

sidering the alternatives, they give pretty good value for the money.

These coupons will be especially helpful on cold days. Not only will ~~the~~ ^{if} hungry person be able to fill his stomach, he'll be able to go inside somewhere and get warm.

If you can't think of anything to say when you give the coupon to the hungry person, talk about the weather.

Cultivating a Spot

People are not the only ones neglected in New York. Things are neglected as well. I don't just mean big things like bridges and subway tracks, I mean the small, barely noticeable things standing right in front of our eyes: patches of sidewalk, walls, park benches. Look closely at the things around you and you'll see that nearly everything is falling apart.

Pick one spot in the city and begin to think of it as yours. It doesn't matter where, and it doesn't matter what. A street corner, a subway entrance, a tree in the park. Take on this place as your responsibility. Keep it clean. Beautify it. Think of it as an extension of who you are, as a part of your identity. Take as much pride in it as you would in your own home.

Go to your spot every day at the same time. Spend an hour watching everything that happens to it, keeping track of everyone who passes by or stops or does anything there. Take notes, take photographs. Make a record of these daily observations and see if you learn anything about the people or the place or yourself.

Smile at the people who come there. Whenever possible, talk to them. If you can't think of anything to say, begin by talking about the weather.

March 5, 1994

KEEP SMILING

I wonder if Paul got his idea for these instructions concerning ways of making life in New York more beautiful by reading the twelve steps of an Alcoholics Anonymous program, or whether he based them on a community service order. Anyway, I have a duty to obey. That was the agreement. I have no other choice but to submit. If I fulfill this assignment maybe he will offer me the novel that I have been asking for as a reward.

As far as the first instruction—the SMILING one—is concerned, it shouldn't involve too much training. This is something I have already practiced. The only problem is keeping track of the number of smiles received each day. Paul didn't ask me to count the smiles I give. Unquestionably an oversight. I add this item to the *Handbook*.

Concerning the instruction TALKING TO STRANGERS, not being in the habit of making compliments, I try out a few formulae:

"It was so lovely to have a chat with you, I hope I'll have the pleasure again."

"This was a very interesting conversation, we must get together again."

"Thank you for the very pleasant moment we have just spent together."

"What a terrific hairdo. I really do like it."

"Just keep on being yourself. Your smile was worth the day." (For this one I'll really have to make a huge effort.)

Since Paul's *Gotham Handbook* recommends that I make use of meteorological considerations,

I may as well take this opportunity to improve my vocabulary. So, there can be breezes, storms, turbulence, fog, squalls, sunny spells, slight improvements ... you can be boiling, baking, roasting, freezing, melting ... the temperature can be mild, clement, idyllic, freezing, frosty, harsh, Siberian ... the climate temperate, rigorous, severe, salubrious, healthy, humid, dry, rainy ... the air fresh, limpid, biting, burning ... the heat torrid, scorching, moderate, oppressive, stifling, tropical, the day pleasant, misty, windy, delightful, clear, gray, brisk, spring-like, enchanting, invigorating, unpleasant, gloomy, tedious, terrible, nasty ... the sky blue, turquoise, clear, pure, calm, serene, misty, overcast, cloudy, lowering, stormy, leaden, fleecy, crystalline, limpid. It can be low and oppressive ...

Paul is right, you could go on about it forever. And if I crack up, why not: "I hate this stupid sun. It's really a day for hanging yourself, don't you think?"

Third clause: BEGGARS AND HOMELESS PEOPLE. I buy white bread, sliced yellow cheese, ham, tomatoes, and four packs of cigarettes (Marlboro, Camel, Benson & Hedges, Kool).

Final clause: CULTIVATE A SPOT. I choose the phone booth located at the corner of Greenwich and Harrison streets. It's a double phone booth. I pick the one to the right.

