

### The third day

"Good morning, Dr. Brandt, did you sleep well?" I blink at the screen and see Vera in an ankle-length silk nightgown, every motion allowing her figure to shine through, and over it a matching bathrobe loosely draped around her. Dr. Servant, or whoever is responsible for the virtual wardrobe, certainly has come up with something here.

"Look! Our medical shower cleanses and rinses your skin completely automatically, while you relax, supported in the harness."

Vera demonstrates the use of the hygiene cell and indicates what kind of assistance I can expect in the early days. I have barely nodded my agreement when the door glides open, and a friendly energetic voice says:

"Good morning, Dr. Brandt. Have we slept well? Very good. Before we have our breakfast, we want to get ourselves cleaned up, don't we? Are you ready?"

I submit to my fate, although the promised mutual cleansing never materializes.

Clean and sated, later, I lie on my bed listening to a Haydn divertimento. A distinct advantage of the early Viennese classical period is that the individual pieces, even the symphonies, are not too long. One has barely grasped the Allegro, when already the Andante arrives – ideal for the impatient and the in-patient, like me – or as background music for a spoiled society in search of diversion: the Eisenstädters, and then the Viennese court in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

I had been dreaming again in the night. An almost forgotten scene from thirty years ago, her oversensitivity, miscarriages, accusations, depression; and I, always busy, often travelling. Of course I didn't understand, men have no need to understand women.

How was it the poet put it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? 'As long as a woman loves, she does nothing else – a man has other chores.' [Jean Paul] I sympathise rather more with the orthodox Jews, who thank their God on their knees every day that they were not born as women.

Her father's patronage had certainly helped me in the early days, brought in some contacts, opened doors, which might otherwise still be closed to me today, but there is no need to overstate his help in hindsight, either. I seized every opportunity, studied law, instead of the unprofitable arts, specialized in promising sectors, distinguished myself, was coming up to my second million and just about ready to leave my wife – and *then* came another pregnancy.

Which she concealed. Right up until I could have almost tripped over her belly. No genetic testing, too late for a discreet and protective termination, or for prenatal therapy. The risks could not be determined. She refused every eugenic test, was already in the Young Traditionalists' camp, running to their meetings and services. Why couldn't she satisfy herself with the consolations and promises of the great churches, whose fallacies we have learned to deal with centuries ago, calculable and navigable, up to a point, as they are? Why exchange the familiar and somewhat trusted damnation for uncertainties and new lies?

Oh Beth, why didn't you stay a Catholic?

At the compulsory scan before Dave's schooling could begin, it all came out: ALS, progressive muscle weakness, and a new, rarely occurring type at that. To be sure, it normally takes hold only after decades, but before that? Reduced professional opportunities, not to mention marriage chances. In our society, who would want to saddle themselves with a prenatally diagnosed cripple - with self-inflicted chronic disease? Of course, there are accident victims, regrettable consequences of human failure, and we do try to ease their fate, should they not prefer death. But it is simply unforgivable, criminal, indeed, to deny our children the blessings of science. The next generation has the right to healthy genes and an optimized hereditary disposition.

Before my minds' eye an image appears, a famous case of ALS at the turn of the century: The British genius of physics, Stephen Hawking, a titanic mind captured in a ludicrously warped body, wheelchair bound, without even his own voice, helpless. This was the fate I

wanted to spare my son, I tried to save what could be saved, consulted the experts, and eventually brought him to Dr Servant.

Servant took him on in his practise, then admitted him to the clinic in Rancho Palos Verdes, and later for in-depth examinations and experiments over to the island. I saw him less and less often, between my professional appointments. And Beth? Instead of being grateful or at least accepting the situation, she sabotaged our course of action. At the beginning, she undertook the relatively short trip to Palos Verdes without complaint – my property there was only built years later, after the last protests of the conservationists had been defeated. She stayed with the child every free minute she had, instead of fulfilling her social obligations at my side. She disliked the medical program and for the experiments she harboured a deep mistrust, of which she made no secret.

Dave, too, must have sensed it. I put it all down to her influence that later, after her death, he turned against me. The recollection of that first extensive discussion with Dr Servant rises in me, formulations that had embedded themselves in my memory.

'Your wife abhors experiments? Then she is forgetting that medicine, like every empirical science, is based on the principle of trial and error. Without trials and the unavoidable risk of failure there is no success, without experiment no progress in science and technology, no evolution. The sequencing of the genome gave us for the first time the chance to cure incurable diseases, in fact to prevent their development through interventions in the germline. Unfortunately you failed to do this for your son, even though we have had impressive success for years now.'

