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The Relief

a tale to be told

Once upon a time, in a country far, far away, there was a small town called X which contributed greatly to national prosperity.

This town was known far beyond national borders for its industrial productivity and its inhabitants were proud of their reputation. However, after many years of prosperous activity, the reserves of raw materials ran low and the production began to decline. The rapid growth of a small village into an important industrial town was suddenly reversed. Instead of flocking into town, people gradually moved out because work was getting scarce. It wasn't long before the population had shrunk by half and hardly anyone under the age of 40 really wanted to live there anymore.

In these times, the planet's ecosystems were in a very bad state. While in the southern hemisphere people had suffered from this problem for a long time already, in the North, awareness was rising and people were started to fear for their own living conditions. In reaction, all governments met seven times for an extra-ordinary summit and decided by a small majority the introduction of drastic measures to preserve the health of their natural environment.

The conclusions of the seventh and final extra-ordinary summit could be summarized as follows: humans take so much space on Earth with their houses, their roads, their factories, their mines, and with all the other infrastructures they build, that they make life impossible for millions of other living species. Their survival depending on the very existence of all these other species, Humans would need to free a large part of the land surface they occupy and give it back to Nature without delay if they wanted to avoid extinction.

Given the gravity of the situation, every country taking part in the summit pledged before all the others to hand one third of their inhabited land surface back to wilderness. Each country was to see for themselves how best to go about it, which locations to choose for rewilding, and how to deal with the affected citizens. A majority of the countries had voted in favour, it had thus to be done.

In the small country in which the small city of X was located, everyone was glued to their radio, their television or to the internet when the government announced their chosen rewilding policy:

The areas of the country that would have to be cleared of all constructions to make place for wildlife were the places whose human population was already on the decline and which no longer attracted people; places whose infrastructure were in a bad state; places whose economies were no longer profitable and had little potential for recovery; places - finally - that would make the biggest difference, because much of

their land was covered in concrete. The residents of the affected areas had to move away, but the state would give them a generous compensation and support them in their search for a new home.

To the ears of the inhabitants of X, the government's description left no place for doubts. It was *the very portrait of their own city*. Within hours, before the name of X had even been mentioned by the government or in the news, half of the population was in the streets protesting.

In every corner of the city one could hear the protesters chant:

[sung]

*Know we will never move away from here
And we don't care how much you're off'ring us
And we also don't care how much happens out there
For we will never move away from here
Our home town stands right here
Know we will never move away from here*

The next day, the inhabitants of X woke up in a divided city. On the one side, the "stayers" who firmly intended to contest the government's decision and to defend their place against its planned disappearance. On the other side, the "leavers", who rather welcomed the government's decision as an opportunity to start a new life elsewhere and leave a city which they thought didn't have much left to offer them.

"Leave with us and help negotiate a good deal with the government!" said the leavers to the stayers. "Stay with us and help defend your place and your history!" said the stayers to the leavers. Both parties were so deeply convinced of their positions that there was not much they could do to persuade the others.

Eventually, as everyone expected, the name of X appeared on the government's official list of places to be rewilded. The leavers went to bargain with the government; the stayers stayed home to plan the resistance.

The next day, the stayers sent an open letter to the government which was published in all national newspapers:

Who are you in your distant offices, looking down at a map? You have never come here. You do not know our city.

And yet, you decide it is no longer worth living in.

For as long as it guaranteed wealth to the country, you cherished our region as the pride of the nation. For as long as our time and our sweat served your purpose, our lives seemed a good investment.

But now that the figures in your accounting no longer point upwards, you see this place as disposable. Now that your statistics show you that people here — like anywhere — are aging, you see us as obsolete.

In your books, our city has already long been a ruin, inhabited by ruined people with no future. In your fantasy, you are the heros saving us from a sinking ship.

Whatever you think about it, this city — and the land around it — is where we come from.

*It is our history.
It is where we live.
It is who we are.*

We will not give it up for the promise of a another home, wherever it is, however luxurious your offer gets to be.

We are like the nature you claim to be protecting: planting a tree over there will never replace the tree you've cut over here.

People in the government were not naïve. They expected a percentage of inhabitants to refuse their offer and they had a plan for this eventuality. Studies showed that once people are given the chance to express themselves they usually calm down and come back to reason. So, emissaries were sent to the city and meetings were organised in every neighborhood to allow the stayers to express their doleances. The government had an open ear.