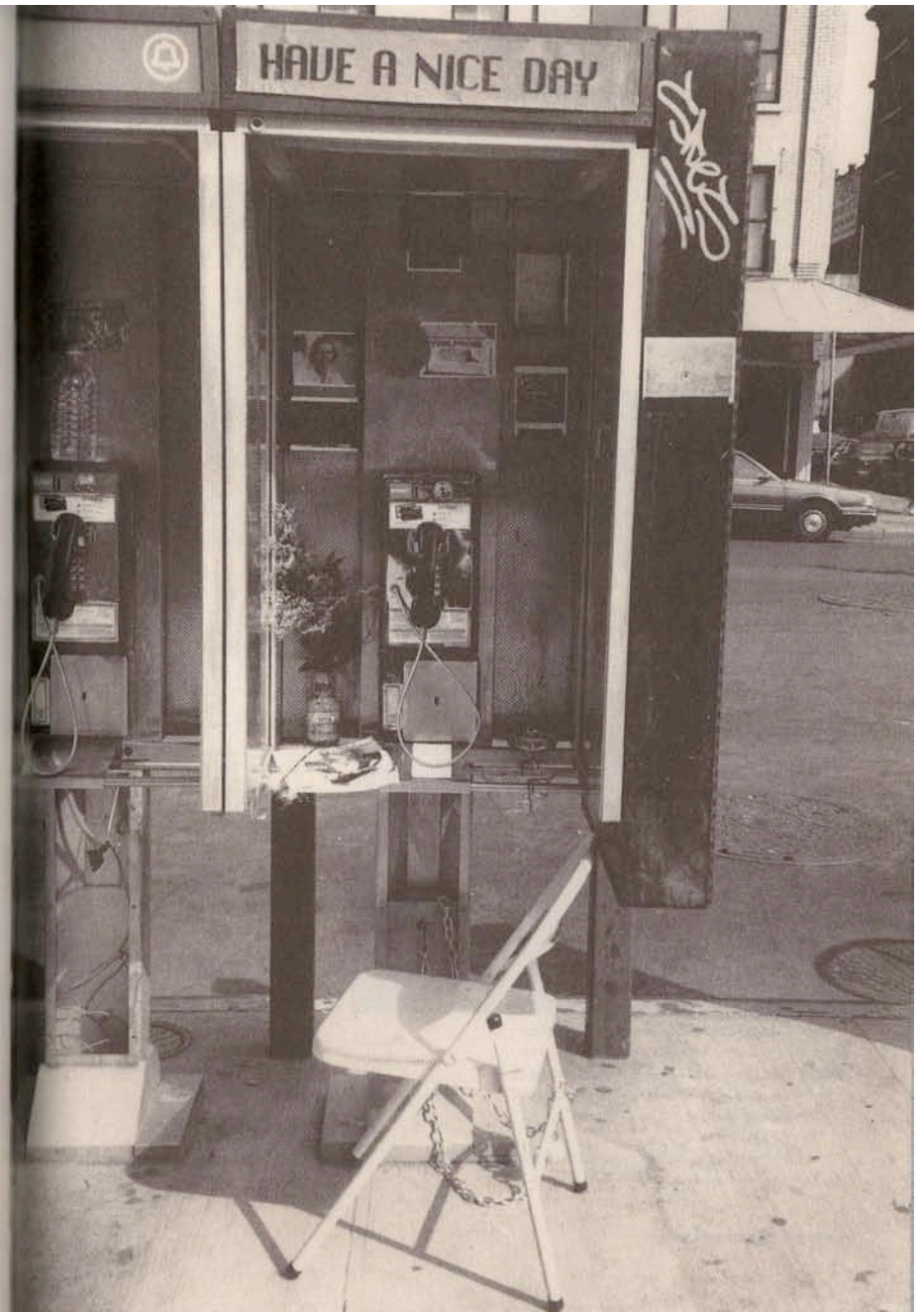
To decorate it, I buy: Glass Plus window cleaner, Brasso metal polish, Krylon "clover green" spray paint, six writing pads, six pencils, one mirror, Devcon epoxy glue, two twelve-foot chains, two padlocks,

one bouquet of red roses, one ashtray, two folding chairs, and the current issue of *Glamour* magazine.