What should I answer? Should I incriminate my wife, whom I do blame to this day for Dave's genetics and development? I still see Dr Servant before me, the same slender figure, only average height, almost the same ageless face, blonde hair that, despite his youth, is already receding at the temples; for he was very young then, nearly ten years younger than me, but had already graduated top of his class from Berkeley, got his MD in record time and was on the cusp of a promising university career, when the Institute snapped him up. I grin inwardly. Meanwhile to everyone who knows him, he *is* the Institute!

My wife Beth became a problem. Initially she seemed to resign herself to the treatment program. After a few months, however, when Dr Servant wanted the child sent over to the island - the clinic complex was still being built, the research facilities were already there - when she would only be allowed occasional day visits, and she found no support in me – then she resisted, and pursued a claim for sole custody. Her goal was to snatch the child back from the claws of science and perverted doctors, and she let it openly be known. This was her downfall, juridically. In a nationally acclaimed plea I adjured my child's right to health and a long life, and was vindicated.

Dave visited us from then on only for vacations – he was educated along with other children on the island. He grew up into a goodlooking, but taciturn young man, and I congratulated myself on my strictness. As Dr Servant assured me, the program was making progress and Dave's participation would benefit not only himself, but would likely spare many potential fellow sufferers a prolonged illness and early death. For this, sacrifices were necessary. My son seemed to see this as his role, too; his desire to study microbiology later on validated me, although he continued to avoid any extended conversations with me.

Our relationship remained politely distanced, and while this disappointed me slightly, in it I saw the legacy of my own character. Had my son displayed the uncontrolled sentimentality of his mother, I would have been repelled. He never talked to me about the circumstances of Beth's death. The news of her death reached him within hours, but because of a series of tests which could not be interrupted, he arrived only shortly before the funeral service, and afterwards stayed in his seat during the whole cremation. Only as the next coffin was being wheeled in and the next group of mourners gathered by the door, did he stand up and leave. On the last bench a man in dark clothes had been waiting, and they left the room together, evidently an Institute employee.

He had not so much as looked at me the whole time. But I can still see him before me, the way I covertly watched him from the side. A child just fifteen years old, or perhaps no longer a child? Lonely, and a judge of character as only precocious experience can bestow, experiences on the experimental rack that would be entirely alien to his peers.

On that day I travelled home alone.

Beth's family had made it clear that they blamed me for her death, and justifications go against my nature. I still see my brother-in-law standing before me, his bulky figure, clenched fists, the spongy face, reddened eyes. His words resound in my ears: Elizabeth never mattered to you. You are only capable of loving yourself. Some day, I swear. Some day your self-absorption will ruin you.'

Pathetic gestures, pathetic words, that only provoked dismissal from me. I turned and left, heard how he called after me: 'She was right, that smooth facade of yours needs to be ripped open!'

My smooth facade. Beth's words. She had told him then, as she had passed everything on in her insatiable need to express herself, as she called it, first to her family, later to the Traditionalists, until I forbade it. For a moment I was tempted to turn around, the work of a split second: to grab him by the throat and shake him - as I had her. Not letting go until she begged for mercy, her voice choking. It was the first major fight since our engagement, just before - ...and the first row that we physically fought out, the first and last time.

Strange that I can no longer remember what we were fighting about. Like the causes of many crises, it wasn't even worth mentioning.

My smooth facade. "My face."

Without realising it, I spoke aloud. Vera interprets my words as instructions, and the wall promptly becomes a mirror, reflecting my face larger than life. Since it's there, now, I examine my likeness, note with satisfaction that I am gradually recovering, my appearance almost my familiar self again, my youthful, smooth face. I try out a small, superior smile. It suits me. Content with myself, I close my eyes.

It is there again, Beth's voice:

"You damned self-absorbed narcissist. You need that smooth facade of yours ripped off!"

And Beth herself. She is standing in front of me, flushed with anger, eyes flashing, clenching her hands into fists. My hands remain in my pockets, I gaze down on Beth from above, show my small, superior smile. She amuses me, and if I'm honest, her rage delights me. What does she insist on fighting with me about? It doesn't particularly interest me.

