



Luigi Passarelli

(The)
SLAVE



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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Passarelli L.

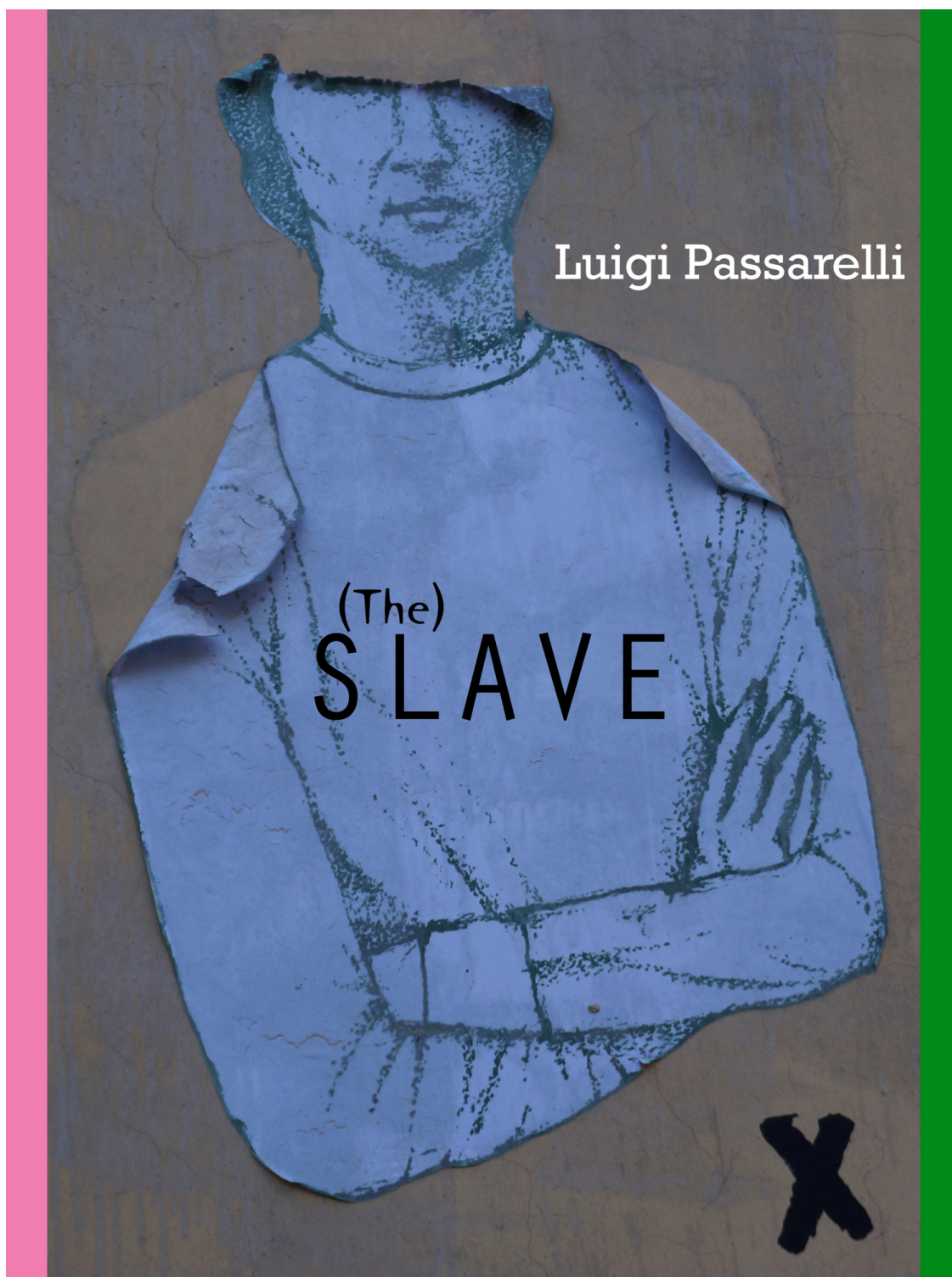
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In the near post apocalyptic future, a boy who has just come of age enrolls on the Price Programme, the new system for managing society. The boy meets a woman who opens up a new perspective on life. The Price Programme is the system for managing society, based on digital credits. Every adult has a microchip implanted in them which contains credits which are downloaded based on that person's participation in State social life. A person is able to live their life in a way which befits their behaviour. Every person with a microchip fitted is therefore able to demonstrate their own worth with the aim of improving their life. Ivano finds himself in a difficult situation, with few choices and he will be forced to come to terms with the person who determines the credit system and its recognition of a person's value.