During the night of Tuesday, September 20, 1994, I take over the phone booth. I start by dusting and polishing. Two men are watching me. One of them asks, "Do you do windows too?" Am I supposed to inaugurate my smiling task? I choose to postpone it until tomorrow. I don't answer, for, as you said yourself Paul, men are pigs. Only five minutes after I started, my fears are confirmed. They are taking me for a nutcase. Too bad.

I get to work on the floor, which I paint green, set out the postcards, mirror, ashtray, flowers, and chain the chairs. As a demonstration of my capacity to perform obediently these good deeds that I am asked to do, I cover the telephone company's NYNEX logo, the name of which is displayed across the top of the booth, with a sign that reads "HAVE A NICE DAY", the American expression which punctuates every conversation and which I hate the most after "Enjoy!" (But I couldn't bring myself to use that. Imagine, putting pleasure in the imperative like that! When I sleep in a hotel, I even deny myself breakfast in bed, one of my great pleasures, phobic beforehand of the dreadful image of a waiter bending over my bed with his tray, spewing out this obscenity with a smile: "Enjo-o-o-oy...")

The worst is yet to come. Tomorrow, Wednesday, September 21, I must get down to business and start smiling.



Wednesday, September 21, 1994

Phone Booth

Arrival time: 12 P.M. Yesterday's two pigs are now five. Everything seems to indicate that this is in fact their corner. I decide to avoid eye contact.

10 P.M. Visitor #1, in his fifties, wearing a gray suit, tries to make a call from the left booth. It doesn't work. He grabs my phone, but something must be bothering him because his body is still stationed in the left-hand booth. I feel rejected. I decide to force him to move by pretending that I need the left-hand phone. He resists. I push him a little. I listen to his side of the conversation: "I need one, you got any?"—three seconds of silence—"Yes"—silence—"No"—silence—"Maybe"—silence—"No"—silence—"I'll do it"—silence—"I'll try again tomorrow ... yes ... see you." He used my phone for about one minute. Tomorrow I must buy a stop-watch. I should also wire tap my phone (Paul wrote: "... pick one spot and begin to think of it as yours ..."). I sit down on the left-hand chair and wait.

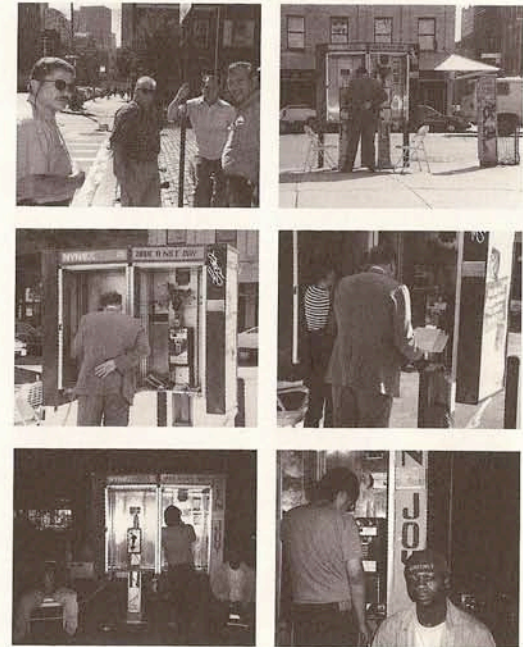
12:25 P.M. Visitor #2, female. I listen: "Hey, it's me." Silence. "I'm at work." Silence. "Listen, honey, lunch will be difficult." Silence. "But we can do it any other time." Long silence. "Oh ... I'd better go now ... Yeah, yeah, I love you, too." She hangs up, turns toward me, points at the booth, and says: "Somebody must be mourning. I guess someone died." She doesn't wait for my response and leaves. Length of phone call: about three minutes.

For the next thirty-five minutes there are no customers. Four men and two women stop to look. Four times I am asked if I am in charge of the booth, and after answering no, I receive the following comments:

"It's vandalism."

"Maybe this is a homeless person's little place."

At 1 P.M., having finished my shift, I leave.