Yet, rather than crowds of citizens eager to be heard, the emissaries met with empty community halls. The stayers were organised and not one of them bothered to leave their house. It is said that on that evening, only one person turned up, Mr D, a leaver and inheritor of a rich factory owners family. Mr D was not happy with the size of the houses the government's compensation money could afford him elsewhere. The emissary told Mr. D that the deal with the leavers was already settled and that he was there to speak to stayers, not to leavers. So, Mr. D, declared he would no longer leave X and rather join the stayers instead.

The stayers' unconventional behaviour was put on the account of the cultural gap between metropolis and province. Informed by further sociolgy and behavioural psychology, the people in the governement concluded that, given the age distribution between leavers and stayers, once the leavers would start leaving X, the stayers would probably follow on their own initiative.

And indeed, those who were leaving X belonged mostly to the younger part of the population: families with small children, young adults who were eager to start a professional life, long term unemployed, or people who still had good jobs but knew that with all the leavers leaving those jobs would probably not last much longer.

Unlike Mr. D, most of the leavers were happy with the money the government promised them. They took part in free organised trips to visit potential new places of residence in all corners of the country. These were exciting times for the leavers and hardly any other subject seemed worthy of conversation, at the bar, at the dinner table, in the newspapers, or at work... new horizons had opened and they were eager to explore them.

The stayers, on the other hand, were mostly older, pensioned citizens who felt a more profound bond with X and its history. The prospect of starting a new life elsewhere did not make much sense to them. On the contrary, opposing the government is what felt like starting a new life. Instead of sitting in front of the TV or getting their grand children from school, they now spent their time organising secret gatherings. A sense of collective and solidarity was growing among them, and for the first time since very long, they felt proud of who they were.

Yet, despite their renewed enthusiasm, witnessing the leavers prepare and rejoice at their departure also left the stayers with a sense of sadness and frustration.

Also for the leavers the situation was not all rosy. The stayers refusing to leave meant for them not only to prepare leaving their town, but also leaving parents and grand parents behind. "But why don't you come with us, granma?" would they say. "Dad, why to cling so tightly to this run down and polluted place?" Things would have been so much easier for the leavers if their elders would have just come along... But the ones did not understand the others. Many stayers resented the leavers whom they saw as betrayers. Many leavers thought the stayers were being selfish and blamed them for for refusing to move with the times. Many families that were once close fell apart.

After a while, what was due to happen happened: the leavers started to leave the city.

The first ones to leave were the lawyers, the notaries, the insurance brokers, those working in advertisement and, more generally speaking, all those working for big companies and corporations who could carry on elsewhere with their work just as they had in X without anybody really noticing it. So, initially, except for close relatives, the leavers' departure hardly disrupted life in X more than life had already been disrupted so far.

But it didn't take long until the first bakers, doctors, bar owners, choir directors, or physiotherapists announced that they too were about to leave, and that with them, so would their shop, their practice, their venue, and all the activities and services they provided. Obviously, the stayers knew this was going to happen, but still, it came as a shock. "What are we going to do?" they were asking eachother. "How will we live when everyone has left?"

And indeed the city became more and more empty. There were more and more empty houses and empty shops. And in the shops that were still open, there was less and less things to be bought. People were forced to travel far to be able to find all the things they needed on a daily basis. The trains and the busses and the trams were less and less frequent. City and state administrations were no longer represented in town and it

was almost impossible to get an appointment with the very few dentists or hairdressers who had stayed. The same was true for construction and maintenance workers, car mechanics and nurses... The streets were no longer cleaned, and the garbage only seldomly picked up. Their city had started to look like a ghost town. And they felt like the ghosts.

By the time the last leavers left the city, the mood among the stayers was not very good. Although hardly anyone dared to mention it aloud, many were thinking about all those who had left and whether their place would not actually better be with them.

People in the government were happy to see that their plan was working out. It was now only a matter of time to finally see the stayers come to reason and accept giving in to a cause greater than their own ...or so they thought.

One day, Ms Q, who had been one of the most motivated stayers since the beginning, woke up with a brilliant idea. "If the reason for choosing our city", she thought, "is that nobody wanted to come to live here anymore, then we just need to find a way to make people want to come here again." And she went on thinking. "What is it that we have here plenty and that people in other places miss the most? Cheap housing! We have so many empty houses here that no longer belong to anyone. Let's offer them for free to anyone wanting to come and live here with us. Who would say no to a free house?"