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Indice dei contenuti

It was an ordinary day, just like any other. Ivano had been waiting his turn in the elegantly styled doctor's waiting room along with all of the other children born on the same day as him. He had only seen four or five of them. He was the second to last. Nobody was talking, nobody even said a word. It was better this way. At the end of it all there would be a practical exam. Everybody was reading the instruction leaflet, which they had all already read so many times that they had all learned it off by heart throughout many years of school and at home life. Redundant stuff. But he knew that even the most obvious things are often filed away as superfluous by a certain type of brain. And in some cases, cases rarely reported in the media, something goes awry. Ivano had never personally experienced or heard any stories of people close to him which were seriously worrying. Just like all the others, he was pretending to be responsible, engaged and interested in the instruction manual. He pretended to read history notes while all the children of his age were obliged to do a three day medical exam to work out if they were eligible for compulsory military service. At the end of the day it was nothing new. The world was just as it always had been. At the end of it all; boring. Perhaps it was always becoming a little more boring. Just like the summer when school is over. That strange summer which opens the door on a whole new world, be it the world of university or the world of work. No homework to do. Studying for studying's sake was a thing of the past. His family had never been on holiday. As the only son, he had only been on short trips close to home, always for educational reasons. But he was never away for longer than one day. He thought about his friends and other people he knew. He would have been happy if one of them would become one of his colleagues in the future. But that would take a great deal of luck. He envied those who could move away even now. He had always had the urge to travel. He should have been able to go to university. Then there would have been many jobs that he could have been able to do, one day in a distant future.

“Ivano? It's your turn, come in.”

Finally, it was his turn.

It was not a good idea to ask questions about the Price Programme. Happiness was a step too far. There were many different possible techniques which he could use to deal with what was coming. Over the past few days his father had made him watch the video courses in preparation for the big event. The day he had been waiting for ever since he was born had finally arrived. It was simple. All he had to do was to get up out of that comfortable armchair, forget everything about his life up to that point and follow the nurse.

The operating room reminded him of visits to the dentist.

Ivano knew that the whole thing would be over in ten minutes.

The anaesthesiologist, who had grown accustomed to the procedure set to it without any hesitation. Nobody said a word. Someone smiled half a smile out of tired courtesy.

It's difficult to fake it forever. Even in front of a young adult facing the most important event of his life.

However everybody was well trained. Ivano braced himself and used the mental isolation techniques he had learned. The anaesthetic and the smell of the room both helped.

He did not lose consciousness. It was obvious that he was annoyed by the cannula which was stuck up one of his nostrils. It was making him nauseous. The wire had to travel all of the way to the pineal gland, where the latest version of the microchip would be inserted, and back again all without doing any serious damage.

It was only then that he started to wonder what kind of relationship there could possibly be between organic matter and technology. But, intrinsically it was the same as it has always been. It was for sure that neither the microchip nor the doctors were suffering any pain at that point.

After a few minutes everything was over. The relief of the cannula being removed came at the same time as the effects of the anaesthetic beginning to wear off. After a short while he would be able to get up and take his first steps in the new grown-up world.

In some ways he felt reborn, in other ways he felt like he had a new burden to carry and he was very much aware of a massive change in his life.

“You can get up, Ivano.”

Yes, he could get up. A slight headache, a slight crick in his neck and he felt a little off balance.

He waited for his paperwork. The file containing his provisional password and the myriad instructions which he already knew off by heart.

“Welcome to the Price Programme, Ivano!”