Six calls are made between 12 and 1 P.M., three concerning appointments, two concerning business. I keep Call #2:

"No, I'm not accusing you, I'm asking you. ... It's just that Vinny got mad and he star-sixty-nined and got your answering machine. ... What do you know? How do I know I listened to it? ... Well, he didn't know it was your phone, but I did. ... Just don't call if you're gonna hang up, it's dumb. ... Yeah, right! Somebody else called my house at midnight, used your phone. ... Ritchie, stop lying. ... Bullshit. ... No, I'm not mad. I already told you. But just don't call me. I'll call you, okay? ... I'll see you. ... Yes, the same place. ... Bye."

Caller #3 reads the news sitting on the chair. Stays five minutes then leaves.

While I am at the phone booth, a conversation starts between two old women:

"Ill ... people are ill. I can't believe it, someone is ill, I can't believe it."

"What happened there?"

"I don't know, someone got killed here, maybe."

"Why don't you use it?"

"Nah! It's bad luck."

"Why?"

"That's what I think. It's kinda weird."

"So why would it be bad luck?"

"I don't know. It's someone else's phone."

"I don't want to use it. It's private property."

"Oh, so out of respect."

"It's like a waiting room."

"A waiting room?"

"Sure. Magazines, cigarettes."

"I think it's the drug dealers. You know the drug dealers ... They must have put this shit up."

"Do they take it down every day?"

"No, they leave it up there."

"Nah, this wouldn't last overnight."

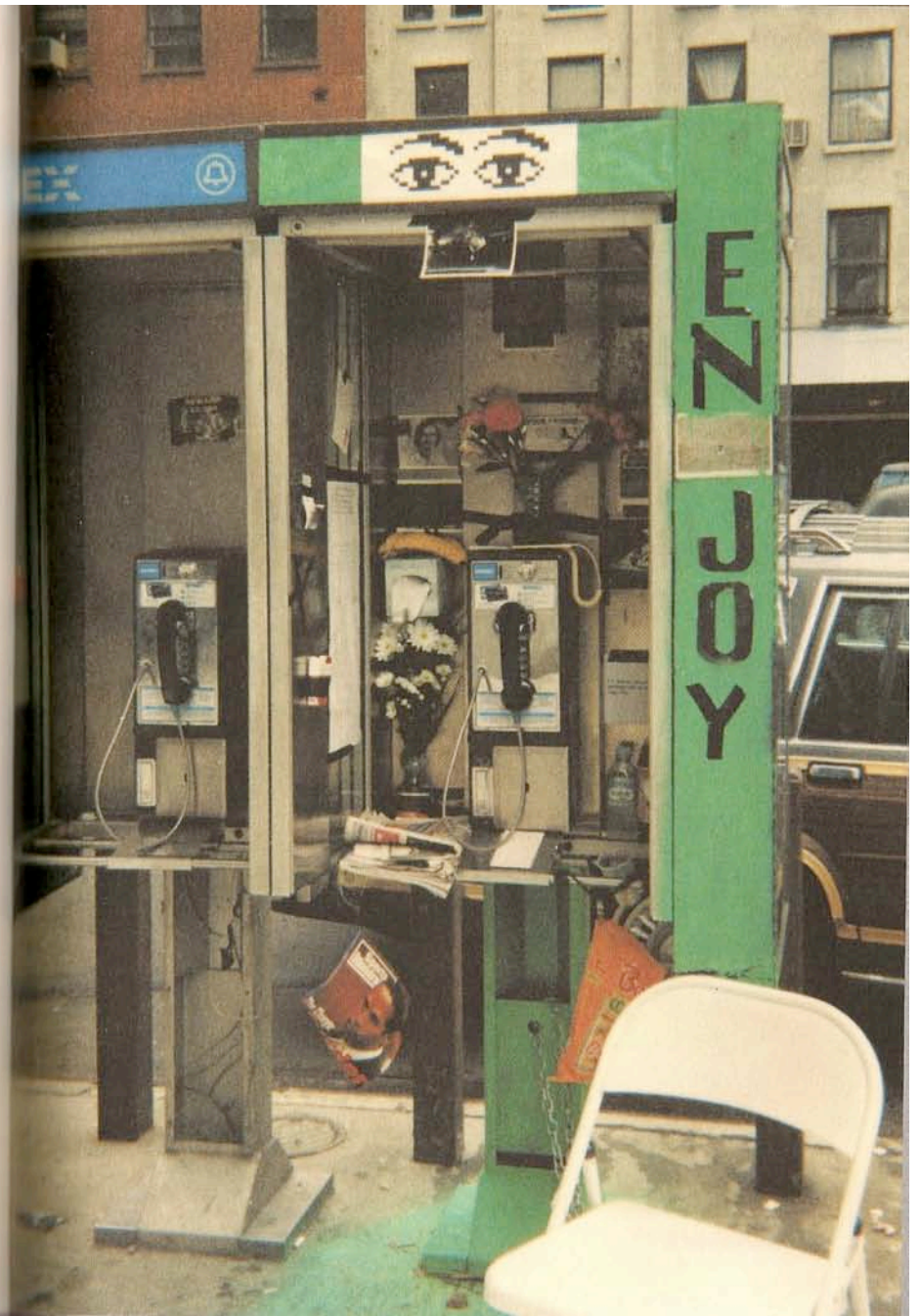
"Whose operation is this?"