And so, over the following weeks, without the government noticing, as discreetly as a conspiracy can be, the inhabitants of X took trips to every city in the country looking for people in need of cheap housing. And, as it turned out, there were many people interested in what they had to offer.

They were young people longing for a different society and who saw in X the chance for a new start. They were people who were no longer able to pay the rising rents in the big cities. They were people coming from other continents, fleeing wars, environmental disasters and oppressive regimes. There were families with children, single people, groups of friends and collectives. Some quit jobs which they didn't like anyways, others could work at a distance, while others still were unemployed, or didn't have anything better to do.

Quickly, new people started to move into the city. They found a new home in the many empty houses and buildings. To welcome the newcomers, the stayers organised collective dinners in the canteen of the disaffected townhall. Thanks to these dinners, people quickly got to know each other. Newcomers and stayers, newcomers and other newcomers, but also stayers and stayers who after so many years living in the same city had the feeling of meeting each other — and themselves — anew.

What started as simple welcoming events rapidly became a central element of life in X. The newcomers came from many different walks of life, countries and cultures. Everybody was eager to offer something of their own to the collectivity. The variety of the meals served in the canteen was impressive. These dinners also became the occasion for concerts, presentations, projections, discussions and debates.

Soon, there was no longer enough space to host everyone in the canteen of the townhall. Other dinner evenings were thus organised in different neighborhoods. Each canteen had their culinary specialities and their own programme. At the time, it was said that in X, on any given evening, you could find something exciting happening. People from neighboring cities even started to come over for a day, to experience the special atmosphere and the events in the city. Everything was rather messy, but it was exhilarating.

The year these events took place was an electoral year in the country. So perhaps politicians had more urgent priorities to attend to, or perhaps they simply assumed that the issue with the stayers would solve itself with time. We will probably never know, but given the reputation X was rapidly acquiring in the region, it took surprisingly long before the government seemed to notice at all that something unexpected was taking place in the city.

But once the government paid attention, their reaction was immediate. In order to prevent any new inhabitants from entering the city, police was sent to establish checkpoints on all roads leading into town. From then on, only the original stayers could come in and out. Newcomers leaving the city were no longer allowed to come back in. And it worked: not only did this measure stop the influx of people into the city, but it also made life much more difficult for everybody. Everyone in X depended now on the stayers to get anything they needed from outside which, at this stage, was most of the things they needed.

The intervention of the government also generated a lot of public attention and polemic. For many days in a row, the situation in X made the all the headlines. And soon enough, almost everybody in the country had their own opinion about what was taking place there. It also became an unavoidable topic in the electoral debate.

Some supported the opinion that historical inhabitants should never be forced away from their city and that the problem of excessive housing prices should be tackled rather than evicting the newcomers who found refuge in X. Others were very critical of the inhabitants of X whom they considered to behave selfishly and to lack a broader view of the situation. In their view, making space for wildlife was not a matter of choice, but of survival. If people in X could not be reasoned with, then, they should be relocated by force. Independently from this debate, there was also a growing support for the people in X and for the social and political experiment it represented.

The government was caught in between two fronts. On the one hand, they felt pressure to apply their rewilding policy according to plan and to comply with their commitments in front of the international community. On the other hand, there was the imperative to please their voters in order to be re-elected in the upcoming elections. "What should we do?" the people in government were asking "if we please the ones we will frustrate the others"!

Also in X people were not spared disagreements and tensions. The arrival of newcomers generated a certain anxiety among many of the older stayers who felt

overwhelmed by what was happening. "Who are all these people, and how will we be able to keep things orderly here?" They would ask.

And indeed, people in X had to organise and to take care of everything they needed without any support from outside. Those who were born in the country were used to more or less efficient garbage collection, street cleaning, medical services, energy, or food and water supplies. They worried much about how the situation would evolve. Many of those coming from poorer countries, on the other hand, knew very well what it was like not to be able to fully count on the state for their basic needs. They had plenty of precious knowledge and experience to share.

