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Mr Jensen Quits

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Herr Jensen Makes a Decision

With a loud sigh Herr Jensen turned off his television one Wednesday morning. Not with the remote. No, he got up and pressed the button right on the set. There he was, standing in front of it, which didn't happen very often, since he usually watched his television from a proper distance, and then the bright pictures and not actually the set itself. But this Wednesday morning Herr Jensen was standing in front of it, and for the first time he noticed the thick layer of dust on the screen. He found a dust-cloth and started to dust off the glass. The picture tube was still charged, and it crackled at every touch.

Under his rag the dust clumped into little grey worms that stuck stubbornly to the screen, hard for Herr Jensen to remove. Now a passion for cleanliness flared up in Herr Jensen with a weakly hissing flame, and after the screen he cleaned the television's housing too, beginning in the front with all the buttons and parts of the panels, and ending with the back. Then he even pulled the power plug and turned the set around on its little table. Finally he took a few steps back, stood in front of his own TV as if it were a display piece in the store, and nodded smugly at his reflection in the dark screen.

Then Herr Jensen opened the window, letting in the delightfully mild spring air. It smelled good. There was the quiet twitter of birds and the distant rumble of construction equipment. Once again Herr Jensen resolved to air his apartment more often. He shook out the dust-rag and watched raptly as the balmy wind caught the little cloud of dust and carried it away. Then he got to work cleaning the video recorder. Finally Herr Jensen looked out the window again and then down at the sidewalk. This early in the morning there wasn't a soul to be seen. Inspired, he walked back into the room, picked up the television, carried it softly groaning across the room and threw it out the window in one calm, supple motion.

It was interesting for Herr Jensen how intensively he experienced the television's brief flight from his window on the fourth floor to the sidewalk. Though the whole thing lasted only fractions of a second, he had the feeling that he had watched for an eternity and could remember it vividly for a long time to come. For one fleeting moment he had even seen his own reflection in the glass of the falling TV tube, before the television, in free fall, made a slow turn around its axis. An elegant motion. Only the helpless flailing of the power cord detracted from the overall impression of decorum. Herr Jensen almost thought he could hear cries for help.

A mere moment and three floors later the television shattered on the deserted sidewalk with a terrific crash, and the tinkle of splintering glass combined with the dry ripping of the plastic housing made for quite an impressive noise. Not one of the four video recorders Herr Jensen sent after the television presented an even remotely comparable spectacle. They fell through the air wobbling helplessly, Asian lightweights at the mercy of the wind, making at most a soft clunk on the pavement. Two recorders landed on large plastic parts of the television and didn't even seem especially damaged by their fall.

He couldn't explain it yet, but after this deed Herr Jensen felt liberated. After pacing through every room in the apartment, he suddenly stood stock still in the middle of his living room. It hit him that, with the equipment gone, his furnishings were piece for piece exactly the same ones he had moved in with. Everything surrounding him had once stood in his old childhood room. Even the walls were still bare. Herr Jensen had never known what kind of pictures he ought to hang there. Sometimes his mother had given him a plant for his birthday, but none of them had survived on its own for more than a few weeks. By the time he realized he had to water them, it was always too late.

Herr Jensen was flooded by a sense of calm.

He sat down contentedly in his armchair and thought about what to do with his new life, because a new life was what he had decided on. And however much he had focused on the TV program in the past months – though lately, in particular, he had become almost completely indiscriminant in his choice of viewing, using the TV program less like a small motorboat than like a big container ship on whose course one had minimal influence – his decision had been made for rational reasons.

Yesterday, Tuesday, he had worked long into the night again and fell asleep in utter exhaustion. But when he woke up the next morning there it was, before he even opened his eyes: the result of his months of research, the answer to the questions he hadn't even known he had. Suddenly he saw it plain as day. It was as if he'd always known it, as if it had always been right in front of his nose and he'd just been standing too close.