"It's been here for a week."

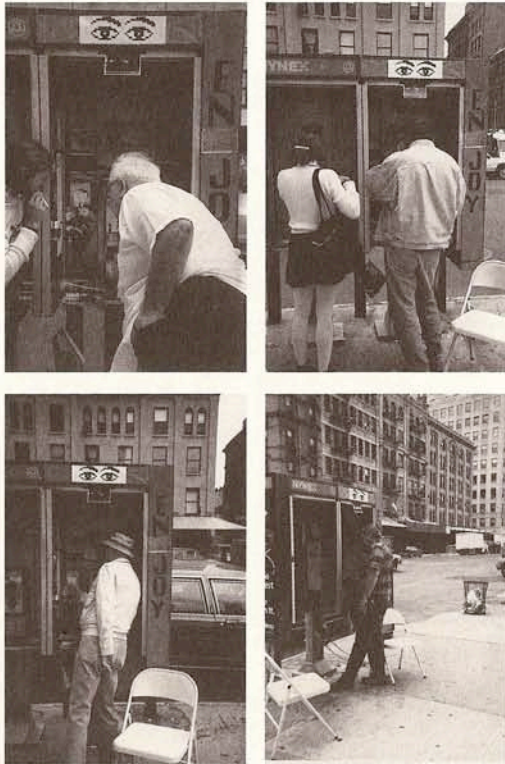
"You mean nobody in this rag town takes it out? I can't believe that."

A woman comes and shouts that she's the chairman of the community board: "Do you have a permit to do what you did to this phone? From the telephone company or Community Board #1? Are you responsible for this? Someone said that you people were doing this every day. Do you have a permit to do this?"

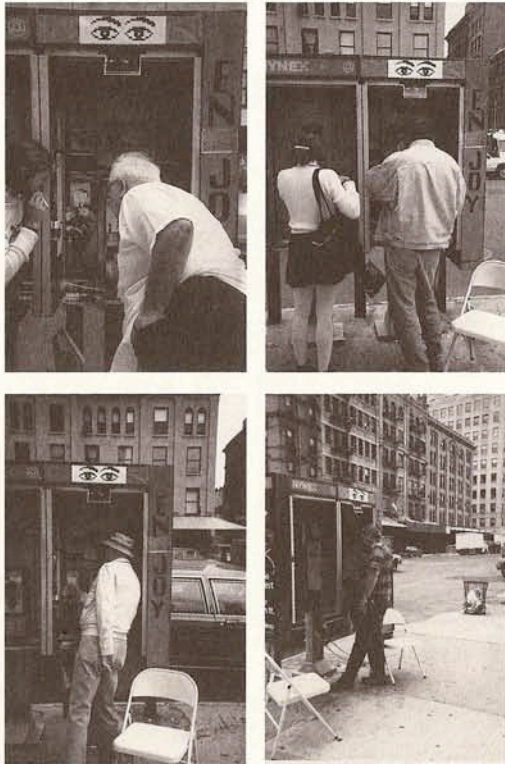
I stay silent and, as my shift is over, I leave.