Some among the stayers said: "We have lived here all our lives, we should have more say about how things should work." But after other stayers pointed out to them that without the newcomers, none of them would probably still be able, or even want to live in X, almost all agreed that whatever the future in X would become, it would have to be fairly decided upon by all people living in the city. Shortly after, as a first collective decision, the city was given a new name. From then on, there would no longer be "stayers" and "newcomers" in X, but only "citizens of New X".

There was plenty to do, and almost everyone worked in a way or another to make life possible and good in the city. But besides those who were pensioned, there weren't many people who actually still earned money. Everyone depended almost entirely on the food and the goods that had to be bought outside of the city and on the work people volunteered to do. Who was to pay for these goods? And with what money?

After different attempts at bartering, setting up a time bank or creating new currencies, it was concluded that the easiest way to deal with the issue was to simply make do without any money at all. All the money people still earned was put together on one single common bank account and that money was used to pay for all the things people needed from the outside world. For the rest, everything in New X was declared money-free.

People contributed what they could through their time, their skills, their strength and their presence and they took what they needed from what there was. Only Mr D disagreed with the decision and insisted on keeping his money and on paying for everything he needed. By the time, people in New X were used to Mr D having his own ways, so they let him be. Dealing with Mr D was a bit like playing a game with toy money. Children loved to do business with Mr. D.

But for some people, living in New X implied giving up on too many things they though were essential to their well-being. "I cannot be happy without strawberries" said the one, although it was October. "I want new clothes", said the other. One could also hear people say "Why should we spend so much money on cigarettes?", or "Those who work less should also eat less!"... Eventually, a group of citizens of New X announced their departure. They wanted a higher life quality and more individual freedom. They didn't believe this would ever be possible in New X. So, they left.

At this point, some thought it was the beginning of the end, because many others would follow their example and leave the city. But in reality, what happened was very much the contrary: people felt all the more convinced in their motives for being there. Some realised how much happier they actually were, even if being in New X meant to sacrifice some of the material comfort they were used to. Others, who had struggled financially all their lives, found more stability in New X, even if the economic situation remained rather precarious. And, most importantly, they were now no longer alone dealing with their financial trouble. And for those who had fled danger, being in New X simply offered so much more safety.

While the departure of the unsatisfied citizens did not affect New X too negatively, it did attract attention again and stirred up the situation with the government. Since establishing the checkpoints, the government's strategy had been to do as little as possible regarding New X in order not to antagonise any potential voters. But in the meantime, the international community had shown signs of impatience and the country was facing very heavy fines if they didn't meet the rewilding targets they had committed to.

With New X in the news again, the government felt forced to take action. They announced that all abandoned houses and buildings in New X would be demolished with immediate effect. "It is a smart move", thought the people in the government. "Two birds with one stone: destroying the buildings, we already start to rewild the city while at the same time, once half of it is gone, it will make people in New X rather want to leave!" And so, the plan was set into motion.

When they heard the news, the people in New X rang the alarm bell. From the outset, they were prepared to resist such a move from the government. Everyone left what they were doing on the spot.

When the bulldozers of the government moved towards a first building, everyone, old and young, ran inside and chained themselves to pillars, radiators and railings. The workers had come to take down buildings, not to crush people under the rubble. So when they saw people entering the building they were about to destroy, they stopped immediately and moved to next building. But there again, people were faster and had chained themselves in already.

The whole country was watching the events in New X. Some people protested, but most thought that, after all, given that the abandoned buildings now formally belonged to the state and that they were left empty anyways, taking them down was a legitimate thing to do, especially if it were a way to avoid having to pay fines.

The government sent more workers and more machines to New X, which made people run faster from one house to the other to protect them. This strange competition went on for a whole week, the inhabitants of New X heroically throwing all the energy they had into the fight. But there were many vacant buildings in New X. The more bulldozers were sent in, the more the defenders had to split up in smaller groups. Until eventually, they ended up being only two or even only one person left to defend each building. At this point, the government felt confident enough to remove people from

their chains without attracting too much attention. And so, the first buildings were taken down.

Realising they could no longer hold their positions, the inhabitants of New X retreated. They decided to concentrate their strengths on defending the houses where people actually lived, and the buildings they actually made use of. This strategy proved efficient for at the end of the day, all the inhabited houses could be saved and only 2 buildings housing collective canteens fell to the bulldozers. The people in the government must have been happy with the result, for shortly after, as quickly as they had appeared, the machines were gone.