Her attack catches me unawares, so that I don't even have time to get my hands out of my pants pockets. Instead of helplessly hammering on my chest, like you see in some movies, and as I had perhaps expected, she opens up both fists. I see the pink of her well-tended fingernails - later she will neglect these, too - as she grabs my shirt with her left hand and, fast as lightning, rakes the fingers of her right hand down my face. Screams: 'Now I've finally ripped open that smooth facade!'

The stinging pain paralyses me for a moment, even more so the expression on her face as it changed from naked triumph, amazement at her own unexpected courage, to fearful shock.

I had bitten my tongue, and more blood flowed from my mouth than from the blood-red weals on my cheek, soaking my shirt and her hand, before she pulled it back as if in a slow-motion film, her eyes widened with fear, open-mouthed in disbelieving wonder at what her onslaught had achieved.

And me? Pressing my left hand to my cheek and staring, equally disbelieving, back at her, feeling the anger abruptly rising, both hands reaching for her neck, her throat, bending over her as my blood ran over her face, shaking her, until she begs, gasps, for mercy.

It was the first and last time that I used violence against her. I have never hit a woman, despise the helpless rage of wife-beaters when I encounter them in litigation. Why that time, and why didn't she leave me then, when there was still time for her, for both of us?

Or was it not so, but in fact quite different? My left hand pressed to my burning cheek, staring at her in disbelief, the warm, sweet taste in my mouth of my own blood.

Everything goes black...

I found myself lying on the floor, my head propped up with cushions which she had hurriedly packed together. Beside me was a bowl of warm water, and Beth was bent over me, looking worried, solicitous, as she dabbed my cheek and mouth with a cloth, rinsed it, wrung it out, dabbed again. The water turned red as I watched. I closed my eyes, feeling weak, as she looked after me. Oh Beth, that must be why you never seized that one-time, last opportunity to release our ties, why you let go the chance to save yourself while there was still time.

Was it so, or similar, and which memory is the real one? Which one would I prefer? Or are they both true, and equal, just on different levels?

'Nobody escapes from love unscathed.'

Another voice from my past. I have, I want to answer, to ask, is that you, Beth, and know already it is not her, and this time I am lost.

I want to deny it. How can I be lost, when I am alive?

'Nobody escapes from love unscathed.'

The same voice, so familiar, painfully familiar. But I do not feel pain. The bracelet pulses calmly on my left wrist. The voice again:

'You fool, how can you get involved with love and believe you can get away unscathed?'

But I am not unscathed. My presence in Dr Servant's clinic is the proof.

I declare war on the voice, begin to argue. It is not just me, any normal man would have lost his temper, faced with such an assault. My face sliced open, biting my tongue, the blood! That was it! My blood.

Like so many men I cannot stand the sight of my own blood, I have abhorred since childhood regular medical procedures for drawing blood. The mere anticipation always makes my capillaries retract, my neck muscles stiffen up painfully, and migraine attacks almost always follow.

Dr Servant, who has known me for many years, could write a book on it.

When I'm bothered by the spilling of the blood of others, then it's because of the irrational thought that it could be my own. I have never understood the virginity cult of patriarchal cultures, the obsession some men have with untouched girls. The white wedding, and the proud presentation of a bloody sheet the morning after, is for some a matter of honour - for me, purely women's business. It is well known that it's the women: Mothers, mothers-in-law, old crones, who keep up the idiotic, self-harming traditions, right down to genital mutilation of little girls.

Why must we be reminded, at the point of consummation, of wounds, blood and death? There is only one explanation: Women are by nature more hardened, as is clear by the way they appear to fear less the bloody, filthy aspects of love, birth and death.

It is incomprehensible to me and and, to men like me, in no way conducive to desire. Quite the opposite.

I recall a misadventure with someone who apparently was incapable of counting to twenty-eight; my ardour was immediately dampened and was not to be rekindled.

I am totally unsuited to traditional warfare - although, as a strategist I could surely have been of significant use. I ask myself, how do men with my sensibilities overcome the problem in direct combat with the enemy? How much seduction and conditioning is required to turn placid esthetes into merciless bloodsuckers? An interesting topic for research, were the task not associated with so many wholly unsavory details.

Involuntarily I open my eyes and meet my gaze in the mirror.

'Self-absorbed narcissist.'

I smile at myself. Beth was wrong, at least at the time; for back then I still recognized myself in the countenance of my brother...

I dismiss the mirror, close my eyes and dedicate myself once more to the divertimento.

There is one thing I still do not understand today. How could my son succeed in misleading me about his intentions? Did his maternal genetics dispose him to her sentimental world view, while simultaneously mine lent him the facility of mimicry?