That was it. It was the wait that was longer than anything else. What had happened was nothing too special. The consequences would be significant though.

All that was left was to retrace his footsteps, to head home and try not to cause any trouble on the way.

He was walking home along his usual route, when he found himself in front of the shop where he had fallen in love with countless girls and women throughout his adolescence. This time there was nobody in the window who inspired him. But he tried a little experiment anyway, a test.

He pointed his phone at a girl in a bikini to check if the Programme was working properly. She seemed to be friendly and happy. It turned out that his account had not been activated yet. Ivano could not see the price and could not add the girl to his basket or his wish list.

The girl waved back at him. He couldn't hear her, but it was easy to understand. She obviously wasn't displeased with his looks. It was a shame that she was not to his liking. Ivano left and started to think back to all those girls he had dreamed about for so many nights, the ones who gave him real, sensual companionship in his fantasies. The ones who had drifted away from him slowly. He was a little ashamed. Mostly for the sake of his family. They had told him straight away that he should never take certain assumptions into account. Starting a family was a completely different matter, even at that time. He would have found the right woman in his own time. His little misadventures with a few friends during his school years had not been all that they could have been. Always hidden and always accompanied by an element of fear.

A beggar caught his eye. Ivano wanted to have another try. He wanted to understand the new power he had acquired, just to see if it was all true.

He pointed his mobile phone at the man.

Yes, this time it worked. The man cost around 3000 credits. This old man with mutilated legs, a beard like one of the ancient prophets, dirtier than most people could ever be and dressed like a Napoleonic soldier, he smiled at him mockingly.

“So, little boy! Do you want to buy me? Are you having fun? Why don't you give your mum a present!! Take me home, give me a room and my own bed!! I could be very useful in your family don't you think?”

Ivano was scared. And ashamed. Yes, it's true, this is how things worked.

He ran away quickly and his thoughts turned to the question of respect for others. At the same time he was thinking of the practical uses for other people. There was still choice when you were in the Programme. You had to be smart just like before. Or at least you always had to remember profit was key. Now he was scared that someone would discover his real value and try to take advantage of him just while walking down the street.

Everybody knew the first rule of the Programme by heart: only other people can find out the actual amount of credits an individual was worth. You cannot check your own value with your own device, only someone else can.

Before Ivano went to the clinic, his father had tried to reassure him: once you are registered on the Programme, you can relax. Credits are standard for everyone, it depends on your journey through life, but he already knew how to deal with things, and he expected a reasonable figure. A figure which would have left him free.

Ivano however was busy imagining what it would be like when he got home.

There would be sermons. There would be too much attention. Yes indeed, his father would not miss out on this opportunity to draw yet another picture.

They didn't want for anything. It was just that there had never been a remote possibility of being able to travel.

The outside world was something which was distant and unknown. His family had only even visited a few areas of their own city. This would have to be enough for him.

The world was just too dangerous to be enjoyed to the full. All trips were controlled by the Programme and only a few lucky ones were allowed to leave their own Area of Competence. That was the case for him and his parents and probably for all of his friends and acquaintances.

Ivano was walking down the street, going past the few shops which were still open. They were almost all greengrocers selling fresh food. He was tempted to secretly make the first purchase of his life. Who knows, it could even have just been a candy. Deep down he knew however that his father would be furious with him if he did. He would have ruined his Price birthday. His father might even have complained to the System Tutors and got them to impose a spending limit.

To really be an adult and to please those around him, he would have to behave properly and not give in to silly little whims. In reality not much had changed in comparison to the past. He couldn't do anything before and now he could do even less. All he could do was to wait for the right moment to invest in something of his own. Certainly not on a whim or on childish things like candy.

He would have to wait for his father to check how many credits he was worth. He quivered to think about how much they had recognised his commitment, his work and basically his whole life.

He trusted in his father, but it was not a blind trust. He remembered that he was not infallible, he could still make a mistake in his calculations somewhere. He even feared that his companions could be worth much more than him. He was ashamed.

He started to walk faster, nearly home now.

Ivano rang the bell. He had never had a set of keys. His father ran to open the door. He was free that day, just like any other father on their child's Price birthday.