When they woke up the next day, people could hardly recognise their city. More than half of New X was simply gone. Where there were still shops, housing buildings, factories, parkings, offices, sidewalks and streets just a few days earlier there was now only bare land, dotted with rests of construction waste. It was like waking up from a nightmare, to realise it was not a nightmare, but reality.

The bricks, beams, doors, pavement, glass, gravel, plastic, metal, stone and insulation materials that once made up half of the city were now piled up in a gigantic heap just outside of town. Where there once was an industrial complex providing the whole region with pride and employment stood now a mountain of rubble which could be seen from every corner of what was left of New X.

After putting so much energy, time and hopes in resisting the disappearance of their city, the people of New X felt completely defeated. Those who had lived there their whole life were devastated. There was nothing left, as if an earthquake, a tornado, or a tsunami had just hit and flattened their home. But worse, because in their case, there would be no disaster relief, or help given for rebuilding. They felt entirely alone in the rubble of their own lives. Everyone in New X sat contemplating the catastrophe, emptied of any ideas or hopes for the future.

There in the distance stood the mountain of rubble, towering above the ruins. Its bare flanks were so steep that even in despair people had to wonder how the machines were ever able to make such a mountain in the first place. The inhabitants of New X looked at their entire history piled up right in front of them. Ms. E couldn't help but to identify the pale green traces at the bottom of the heap with the extravagant color their daughter had chosen for their new house, not even five years earlier. Ms. A had the impression she could recognise the bricks of her primary school, on a strata somewhere half way up the mountain. And Mr. M could swear the brighter rubble covering the whole top of the heap came from the old disaffected power plant his father still had worked at almost a century ago. Much later, people would say it had looked like a postcard of Mount Fujijama, but in smaller.

The city remained strangely silent after that, as if people were afraid to speak to each other. They were dumbed by what had happened. It took a long time before they finally managed to gather the courage to meet and to discuss what to do. The older inhabitants were exhausted. "We have enough", they said "it's over. The city is gone,

let's just leave and go where the government wants us to go. Let's forget about all this".

At this point, Mr. G took the word. Mr. G had arrived in the country as a refugee, not long before coming to New X. "I understand that you are very tired and sad about what happened to the city. And that what is now gone will never come back. I understand. There is nothing to do about this. But look around! It could have been a lot worse. We still have our houses. Most of the buildings we need are still standing. None of us are in prison, we are still free to go about and live the lives we want to live. Believe me, this is a great chance. For as long as it lasts, we cannot give up on it!"

And so, life in New X continued. At first, people still felt very much like living in a disaster zone, or a in the aftermath of a long war. Everything looked so desolated. There was so much bare land between the houses and buildings. So many voids that kept reminding people of what used to stand there. But then, slowly, grasses and other small plants started to seek their way between the houses.

For a long time, the landscape still looked muddy and grim, but another kind of life was appearing. Little bit by little bit, that new life replaced the memories of walls and sidewalks. The landscape was badly scarred, but it already gave hints as to what New X could look like if it were just given enough time. And as time passed, people learned to like what they saw. Only Mr. D felt the need to spray Roundup on every weed appearing around his house. But again, that was Mr. D...

The free spaces were so plenty that vegetable gardens could be planted in the middle of the city, as well as bigger fields with favas, potatoes, corn and many other crops. The land was poor, but anything that could be harvested was more than welcome, for the older inhabitants — still seen as the original "stayers" by the government — were getting tired of the many rides they had to do to provide the city with groceries. Attempts were also made at planting trees on the Fuji Yama, as people liked to call the mountain of rubble. But nothing seemed to really want to grow there.

By then, the elections had taken place in the country. The new parties in power did not feel any urge to carry on with the process of rewilding. As it turned out, most countries were very much behind schedule. Even if at each international summit rewilding was spoken about as being one of the main priorities of the times, all preferred not to push the issue too much in order to preserve the status quo, which was at that moment indeed much more comfortable for everyone. So, even if the police was still manning the checkpoints on the access roads, the people in New X were now pretty much left alone.

One early morning, the son of Mr. G opened the door and saw a deer rushing away from their front yard. Some time later, someone spotted a racoon in the city center. A family of furets, herons, salamanders, a skunk, snakes and lizards, unknown kinds of bees and spiders, and plenty of mosquitoes. At some point, someone even reported having seen a bear, but whether this was true still remains to be proven.

