



## THE GRID

BY CHRISTOPHER ENTZENBERG

The city is quaint, insignificant. Decades of a gray political mindset nearly shaped it into a perfect Soviet tool of suicide inducement. Apartment buildings that pretend to be nothing other than storage units for humans. The folly of injecting life into this flat land where shadows are cast by concrete boxes and autumn trees manifests itself everywhere; they build malls, towers of Babel, bridges to nowhere. It's the city which William S. Burroughs remembered for its centrally located cemetery. Nobody likes it here; anyone that claims otherwise is either a liar or a privileged cunt in a golden cage. You know this.

Times have changed. The blue collars used to arrive in flocks to spend their weekly salaries in cheap bars on Fridays. Industry has been outsourced, and the drones pray reluctantly at the altars of mass consumption. Gone is the plethora of x-rated commerce; the few left reside in back alleys and act as fronts for drug operations. You used to dream of building a house in the middle of nowhere, entrenched in the deep forest, self-sustained. There was just one nagging reality: there are no comic book stores in the wild.

You collect. You, the collector, jaywalk diagonally through the halted traffic near the intersection. Plain and skinny with a slumping posture on the verge of a hunchback, you adjust your rat-brown bangs with a meek wave. Your distractedness is a deception. You wish to disassociate from these bipeds and their glorified wheelchairs, and the blank stare works wonders. There is no doubt that you move on instinct and that the city is full of obstacles that you have grown accustomed to. Still, patience wears thin as the old white haired crow struggles past the entrance to the store, blocking the view of the yellowing sign in the window.

The sign states that within minutes you will be allowed to enter. A brief eternity passes until you do. Pretending to browse the store's offerings, you stroll up and down the aisles, glancing at the vinyl crates and shelves loaded with posing Mickey Mouse statuettes and rows of manga paperbacks. It is too warm in here, and you feel the sweat beneath your black non-descript jacket, appropriate for the harsh autumn winds outside, but less so for cramped locations such as this. Enough savoring the moment, you need to make it happen. For many years, that particular comic book has been on display in the window. It is the missing piece of the puzzle, the final element of the flawless acquisition. Put on the white gloves and prepare for inspection.



The hint of a smile on your face reeks of smugness as you hold the sacred artifact in your hands. The cover is standard silver age fare, and you have seen it countless times before. A battle between the iconic heroes and their arch-nemesis, crude colors on a white backdrop. The gang of five blue and yellow spandex-clad heroes in their vintage forms. An angel in mid-flight, wielding a bazooka; a rotund man displaying his bare, enormous feet as he swings on an odd trapeze; a man shooting eye-lasers, manipulating the shape of the spherical force field surrounding the red villain; and a man made from ice, hurling snowballs in a futile attempt to break through the aforementioned barrier. That leaves the fifth, a red-haired woman that nearly disappears into the background. She seems to be in the wrong place, unaware of the combat, locked in a flimsy dance move.

Much time has passed since the dramatic interplay between these oppressed mutants dominated your thoughts. You have read them all, and oblivious to their sexism and shallow morality, they have receded into the depth of your subconscious, now constituting your frame of reference for human interaction. You turn each page with caution, probing for coffee stains and other signs of damage. There is none. It is undoubtedly immaculate. Your face remains smug all the way to the counter, where a sizable chunk of your savings is reduced via the credit card swipe. The external proof of emotion fades as the humid winds strike your face outside, and you conceal the artifact beneath your jacket, as if the layers of brown paper and plastic would be insufficient to protect it from the rain.

Close your eyes, and the grid unfolds. Every square is occupied by a comic book, arranged by chronology and category. There is but one comic book that is worthy of your completist obsession, and the cover of every issue is represented in the grid. Five decades of juvenile illustrations, completely memorized. The ritual will take place in your living room, where the gargantuan varnished pine cabinet rests, in which your collection resides. You place the artifact in the cabinet, removing the facsimile that has been waiting to be replaced for years. The darkness of the locked cabinet will provide refuge from atrophy. You have ascended. The flawless acquisition has been reached.

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The repetitive clinks occur in between each tick of the grandfather clock as you stir the tea in a quadratic motion. The grid has lost its purpose. The grid has been the guiding light, determining your pattern of movement. You wake up, go to work, go to the supermarket and then you stand looking through the window of the comic book store, taunted by the fabled antiquity that you wish to afford. Work was a path to the flawless acquisition, and now the pattern has been disrupted. Why bother to administer these electronic government forms? Why stare at the flat widescreen monitor, secretly browsing comic book forums, pretending that your task requires more than an eighth of the time that you claim to be necessary? What is the purpose of fueling this dying body? What is the purpose of sleep?