"Ivo!! Has it happened?! You are back!! Come in, come in!! So? How do you feel? Do you feel like a grown-up now? Sit down, I have a surprise for you!"

His mother brought in a tiny cake with a huge candle on it.

Now everyone was sat at the table. Well, not really everyone. The rest of his family was missing. But since the Programme did not provide extra credits for presents or holidays, nobody celebrated anything anymore.

As soon as Ivano blew out his candle, he wanted to go straight to his room. He could forget about that though.

Ivano's father got out his mobile phone and solemnly pointed it towards Ivano's head.

"Are you ready? Do you want to know or not? Aren't you curious? All of these years that I have been here, guiding you, giving you advice. All it takes is one little click to know! Ah! Did someone assess you already on the street? Or were you so ungrateful as to ask a passer-by to do the favour? What do you say Ivano? Shall I do it?"

His father pointed the phone at him and found out what he wanted to know straight away. At first he looked serious and worried. Then he relaxed.

“Just as I thought. Exactly as I thought. I never get it wrong, not me. Isn't that right love? Look at that!”

His father was right. In his heart, Ivano was hoping that it would be a good deal higher. There was no real reason. It was just a dream. He dreamed of being better than the crude reality had made him out to be. One can dream too much however. He had taken too much from the world of literature; in his head he had written a novel with a happy ending. Now all he wanted to do was to go and rest. He had a headache, his sense of balance was not quite back to normal. He had felt better while he was walking compared to now that he was sitting still.

The cake was rancid. It was because of those hyper-preservatives they used these days. You had to drink three glasses of water just to swallow a piece of cake. His mind wandered to the cream that they used to have, once upon a time.

Ivano and his father sat down in the living room. His mother was only interested in her housework as usual. Looking after the kitchen, cleaning, little jobs like that. Her husband had power of attorney when it came to credits as she had always been an awful student. This fact had always depressed her and she had felt humiliated throughout her adult life. She didn't play an active role in decision making in the family, even if her husband, albeit in the privacy of their marital bedroom, did ask her questions, as for her opinion and for advice. Her responses were usually short and elusive. That was enough to make her husband happy. She missed her own family, but nobody knew why the ties between them had been severed. At least officially nobody knew. There was just a myth about one of her relatives being arrested, and that was it...

Ivano's father worked in maintenance at a local play ground, the only one which still existed in their Area of Competence. The park itself was enormous and had an extensive infrastructure. So it needed constant checks and supervision, as did the technology which was necessary for it to run. Ivano's father had become one of the people responsible for that sector.

For Ivano, the joy of going to a park had understandably diminished with the passing of the years. Nothing was ever new, nothing was ever brought up to date, it was all exactly as it had been on the day it was created. Thus, he had lost interest in going. His father didn't blame him for that, he knew that the place was for families with small children. He knew 100% that Ivano's children would be able to go there almost for free as often as they wanted to, thanks to his being there. That made him happy. Just a small privilege that he could be proud of. Ivano's father needed incentives to spur him on, even if they were only small. It stopped him thinking about other things which were less pleasant.

Back in the living room, Ivano was listening to his father speaking, his words were full of wisdom, but at the same time melancholic and unnerving.

Don't buy anything that is not strictly necessary, your university fees include the meal of the day at the canteen, eBooks, handouts, video lessons and everything else.

Ivano's behaviour would not have to change at all. He would continue along the same path he had taken throughout school. It had now become imperative to get the highest grades possible. That would take four years of intensive and continuous work on his part. He never asked for anything else. Now he had moved on to the next step.

He remembered that not all of his friends had had his good fortune, they had not all had his abilities. Recognition was necessary for everyone and everything. Recognition that you are privileged and middle class and relying on this recognition to maintain your position. To maintain your position in society.

Ivano had heard the same stories for almost half of his life, but this time they sounded disgusting to him. He was daydreaming about escaping from the living room and jumping into bed, even if he couldn't sleep he could put his headphones on and listen to audio dreams.

