only dimensions grow bigger or smaller, while rough edges remain unchanged. But in the first darkness of the night, the rough walls lose their firmness and the membranes which restrain them become erased. In the night blindness, Daniel inhales the darkness that permeates his whole being. He spends hours sitting in the dark office. Disappearing.

When the relaxedness of his body begins to put a strain on his muscles and the stiffness demands movement, he stands up. With the instinct of a night animal, he finds his way in the dark and puts on his gloves, scarf and coat. Out in the street he is met by the curtain of the first snow which covers the sharp membrane of the city, making it colder and softer at the same time. He looks up at the big snowflakes and watches them for a while; they remind him of the ashes. He can almost feel the smell of burning in the air.

- Dust and ashes in the eyes of the descendants - he says to reassure himself. Thinking about the inevitability of human life, these are the only words he still believes in.

As he returns home, his legs are heavy, his step slow. Convinced that his paths no longer lead him anywhere, he feels like a hamster in a plastic wheel. He tries to figure out the purpose of his movements, to find the force that propels him. The thin blanket of snow crunching under his feet? He likes the sound; its innocent simplicity is like a gently rocking cradle that lulls the imagination to sleep. Without a purpose, he waits to wake up, already convinced he never will.

- Hell of a night for a walk, isn't it, buddy? - Like glass, the silence is broken by the question from a group of young men standing under a street lamp. It was the tallest, the bravest of the three, who addressed him.

It is hard to say if Daniel has heard him and refused to acknowledge the presence of those young men, or if other people's voices no longer reach the place to which he has withdrawn.

He walks on, carefully treading on the thin blanket of snow and listening to the creaking of his shoes. His footprints in the snow fill him with uneasiness. There is something deeply disturbing

in walking on the fresh snow, he thinks. One feels as if violating something virgin, intact.

Thinking about the paths he is leaving behind, he turns around to see the traces of his footsteps, but what he sees are the three young men following him at the distance of about a dozen meters. Their dark silhouettes hovering above the fresh snow look like apparitions.

He quickens his step, wishing to escape his pursuers before they carry out their intention. As he keeps his gaze firmly ahead, the street lights cast their shadow across the pavement in front of him. He steps on it, and the shadow retreats, only to catch up with him again after several meters. He doesn't have the courage to turn around. He walks on as fast as he can, and then his swift walking becomes a run.

He knows he is being followed. He doesn't hear the footsteps of his pursuers, but he feels they are after him. For the first time in a long while, he runs with all his might and only now does he realize how much his body has weakened in the last year. He feels the merciless grip of fatigue on the thinned muscles of his numb legs and the painful beats of his heart which is older than in any other young man of his age. The stabs of sharp winter air choke his lungs and instead of blood, a stale acid runs through his veins and sears his limbs. He has been running for less than a minute, but he feels as if he had been running for hours. And indeed, listening to the agonizing wails of his feeble body, he realizes that he has been running away for a long time. For a whole year.

But now he is not sure how much longer he can run. Fatigue is gaining on him and fear is no longer enough to propel his exhausted body. He decides to keep running until his pursuers catch him, until his legs buckle under him.

His limbs have long lost the grace of uninhibited movement and they flail awkwardly as he runs on. And then he slips, his body twists and he falls on his back on the snow covered pavement.

The race is finished and Daniel is defeated. But instead of the bitterness of defeat or the fear of punishment that befits the loser, he feels only relief.

After exactly one year of his self-imposed imprisonment in a moving cell of numbness, he is ready to face what he has been avoiding. He has no doubt that the touch he is about to feel will be rough and violent; it is the only way to make up for a year of emptiness in such a short time. He knows that each blow will be delivered with the multiplied force of all the touches he has avoided. The pain caused by the clumsy fall has numbed his body and erased his fear. He is ready to rejoin the community waiting to embrace him.

He lifts his head and looks in the direction of his pursuers, but the three young men are gone. The hovering shadows, the gliding apparitions have disappeared as treacherously as they have appeared. He gazes down the wide street looking for any sign of them, but there is none. Dipped in darkness and cloaked in silence, the street is motionless, and the dance of the snowflakes in the air is the only evidence that the time hasn't stopped.

Surprise is replaced by loneliness, which immediately yields to the numbness flooding every inch of Daniel's body. The pain quickly leaves his swollen knee and scratched elbow. Except for a few stains on his trousers and coat, he sees no other consequences of the fall. He slowly rises to his feet, shakes the snow off his coat, shoves his hands back into the coat pockets and carries on his way.

Walking on into the gluttonous night, he pricks up his ears expecting to hear the creaking of his shoes on the snow, but that sound is gone as well. His footsteps leave no trace on the ground. The only thing surrounding him now is the dead silence and the void of all the touches he has avoided.