You post a topic on the message board that you frequent; never participating, but you know these people and their language quirks, opinions and differing world-views. You write flowery prose, scrutinizing every sentence, carefully straightening out every possible ambiguity. It is the step outwards, seeking advice from your peers, finally making the grand entrance. Unable to resist the temptation, you return and edit the post several times, until you decide to abandon the computer for the sake of a shower. The tepid water cannot cleanse you from a relentless anticipation. Leaving a trail of water on the parquet, you hurry back to the computer, and the swivel chair slides from the impact of your descent.

You were never that guy. You were never that guy who opened his heart on the internet only to have it devoured and vomited back on you. You belonged to the sidelines, laughing internally as people would make fools out of themselves and be ridiculed accordingly. Wasn't it obvious how they would react? Some question your sexual orientation, some claim that you need to get a life, and the more polite ones are puzzled in regards to why it would be so hard to find another hobby. They do not understand: it's too late to begin collecting something else, too much, and you'd have to start from nothing. That's when it hits you.

You will take steps to acquire a life. With some elements already in place, you have a head start, what with the job, the apartment, and the social network. The latter might need improvement, as your acquaintances are few and limited to the online world, but you are pretty sure that they qualify as friends. The most important part of the puzzle remains, namely sex. It is the phenomenon that permeates everything, and as a result of your frequent eavesdropping during lunch breaks at work, you know that it is crucial for obtaining respect from other heterosexual males. With sexual experience, you can safely say that you possess a complete life. You have no idea where to begin, and the more you think about it, the more complicated it gets. There must be a viable strategy, a structured approach.

It is common knowledge that nightclubs provide the mating grounds for dancers and drunkards, but your memories of that one high school dance, along with your distaste for alcohol, are enough to deter you. And your recent devastating experience of the online environment rules out the possibility of websites. It seems that figuring out the finer points of social interaction is mandatory, and you fear the rejection. If only there was a painless route, a simple linear path to follow. You click your way through the internet, carefully avoiding anything beyond the realm of heterosexuality. There is plenty of education to be found, and it gradually becomes a research project, making you stay up late, night after night.

Close your eyes, and the grid unfolds. Every square presents a symbolic image of a sexual activity, everything from mundane positions to games of humiliation. You will experience all of it, becoming a sexual connoisseur of sorts, and while some things seem rather unpleasant, such as defecation or strangulation, you suspect that it's a matter of acquired



taste, much like how you came to appreciate the artwork of John Romita Jr. after some initial skepticism. Besides, you have yet to complete the first step: losing your virginity. Your solution is a stroke of genius. To acquire a life, one must travel the world, and there are places where urges can be satisfied in a simple way. You shock your boss by demanding vacation on such short notice. As you never ask for anything, your request is granted.

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The plane hits the ground with a thump. Proceeding through the security checks and luggage claims, you are thankful that your mother insisted on you taking the swine flu vaccine. People cough, sneeze and blow their noses like there's no tomorrow, and it disgusts you. The airport is big and gray, and you are bewildered by the amount of options and paths that lie ahead of you. After some confusion, you purchase a map and take the bus to Leidseplein. The only passengers besides you are two male American backpackers, who converse explicitly about going to places where you can purchase drugs legally. We have all come to this decadent hole in search of forbidden pleasures, you think to yourself, realizing that your planned activity here will make you eligible for a certain dreadful epithet.

The city is much more beautiful than your own, but cluttered. Getting off at Leidseplein, you pause in the middle of the lively square, observing the abundance of tourists and restaurants around you. Your examination of the map reveals that you should head in the same direction as the American backpackers, and eventually you notice them in the distance, standing in the middle of a narrow street. As you close in on them, you hear the one with the baseball cap and pierced lower lip mention joyously that they have located the first coffee shop. You pass them by, and soon enough you find yourself outside the Orfeo hostel on Leidsekruisstraat. The smells of multicultural cuisine grace your nostrils, and despite the gray weather, a cheerful mood seems to prevail here, as chubby Italian restaurant owners crack wise in their efforts to entice the passing tourists into wasting their cash on overpriced meals. The hostel building is purple and thin, the latter a characteristic shared by every building nearby. It's as if cramming them together made them slimmer and taller. As you enter, you catch a glimpse of the American fellows heading your way.

After some formalities, you struggle up the cramped staircase with the luggage, and a group of young giggling Spaniards shuffles past. You hear the voices of the Americans downstairs as you unlock the white door to your room. It's small and filthy, with a view to the street below. Old Coke bottles lay collecting dust on top of a high shelf, and there are two beds, a shower, a sink but no toilet. You dump the gym bag on the floor and sit down to take a breather. It's around noon, and all of this strangeness is beginning to take its toll. Outside, ceaseless laughter and clinks of utensils against plates, roaring mopeds and ringing bicycle bells. Weariness and stress creep up from below, and you take a shower to calm down.