He tried, but he couldn't listen to his father's monologue any longer. He was trembling and felt a sort of paralysis which was making him break out in a cold sweat. His mother had been coming in and out of the room but said nothing as usual.

“Okay, go and rest. I know that the operation itself wasn’t too bad, but I remember when it was my turn, I stayed in bed for a week. We thought about claiming on the guarantee. Then everything went back to normal. Just like with any other update.”

Ivano stood up mechanically. Luckily there was still a hand rail on the stairs for him to hold onto. Finally he made it to his own bed.

The main transition had occurred by now. He was lying on his bed when he began to doubt the usefulness of his past and future studies. He realised that he had not made choices which corresponded to his desires. He had even done all of the aptitude tests to try to work out a suitable career path that fitted in with his characteristics. He needn't have any doubt, a mistake could not be possible. He still felt lousy though. He knew as well that in reality he didn't actually have any plausible desires or aims. All he would have wanted to do was to travel and to choose from time to time the road down which he would travel. He knew very little about the world however. The only thing he knew about the world was about the different plants. And basically there wasn't that much to know about them.

Only one other boy from his age range had progressed with him through the same studies, and he had never even spoken to him. They had never met and he didn't even know his contact details. On the last day of school, they both had an appointment at the same time to go and see the building which would have been their new faculty. Every department of the university was strictly separated from the others.

He had never seen the building before, although it was not very far from his house. He had never even heard anybody talking about it. It was called Container B1. He decided to have a look on his tablet to try to find some photos of it. Strangely, he had never even thought about doing that before.

He was disappointed. There was only one app which he could download, the search engine could not find any others. There was no point trying anything else.

He presumed he would have access to more information when he had signed up. His father had already told him how many credits a year they would be spending, and also about the various possibilities for making more money.

He got a bit of energy and hope back. Maybe it was worth giving his best to get the most credits. He thought about a positive balance at the end of things. He only feared that it would be incredibly difficult to achieve.

Impossible tests, misleading questions and answers, they had done everything to try to make it as difficult as possible to find the right answer. But at the end of the day, if everything had been easy, then there would be no point. Or maybe there would...

He put his favourite channel on the radio, but the Voice of Conscience was speaking.

“Ivano, now that you can be who you have always dreamed of being, stop thinking negative thoughts! Today is a special day. Enjoy these moments with your loved ones. Show them some recognition for everything they have done for you. It is down to all of us! We have always been close to you and now you have made it to your Big Day. You should be grateful for that. Would you like to hear today's horoscope?”

Ivano hated horoscopes. He hated everything which claimed to be the truth but had no proof. It seemed like they were just made up.

The audiophone chose an invigorating playlist for him. Even so he only recognised a couple of the artist's songs. An older song came on, something by one of the few artists who had survived the years.

He had studied it over and over. It was an appropriate subject for him. The abandonment of idolatry and the love of icons. They were products in effect. Given the fact that the Programme was not able to control pure or impure thoughts, it was decided to do without all of that.

He could never understand if it would be useful, right or worthwhile, if it was time to simply cut the impossible knot and to make creativity walk the plank. Ivano thought that artefacts were stuff of the past, of a past which was full of doubts and problems, full of uncertainties and multiple

interpretations. Now, all of that had definitively been left behind. He had not lived through the excitement and the culture, but it was certainly not possible to go back to that now.

He didn't feel remotely able of creating something, he was making the most of the positive energy and left those who were more graceful than him to be chosen by Selection.

There were after all special schools, where the work was very difficult and the most suitable students studied there.

He had actually got the lowest results in the tests.

He loved being stretched out and examining the ceiling. Especially when he liked what was on the audiophone. He loved being in his room.

Yes, the Voice was right. He had really accomplished a dream. Now he needed to rest, but if he slept now he wouldn't be able to sleep tonight.

A sense of calm and of personal fulfilment swept over him, giving him a renewed feeling of self confidence. Slowly but surely he felt able to move forward. Going forward with these tiny things was the only journey he could take. A journey which had already been dreamt up and was already planned out. All he had to do to accomplish this journey was to pass the time. His studies had helped, now he understood that better. He was learning the true dimensions of realisation. Perhaps the microchip had helped him? He just didn't know.