Before his twentieth birthday he must have been establishing contacts for months and years, preparing to disappear.

'They want to replace me.'

His last, incomprehensible words, before he left. I have never seen him again since. One trail led to Canada, to a Traditionalist community close to the Amish. But after two years, the detective agency had to admit failure. They had come up against a wall of silence, I was told.

Since then nearly twelve years have passed. If he is still alive, the disease has surely become manifest, and he will dearly need the achievements of experimental science, which he previously so haughtily rejected. I myself no longer feel any desire to see my once so upstanding, promising son.

Could recent developments in the field of artificial intelligence have helped avoid this family drama? I don't know, even though back before the launch of the optimized ToddlerTrainer, I led the contract negotiations with the ministry of state for education, which oversaw its introduction.

Meanwhile, android trainers for every age group are increasingly taking over the roleplays and family constellations in which social behavior and crisis management used to be learned. The programming encompasses common characteristics, in the ToddlerTrainer, for example, the first prototypes of which emerged shortly after the turn of the century, these include attention-seeking, disturbance of adult conversations, pestering questioning and curiosity, defiance and destructiveness. Inexperienced parents are thus shown the consequences of poor parenting, so as to learn how to avoid them in practise. Besides, a wriggly, whingy and - when appropriately programmed - pant-wetting creature makes a significantly deeper impression than any virtual program.

However, in practise certain unexpected problems arose: The humanoid proxies increasingly became the objects of unrestrained violent destruction, leading to intense debate in psychology circles on whether such vicariously directed aggression could be seen as a valid form of modern mental hygiene that served to protect the real trainees, or whether they rather encouraged a readiness to use violence. The ministry of state for education reacted in a timely manner, halted the sale of trainers and, on my advice, converted the property rights into right of use. Since the humanoid models have been available on lease only and all damages are repayable, along with detailed protocols of the circumstances of damage, there has been a significant decrease in the rate of violent acts in the experimental education sector. Hardly surprising to me: the combined insight of psychologists and market researchers has paid off - many a family man treats his leased car with more care than the product of his genes.

Back then, when Dave was growing up, there were only the most primitive precursors of these educational aids, and so my musings are really superfluous. Nonetheless, they will not leave me in peace, because since my youth I have been fascinated by the possibilities and boundaries of artificial intelligence, not least because people seldom live up to my requirements. But where a clearly defined psychological profile is tasked with responding to certain limited needs, such as in nursing and geriatric care, there are indeed advantages. What was it Dr Servant said, when I raised it with him?

'Artificial intelligence in nursing and geriatric care has become well-established. In the upper care categories, however, we still prefer human personnel, carefully selected and

trained, and should there be any lack in intellectuality, shall we say, they are complemented by virtual hostesses such as our own charming and clever Vera.

How right he is, as my experiences with both ladies has shown.

My thoughts wander further, following the progress of artificial intelligence. The SchoolTrainer project was abandoned before ever reaching practicability. Particularly for older age groups it failed to meet expectations of a realistic simulation of group-dynamics processes and self-organizing systems, especially given that human teachers really function more as co-ordinators and advisors now.

Since they have been relieved of the duties of presenting subject matter and correcting work, they scarcely attract the aggression of their students, and so crisis programming became unnecessary.

Overall things turned out differently than had been envisaged by the early robotics developers. Leaving aside the fact that the humanoid form is only very rarely fit for purpose, the fruits of our research lie far behind the great expectations of the twentieth century. My professional activities in international patent law have given me the necessary insight and precise knowledge of the subject and I know: The richness of a highly organized personality, with all its contradictions and creativity, to date simply cannot be copied by any technology. Relative success has been achieved only in the programming of animalistic behavioral models, and the advertising slogan 'There's nobody more loyal than a robot dog!' successfully reeled in many a lonesome purchaser, especially older women who still cling to the prejudice that animals are the better people. But even they were evidently searching for something that their man-made companions could not offer. Turnover has stagnated, meanwhile, and the mentally alert seniors get their loneliness caught up in virtual networks instead, where for every topic there is a conversation partner waiting. What use is a robotic pet to them?

The optically perfect imitations lacked something, and when I think of some of the absurd tests and suggested modifications I am compelled to smile. It was only a multiple sensory comparison with the live models that picked up the right scent: It was the smell, even though nobody consciously noticed it.