Mr. D fell ill. He refused to be taken to a hospital outside of New X and insisted on staying in his house until his death. So people took turns taking care of Mr. D. His illness didn't really seem to soften his temper. He stubbornly persisted in wanting to pay people for their help, probably — as many suspected — in order to feel more legitimate in ordering them around. Even though he was often seen as a thorn in the side, it was a sad day in New X when Mr. D passed away. In his bed, under the pillow, a testament was found, written in a nicely bureaucratic style:

I, Mr D, hereby submit my will and testament to the inhabitants of New X, whom I expect to execute it scrupulously.

Point 1. *Once my vital energies will have left me on this bed, my body shall be carried bare-handedly to the woods where it will be left as a dinner for the wolf and for the other creatures dwelling there — even if they most probably not deserve such a delicacy.*

2.1. *The house of the D's shall be taken down in order to free the land underneath, and to hand it back to the wilderness.*

2.2. *Dismantling the above-mentioned house shall be done bit by bit and great care shall be taken to preserve intact all of its parts, to serve as materials for the construction of future edifices.*

2.3. *The construction of the edifices referred to under point 2.2 shall not be undertaken within the city limits of New X.*

Signed: Mr. D

Mr. D's will was pretty suprising for everyone. But a will is a will. So they did as requested. Everyone in New X, including children and the elderly, stood in two lines that extended until the outskirts of the city. The body of Mr. D was passed from hand to hand until it reached an isolated spot in the young forest. There, the last people in the line carefully layed the body down on the ground and everyone walked back in silence. It was for many of them the first time they had touched a dead body...

Taking down the house as Mr. D had wanted was not an easy task. In order not to damage the tiles, the bricks, the windows, the beams, the floorboards, the pipes, the light switches and all the other parts which made up the house, they couldn't just tip it over with a bulldozer, or crush it with a crane as the government had done. It had to be litterally deconstructed, bit by bit, from top to bottom. There again, they took turns. By the time Mr. D's house was entirely dismantled, almost everybody in the city had spent at least half a day with it. All the parts that could be re-used were taken to the neighboring cities where they were offered to whoever needed construction materials. It proved too difficult to bring the left-over rubble to the top of the Fuji Yama, so they made a small heap in the yard next to the house, where Mr. D used to fight the weeds. The house's foundation pit was left open. Time and rainfall filled it with water and it became home to frogs, ducks and water lilies. Seeing that, unlike the Fuji Yama, the small left-over heap from Mr. D's house gladly welcomed Burdock, Dandelion, Creeping Charlie, Leafy Spurge, Nettles, Bermuda Grass and all kinds of other pioneer species, people had to smile, thinking of it as the weeds taking their revenge. Quickly, the heap became a tiny green hill from which kingfishers could look into the pond.

Not long after, Ms. Z, the second oldest person in the city, passed away. She left a very short will that just read: "I would like it like Mr. D". Her body was thus carried many handedly to the forest. Only much later, when her husband died was their house carefully deconstructed and offered in the neighboring cities. Later still, a small pond appeared, next to a tiny green hill, where the Z's house had once stood.

Time passed in New X. The weeds grew into bushes which grew into small trees. The city's vegetable gardens and the fields grew ever more fertile, the children grew bigger and the older inhabitants grew older.

Mr. O, who had worked his whole life in X as a garbage collector was struck by a heart attack on his bike on the way to a meeting to discuss waste collection improvements in New X. At first, people were unsure. "What should we do for his funeral?" they asked, for he had not left any will. But then, for most, it felt pretty natural to just follow the example of Mr. D and Ms. Z. Since Mr. O lived in an apartment building, everything in his flat was dismantled, except for a few concrete pillars which held the upper floors of the building where other people still lived. The pond only appeared much later, with the passing of the last inhabitants of the building, at the center of a circle of many little hills.

From then on, whether old or young, people in New X knew exactly what would happen once they reached the end of their lives. And that made them happy.

As time passed, one after the other, the older inhabitants of New X took their leave. Each time, their body was fed to the forest and a part of what the city used to be disappeared from the landscape, making space for new species of citizens, who in their turn could call it their home.