A few days later his brain, or more specifically his frontal cortex had got used to the intruder which had been placed there. He received a phone call from the other student of the same age, who had managed to get his number from a mutual friend. They were allowed to meet.

It was the middle of the morning and the two friends met up in front of their old school, which was closed.

A sense of nostalgia took over both of them. Basically everything had gone well.

Their first words to each other were about their school days and their shared experiences. They didn't have any idea about what was waiting for them at the end of the summer. They were both a bit offish with each other, typical boys. They both pretended that they did not trust what they had been told or the rumours that they had heard.

Generally in this kind of situation a sort of one-upping competition would take place, improvements and various possible privileges that they could gain in the future. Some would say that their life would be better, they would be richer, happier etc. and some would say the exact opposite. The one thing that is certain however is that none of this ever comes about due to their own personal choice. But all of the hopeful students hoped that the Programme would be kind to them, and that this kindness would be more influential than their studies and their test results.

He took his first steps in the direction of Container B1 and his friend followed.

"Listen... Have you bought anything yet? I haven't. If you want I can check your account and you can check mine. My father says to always keep an eye on it and to be careful about what you do and what you think. Are you scared?"

Ivano pointed his mobile phone at his friend's forehead as he had been asked to and was very surprised to see a figure which was three times higher than his own. He didn't make anything up but he refused to allow his friend to check what he was worth.

"Why not? I will let you see the display. You can even do it yourself, I will give you the phone and you can delete the data when you are finished. You know how to do it don't you?"

Ivano convinced himself, he actually wanted to check himself, to know once and for all.

He took his friend's phone and checked how much he was worth. It told him what he already knew.

He didn't delete the figure from the phone and feeling a bit ashamed he gave it back to his friend who reacted with a mixture of compassion and disgust.

"My father was right," he said.

Ivano told his friend about an ethics lesson he remembered: once you reach maturity you are able to drive a hydrogen car. On the road you have to be precise and disciplined. However, you need a good amount of luck as well. If a tree falls in front of you or someone else makes a mistake you could end up dead and it would not be your fault at all.

“But mine is not just luck. It is down to merit. Calculated merit.”

Ivano said that basically the secret was to make simple things complicated.

His friend told him to be quiet and not to say things like that any more. There would be no more secret words or shortcuts, they were not allowed. It was time to put up and shut up. It was all down to merit. Just like him.

His friend remained silent for a while until he blurted out something about how if Ivano carried on saying things like that he would have to report him to the authorities.

Ivano was not exactly surprised at the fact that the two of them had not spoken to each other for five years.

In any case, it reassured him. He thought about how he could triple his credits. It would need tactics.

The two of them walked along in silence, crestfallen, each with his own thoughts being probed by the microchip.

Ivano was thinking about when he went to visit his grandfather at the retirement home. His grandfather had fought in the last war. He was posted at a missile silo. He had seen a little of the world, even if it was mainly through the servers and satellite scanners, the little that he was allowed to see anyway. That one time he visited his grandfather, he had hardly told him anything, but he had wanted to know everything. The war had taught him that a sunrise and a sunset can look the same through pained and experienced eyes. He had now become convinced that there was no realistic way to enjoy life. Too much input on either a microscopic or a macroscopic level can affect our conscience. And the strongest factors, which are the ones which affect us for ever, are always the negative ones. There was no getting away from it. Don't fool yourself Ivano, don't fool yourself, you won't make it either.

Anyway, the memory of his grandfather was interrupted when he received a message on his mobile: activity not allowed!

Already! They had now arrived in front of their destination. They both smiled and said that it was strange that they had never noticed it before. It was only now that they realised that this cube which had no real windows, only virtual ones was a Container. The friend said that he had walked past it several times without even realising it. They both felt pride in their chests. They wanted to go up to the entrance, hoping that it would be open. They were disappointed.

There was a three metre tiled garden around the building along with a slightly larger space in front of the entrance which had two staircases.

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