The whole thing was no fluke. It all came together. The fat women in lingerie and the mumbling adolescents trying awkwardly to dance. It was all about moral norms. But whereas in the old days you could learn them in courses and look them up in etiquette books, now they were conveyed in this completely different way. In the old days you were told how to live. In the programs Herr Jensen had studied and analyzed over the past months, you could see instead how you were *not* supposed to live anymore. That was why it was possible for the same people to keep taking different extreme points of view. They were merely serving as bad

examples in human form. And it made no difference whether they were paid actors, acting amateurs or just crazy people. The most off-the-wall discussions with sodomizers and pederasts showed where the boundary was, marked how far you could go. Anyone who didn't cross this boundary could assume they were acting in accordance with the norms.

That was what Herr Jensen had found out. And he wrote down on a piece of paper what this meant was supposed to be normal:

You were supposed to go to work.

You were supposed to have a wife, or at least have sex a lot.

You were supposed to have lots of friends.

You were supposed to know the current fashions.

You were supposed to know something about music.

You were supposed to be in a good mood.

You were supposed to have money.

You were supposed to be beautiful.

You were supposed to do something with yourself.

You were supposed to have dreams.

Herr Jensen was forced to admit that he wasn't normal. He sighed wearily. Herr Jensen couldn't remember having ever done anything wrong. He had always done what he was told, and he had never been rebellious. Nonetheless he now realized in astonishment that he was living on the margins of society. He asked himself why the norms his research had brought to light hadn't just been taught to him in school. What if he hadn't taken the trouble to perform this analysis? Would he never have found out?

He knew that he didn't even have discoveries to boast, because everyone aside from him seemed to be in the picture already. His work had opened his eyes, but it had still been completely futile. So he made a decision. His disapproval of the situation would only raise his blood pressure or his pulse needlessly and without any further benefit. From now on he wouldn't watch any more television, wouldn't listen to the radio. With his notes, he could prove that these things had nothing to do with him. Without the television Herr Jensen could probably even learn more than other people. He wouldn't read any more newspapers either, he wouldn't read anything anymore. From now on, all that would no longer exist for Herr Jensen. For him all that counted now was the day and the fact that he was free at last.

Herr Jensen Looks the Situation in the Face

Though as usual he hadn't drunk any alcohol that crucial Wednesday, Herr Jensen felt hung over the next morning. He had sat in his room until late at night, congratulating himself on his decision. Feelings of happiness coursed through him like warm waves, and he had to force himself not to suddenly start singing out loud. "No more television, no more radio, no more politics," he would say to himself and suddenly stand up in the middle of his kitchen jubilating like a soccer player after a goal and yelling: "And no more 'Miscellaneous' either!" And then he'd throw up his arms and fall on his knees, waving to thousands of spectators in the imaginary stands.

Now, the morning after, things looked a bit more complicated again. It was a weight off Herr Jensen's mind – but on the other hand there was no more project now either. As he made his coffee Herr Jensen thought about his jubilant gesture on the linoleum of the kitchen floor. He had never been to a soccer game himself, and jubilation was something he knew only from the TV whose remains were presumably still lying outside the front door as hazardous waste. So it was pretty paradoxical to celebrate the end of his brainwashing with a gesture like that, like marking the end of your alcoholism with a drinking binge.

It suddenly struck him how much TV jubilation had changed over time. Though he was barely interested in soccer, he had already watched tons of jubilation. In the old black and white clips the soccer players just threw up their arms for a second, even if they'd shot the crucial goal to win the World Cup. And when the game was over the trainer shook each player's hand cordially with an expression of deep happiness on his face. Nowadays the more unimportant goal could be made in the most insignificant friendship game, and the scorer ran across the field cheering as if he'd gone out of his mind, fleeing from all the other players, who of course would end up catching up and piling on top of him. When you looked at it, less jubilation was almost an expression of dissatisfaction, but it was getting harder and harder to display even more jubilation when a player really did shoot the crucial goal in the World Cup.

There were often a few people playing soccer in the nearby park, and a few times Herr Jensen had stood around and watched for a while. Because there were hardly any spectators and no stadium, and because the men played in normal clothing, Herr Jensen had attached no significance to these games. If asked, he would have said he'd never been to a soccer game before. That, thought Herr Jensen, was just the kind of problem he wanted to stop worrying about. Why should a soccer match without TV cameras be less important than soccer with

cameras? One way or the other it was a game people played with each other. Whether the players got more or less money for it and the spectators paid more or less money for it, and whether the players played better or worse, it was still a game, however you looked at it.