Rejuvenated, you walk the streets with great expectations. Rainbow flags abound, and you surmise that shit attracts flies. Your case is different, of course, you fool yourself, sidestepping yet another tram car. A refined person such as yourself would do this simply because there is no other viable route. The game is rigged, making sure that only a chosen few gain access to the privilege of intercourse. Somewhat paradoxically, absent-mindedness isn't appropriate as one traverses this city of whores and junkies. This becomes painfully obvious as your ruminations are interrupted by a bicycle colliding with your posterior, nearly sending you into the waters of the canal. You squirm in pain as you get up on your feet, only to be antagonized by a pissed off Dutchman, his red face hurling unintelligible invectives and spit. A crowd of chuckling spectators stops briefly to observe the scene, and you remain silent, responding to his rage with nothing more than your trademark indifference. You watch him bike away, growling to himself.

Not far from the central station, they have erected a phallic memorial to one of the world wars, presumably the second, you are unsure which. It towers above the falafel-gobbling tourists, making it clear that the unified West is well-endowed, ready to sodomize any threat against its hegemony. Appropriately enough, it is placed quite near your destination, the red light district. A nervous tingling spreads throughout your body, as you know that your wallet is thick with euros, and you are about to enter a lawless zone.

It seems impossible to quench this nervousness. You walk up and down the streets, along the canals, and there is a variety of stores for sex toys, private booths, strip clubs and coffee shops. There's even a comic book store, but you decide that visiting it would distract you from your goal. Very few prostitutes appear in the sometimes crimson light behind the glass doors, and most of them are either fat or old. Perhaps it is too early. Of course, you realize, the sun isn't even down yet. Suddenly paralyzed, you gaze across to the other side of the canal as a stunning apparition emerges. A scantily clad porn star with ludicrous curves, stuffed with silicone, unnatural platinum hair, and arms draped in tattoos. She smiles at the hollering men on your side of the canal and then walks away. Although you lament the fact that her shift is over, you know that you would be dumbfounded facing the prospect of even standing within a five-meter radius of this unearthly human being.

Human being. A human being what? She and the others are human beings, and you are ready to join the line of perverts that wish to rent their bodies. How did it come to this? Right, trading one obsession for another, allowing the grid to guide you. It has guided you here, and you have obeyed without question. You sit down on the front steps of an anonymous building, lowering your head as your fingers slip through your hair. You are alone, here and everywhere. Past twenty-five, approaching thirty, convinced that only a prostitute would be willing to embrace you. Looking up, the sun sets and you notice the American backpackers entering a coffee shop further down the street. At least they know what they want, you think to yourself, getting to your feet.



Discouraged and defeated, you walk in the direction of the comic book store. Taking a short cut through a narrow alley, you ignore the streetwise Somalians and their intrepid attempts to sell cocaine. Further down, near the end of the alley, a dim light shines from yet another glass door. Curious, you glance to your right as you pass by. Behind the glass door stands a tall, dark-haired woman, very likely around your age. Her lime green bikini is vibrant, and her body is fit and natural. You have stopped walking, and she smiles pleasantly, hips swaying in a lazy attempt at seduction. Without thinking, you open the door.

There is no time to lose. You have paid for a full hour, and you will not waste it on casual conversation. The room is located at the far end of a long corridor, and there is a large mirror on the wall beside the bed, upon which a towel has been placed. You avoid the mirror as you lie down. She laughs as you suddenly grab hold of her and try to hurry your way in, despite not being hard enough. Initial awkwardness aside, you are actually having fun, more than you can remember having for many years. Systematically going through different positions, you become exhausted, and eventually she lies prone, text-messaging while you continue to thrust.

A strange feeling of calm flows through your body as you put on your clothes. You leave the place with a hasty farewell and step out into the darkness of the evening. Never before has air been so fresh, and your body is relaxed in a new way. As you walk back to the square of the phallic memorial, you head in the direction of a bar. Despite the rather unpleasant winds, and despite the fact that you never drink, you sit down outside and order a tankard of lager. You think about how it all played out. There was a lingering doubt and a vague sense of emptiness that tainted your experience in that spartan room, yet you regret nothing. You only wish her well and hope that having to be intimate with your foul body wasn't too excruciating. The beer has a somewhat bitter taste, and you gradually take bigger sips, watching the endless flow of people on the square.

You close your eyes, and the world unfolds. No grid can systematize its components without losing the nuances, exceptions, and particulars. It's a world of infinite choice.

*CHRISTOPHER ENTZENBERG was born in Lund, Sweden, in 1985. He has lived in various places in Sweden, but Malmö has now been his home for more than ten years. He dabbles in various artforms: comics, painting, illustration, and fiction writing. He drew the cover illustration for his father Claes Entzenberg's book "Grounds of Representation," which was published in 2007. Christopher also made a comic strip called "Smålek" for the first issue of the Pekå magazine, which was published online in 2009. He has delivered newspapers in Denmark and is currently employed part-time in a warehouse, handling dairy products. He has studied a number of subjects at university level but has not specialized in anything yet. English is his second language.*