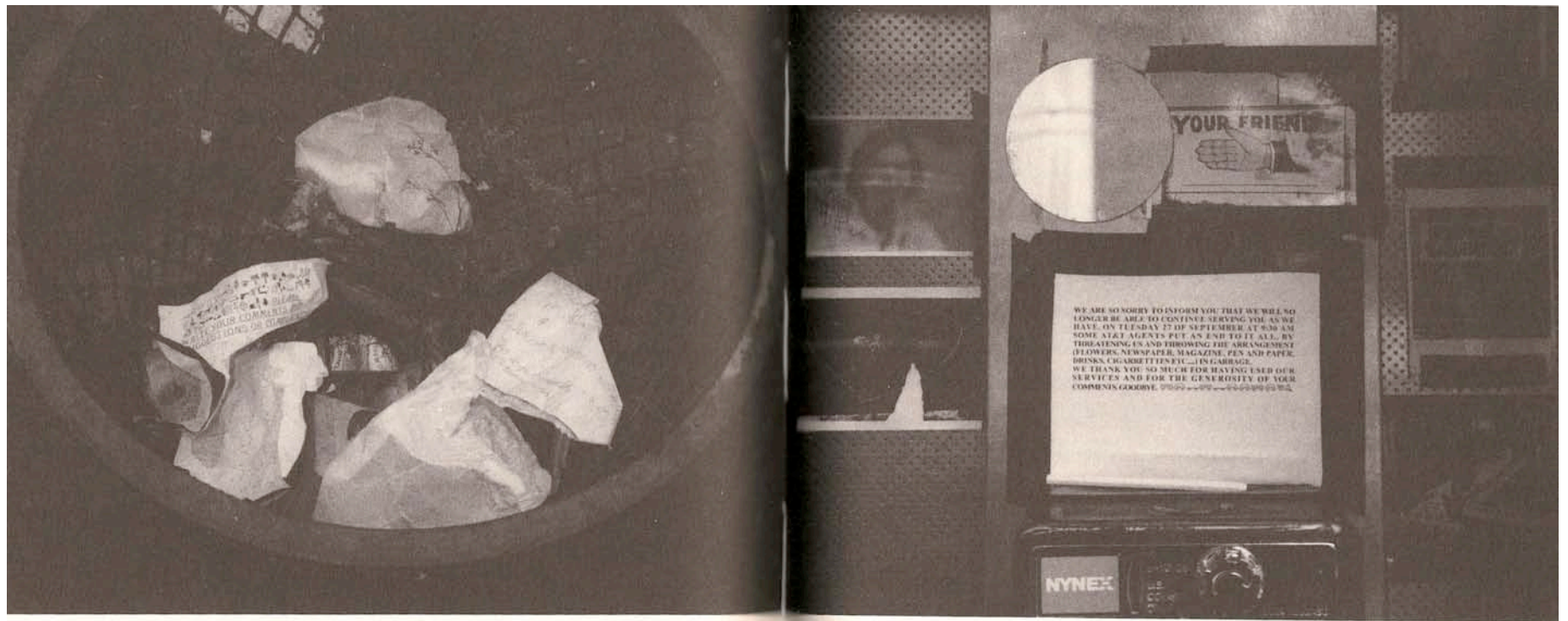
Sophie Calle - Double Game - "Phone Booth"



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“We are so sorry to inform you that we will no longer be able to continue serving you as we have. On Tuesday 27 of September at 9:30 A.M. some AT&T agents put an end to it all by threatening us and throwing the arrangement (flowers, newspaper, magazine, pen and paper, drinks, cigarettes, etc.) in the garbage. We thank you so much for having used our services and for the generosity of your comments. Goodbye.”