Herr Jensen smiled raptly into his coffee cup. The thought of the soccer players in the park gave him a first inkling of how he wanted to approach things from now on and how he could see the world. That reassured him a bit.

He took another sip of coffee. Surprising, really, how a fruit from the jungle had made it across the ocean and found its way, roasted, into his tap water. Incredible, the things people came up with. That of all things coffee ended up making it. Surely happenstance had played an immeasurable role along the way. He wondered whether, under different circumstances, rosehips might have made the running. Now Herr Jensen saw his broad grin on the gleaming surface of his coffee. He had no idea when he'd seen that the last time. He took a big, appreciative swallow and felt the coffee's warm, invigorating effect. From now on he'd have no more "free" or otherwise specified time. All there was now for Herr Jensen was time, and he'd calmly wait and see what it brought him. At the moment he happened to be drinking a cup of coffee, and that was just fine.

At some point he got up, got dressed and went down to the park. He wanted to tell someone about his new life, hear what other people would say about his decision. He sat down an appropriate distance away from a woman on a park bench. Herr Jensen stared into space and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his skin. The woman read a book.

"Nice day today," said Herr Jensen. The woman didn't even look at him. She rummaged through her bag, put on her headphones, stuffed away her book and rapidly abandoned the bench. A while later a man with a little water bottle and a newspaper came along. He sat down in the same place, but when Herr Jensen cleared his throat, he jumped up again, grabbed his things and vanished. Disappointed, Herr Jensen looked around.

He saw people walking past each other in the park with their cell phones. When two people walked along side by side talking on the phone, he always thought they might actually be talking to each other. How could you approach people like that? How could he even tell anyone about his idea? Even if he'd called old friends, to say nothing of his parents, it wouldn't have done any good. They would have mumbled something noncommittal and concentrated on driving or on the TV. And even if they did really listen to him, they would probably have thought to themselves that he was in the process of losing his mind.

Herr Jensen Explains Himself

The remains of his electronic equipment had long since vanished from the sidewalk by the time Herr Jensen ran into his former classmate there, Matthias, the one who had gotten him the job at the post office back then. Every few years they met each other on the street. A while ago Matthias had moved to another city and only saw Herr Jensen when he came back to town to visit his parents.

Matthias did something with money, and it looked like he managed to keep some for himself too. He wore coats over suits and ties. His shoes always looked brand-new, dark brown or black and gleaming, their leather decorated with patterns of holes. Himself, Herr Jensen always wore his shoes as long as possible. That was the most comfortable, and he found shoe shopping stressful. But why talk about shoes when you only ran into each other every few years?

They shook hands in greeting, and Matthias patted Herr Jensen on the shoulder with his left hand. Whenever they met, in a way they were still two school-kids who got along because they both hated the physics teacher and had both copied their homework from other people at some point. Whenever he met Matthias, Herr Jensen felt just the way he did back in his school-days. Matthias was popular and successful, and Herr Jensen listened to him and admired him. They usually exchanged some pleasantries about the weather and ended with some story from their school days.

Matthias started right off by telling about his new job and the responsibility it brought with it, while implying that to make up for it he'd also earn more money than he had at his last job. For Herr Jensen it almost sounded like a job interview. But what kind of job could he possibly have to offer Matthias? Maybe Matthias was just reassuring himself of the fact that he'd gotten around since their school-days. "And what are you doing these days?" he asked Herr Jensen at last.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?" It looked like Matthias had never heard that answer before. "You must be doing something." The usual reaction.

"That's what I thought, too," Herr Jensen replied. "But actually you don't need to do anything."

"And what are you planning to do in the long run?" Matthias stuck to his guns.

“To keep it up,” said Herr Jensen.

“You want to keep up doing *nothing*?”

“Sure, it’s no easy goal, and it’s not getting any easier. After all, these days everyone wants you to do something. But I’m going to go down fighting. I’ve never had it this good before. Look, I’m my own boss, I can get up and come and go as I please. And unlike other self-employed people, I have absolutely no business risk.” Herr Jensen felt elated. Why on earth had he always hated to be asked about his work before?