The developers of artificial sex partners were consequently at pains to include organic scent notes, especially pheromones, testing their composition on tomcats on the prowl and bitches in heat. A couple of decades ago the animals were still wrinkling their noses in disdain at these attempts to simulate nature, but meanwhile they show at least some interest. The products successfully entered the market - no surprises there: One-dimensional characters such as the dumb, willing blonde offer only advantages.

In addition, the so-called Pygmalion program offers a simulated learning function, enabling the gallant purchaser to indulge in feelings of superiority as he molds his android partner to his own liking. Abuse naturally cannot be ruled out, and I recall a client who took me into his confidence after winning his case, seemingly laboring under the misapprehension that my legal care for his case applied to his person. He had kitted out his robot girlfriend with feminist agitprop from the last century, among other things, but her behavior was programmed to react to certain verbal and manual cues by tipping over into subservience. Kneeling, naked, in lacy maid's cap and apron, Jeannie, as he inexplicably called her, would then scrub the floor, bring his slippers and begin every interaction with a simpering: 'Master?' Of course I broke off contact with him immediately, such uses of the technology being beneath me.

The incident led me to an interesting phenomenon, however: Soon after the launch of the pheromone-enhanced companions there was a wave of puzzling returns. A number of customers, mostly men, who in any case comprised the majority of the clientele, brought back their perfectly functioning objects of desire, giving flimsy excuses.

Interviews gave a startling result. After initial enthusiasm, buyers rejected the pheromones; it turned out that what they wanted from the intelligent dolls was not so much sexual

stimulation and seduction, which are ultimately a form of bonding, if not bondage, but rather the freedom to exercise absolute power over an object, without the tiresome controls that had already spoiled their interaction with the EduTrainers. Sexuality had no goal or purpose of its own, but was merely an exchangeable and arbitrary expression of power, one release valve among several for the aggression inherent in human nature...

I am compelled to think of the owner of the submissive Jeannie, and a second observation segues into the picture: Buyers from the traditional S&M scene, for whom authority and submission are inseparable from sexual triggers, never needed to return their purchases. On the contrary, they were more than happy with the extra stimulation available from the olfactorily optimized partners. I am slightly vexed to realize my musings on artificial intelligence and humanoid simulators have once again come around to the flawed nature of man.

I briefly open my eyes and close them again: The divertimento has long faded away, the screen is blank, and the fruitless reflections are tiring me. After only a few hours of regained consciousness I must not strain myself, I must spare my mental strength...

But how can I rest with her relentless stomping around above my head? It was a mistake to locate my study under her bedroom. The clumping is progressing to thudding in my ears, now it is silenced for a moment, then a crash, it sounds like she has knocked over a chair. Silence, at last. I shall be able to work on a little. All the more time for my weekend with Helen.

But that weekend together is thwarted, and Helen waits for me in vain. I forgot her, have to break down the door to another bedroom, clambering past the overthrown chair, then look up at the silent figure and look quickly away, running to the bathroom, hunting for scissors, a knife. Back with trembling fingers, positioning the blade whilst avoiding looking at her face, cutting through the cord, accidentally injuring her throat: Blood that will later confuse the police, compel me to longwinded, awkward explanations, as awkward as all my actions.

They understand. The confusion of the pitiable husband, overwhelmed by the suicide of his depressive wife, endogenous depression, years of medical treatment, difficult to treat, a difficult patient, always forgetting to take her highly effective medication, or refusing, possibly a heritable disease. The son isn't right either, you hear, in the private clinic for years, a very well-off family, it is evident in the home, the holographic artworks, but badly off, really badly off, after all. You've got a demanding job yourself, fighting with the wife now and then, kids could be doing better in school, but when you see something like this...

They shake their heads, pat him on the shoulder, an intimate gesture, which, this time, he does not brush off.

'Life goes on!'

It goes on. A year later he observes that the death in the family has brought only advantages, an intact inheritance, his wished-for freedom. Life goes on, just sometimes he suddenly glimpses the face of his hanged wife...

Slowly, I return to myself and wonder. My memory has presented me, like an impartial bystander, with one of the most unpleasant scenes of my life and simultaneously spared me the recollection of her disfigured face. Or wasn't this service a feat of my memory at all? I raise my left hand and gaze in recognition at the bracelet. Evidently it is capable of protecting me from the esthetic affront of that sight that used to oppress me so, a negative anchor that used to rip her image out of repression at the most inconvenient moments.

There is no pain, either, in thinking of my son, why indeed? A grown man, responsible for his own decisions, as I am for mine. I am satisfied...