Deconstructing the house of the deceased was considered to be part of the funeral ceremony. It marked a time of mourning but also of regeneration. The closer someone felt to the deceased, the more time they spent on the deconstruction site. People met there to work, to remember and to prepare the future. They also started to sing and invent songs, to accompany the important moments of life in New X. For example, the following song was often sung by those dismantling the house of a departed fellow citizen. The accompanying percussion was traditionally performed with whatever tools they were presently using — most often hammer and chisel.

People of New X had the habit of saying that these songs needed to be heard « with the inside ear ». What they meant is that, in order to be really heard, these songs needed to be sung by the people who are listening. So if you would like to sing along, please feel free to do so.

[sung, with handclaps]

*House now you disappear
Bit by bit*

*Precious were you to us
Bit by bit*

*My hand takes you down now
Bit by bit*

*Tomorrow in your place
Swamp and bush*

*House we too will be gone
Swamp and bush*

*Softly do we let go
Swamp and bush*

*Bit by bit off you are
Dot and ring*

*Yet shall we linger here
Dot and ring*

*Pleased that it carries on
Dot and ring*

[reversed handclaps]

*House we too will be house
Bit by bit*

*House we too will be house
Bit by bit*

*House we too will be house
Bit by bit*

Bit by bit, the inhabitants of New X started to feel much less connected with what the city used to be than with what it was becoming. Eventually, they decided to find a new name of their city. After a long process, and plentiful discussions which were not devoid of tensions, a new name was agreed upon: from then on, the city of New X would be called "Y". But as it is with names, in the end, things are called what people actually call them. Some people called their city "The City of Grass", while others, mostly those from the older generation, called it "Shrinking City". Much later, people from the outside would refer to it as the "Valley of the 1000 Hills and Ponds".

With the complicity of a few inhabitants, a documentary film maker and her team managed to spend some time in Y. After the film was aired on national TV, former inhabitants of X — formally known as "the leavers" — asked the government permission to visit their relatives who still lived in Y, or at least, to be able to attend their funerals, or to visit what had become of their houses.

The leavers couldn't believe their eyes, as they arrived. They had left a grey and depressed city, with deserted industrial zones, polluted landscapes and a dwindling culture. They were now coming back to a village which had the size of a city, but seemed to border at every crossroad with farms and wilderness. It was in fact even strange to call them roads, as most ways were rather sinuous, designed as it were by the feet that walked them. It was like visiting a place for the very first time, except that this place was where they had spent most of their lives. For the leavers, coming to Y was like entering a state of hallucination, a dream oscillating between a nightmare and a holiday on a remote island. Once passed the initial shock, it was also a very emotional visit, for those who came for a funeral, but also for those who saw their parents, grand-parents, aunt, uncle, or former neighbors for the first time in such a long period, or for those who visited the hills and the ponds of those who had already gone. Many of the visitors helped deconstructing the houses of the people they had known. Others struggled too much with these strange customs to be able to join in.

"Why do you give all these vintage materials out for free?" some leavers would ask. "It has become quite a fashion to re-use things coming from here. You could make quite some money with it!" To which the inhabitants of Y would answer: "What's the use? We have more than enough to live well. All that counts really is that the houses have a new life elsewhere."

Then, eventually, the time came when the very last original inhabitant of the city — or "stayer" as they were once called — reached the end of her life. The body of Ms. K who had just turned 99 at the moment of her death was so tiny and so light that people had the impression it was almost floating on its own towards the forest.

After that, not much was heard from Y. Nobody ever came out of the city and, since still only stayers were allowed to enter, nobody ever came in either. Time passed. It was difficult times. Multiple crises were looming and the future was very uncertain. The government and the people in the country had many other priorities to worry about. Politicians happily forgot about Y, and so did the media.

If at some point someone had been able to visit the city through the eyes of a raven, the ears of a fox, the tongue of a lizzard or the leaves of a birch, they would have nowhere met the hard surfaces of a concrete wall, the smells of food simmering in a big pot, the sound of songs and tools, nor for that matter, the sight or traces of any human inhabitant of Y.

Where had they gone? Had they all gently passed away in their turn? Had they moved out without anyone noticing, to start new cities elsewhere? Or had they become inhabitants of the forest, of the hills and of the ponds? Nobody would ever know.

On the outskirts of Y, the police officers still held their checkpoints. They hadn't seen anyone for a very, very long time. They too were getting old. They wondered about what they were doing, they dreamed about all that life still had on offer for them. So, at one point, they simply left.