“But what do you do all day?” asked Matthias, starting to look uncomfortable in his expensive shoes and his elegant coat.

“Like I said: I do nothing.”

“I can’t picture it. I wouldn’t know how to spend the day.”

“That’s just the trick,” said Herr Jensen. “That was the hardest thing to learn. From the very start we get it hammered into our heads that we have to fill our days with some kind of activity. That might have been true decades ago, when everyone got up in the morning to till the fields because otherwise there wouldn’t be anything to eat in the winter. But it’s not like that anymore.” This was starting to be fun. Never before had he been able to formulate his thoughts as clearly as in this conversation. It was important to talk to people now and then after all, thought Herr Jensen.

“But if everyone were to do that –” Matthias started.

“That’s not the problem at all,” Herr Jensen interrupted him. “There are far too few people who want to do nothing. Most people want to do something, and there are too many of them. It’s a new kind of division of labor, where some people get work, usually quite a lot of it. You for example.” Matthias nodded. “And other people get less of the work. Me for example. That’s my social role, practically speaking. Not everyone can give all the time, some people have to take. Other people talk, I listen. Other people work, I do without. No one’s shouting it from the rooftops, but really everyone’s clear about it. Look, for example there’s a whole enormous bureaucracy just for us.”

“But it still can’t go on like that. There ought to be more work.”

“Sure it will, it’ll go on just like that. Fewer and fewer people will produce more and more. People like me are the proof of our prosperity. We’re needed. No employer thinks about how to create new jobs. A new job gets created only when you can get rid of two others in its place.”

Matthias chewed silently on his lower lip for a moment. “And how do you spend your time now? Do you watch television all day or what?”

“Absolutely not,” Herr Jensen said proudly. “I don’t have a television or a radio, and I don’t read the newspapers either.”

“And what’s it like?”

“It’s terrific,” he replied. “Just look at us now. We’re not talking about some trivial game or so-called news that has absolutely nothing to do with us. Instead I’m telling you about me and you’re telling me about you.” Besides, he added quickly, he had the feeling that the world was starting to change more slowly now that he’d decided to do without this so-called information. “Earlier I’d have a hundred marks in my pocket and I’d feel like a rich man. I’d go home, turn on the TV, see three diagrams about the economic crisis, and right away I’d feel poor. Nowadays when I have money in my pocket, it stays there until I’ve spent it, and nothing happens. The truth is, we’re all rolling in money. I get less money than most people, but it’s enough to eat my fill every day and live in a nice apartment that’s warm in the winter and dry when it rains.”

Matthias shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other and glanced up and down the street as if to make sure that no one was listening. His old classmate smiled at him with disarming friendliness and went on with his train of thought: “First I had to learn to start my day without the radio alarm, not to glance at every single newspaper in the mornings, how to spend the evening without depending on the TV program. That was hard. There was a time when I didn’t know what to do with myself. Sometimes I’d pace from one room of my apartment to the next. Then I’d sit in my armchair and stare at the place where the TV used to be. Sometimes I even caught myself muttering news I thought up, changing my voice to sound like a newscaster. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I’d leave the apartment and just walk around. But suddenly there’d seem to be newspapers lying around everywhere, radios on, TVs flickering. I concentrated so much on not looking and not listening that I couldn’t take in a thing anymore. When I got back to my apartment, I was completely exhausted.

“But gradually I’m starting to notice things I never knew about before. I’m telling you, we don’t see or hear the really simple truths anymore, even when they’re right in front of our noses.”

“What do you mean by that?” Matthias asked, starting to get alarmed.

“They’re things I notice,” Herr Jensen said mysteriously. “Just things. You wouldn’t understand them because you’re under the influence of this white noise. You’d say I was crazy, and I don’t want that. Let’s just say: things that happen.”

At that point Matthias stretched out his left arm decisively, uncovering the watch on his wrist. With a show of horror he looked at the watch face and said that he absolutely had to

be going. He briefly shook his school-friend's hand and strode off rapidly, as Herr Jensen lingered on the sidewalk a while, smiling.