

The fifth day

The gong. Melodic tones accompanying Vera's smiling face. Her soft, perfectly modulated voice: 'Good morning, Dr. Brandt. How are you feeling? The psychoformer showed raised activity levels, and you were talking in your sleep.'

So Vera monitors me acoustically. It doesn't surprise me.

'What did I say?'

'Guilt is always beyond doubt. You even said it three times. The first repetition came after 55 seconds, with another one two minutes and three seconds later.'

Sometimes even Vera can't hide that she is only a machine after all...

Guilt is always beyond doubt.

I have a hazy recollection of a dream. It was related to what I was reading, and it began nicely, but then my bracelet must have cut in, and I can no longer remember how it ended. A pity.

Vera chimed in once more:

'How would you like me to accompany you on a journey once you have gotten dressed and had breakfast? The Virtual Travel Society has added a few interesting options to my program.'

Vera wasn't exaggerating. The program really does have very few gaps. While I dithered between stays on the US moon base and the international Mars station, Vera suggested journeying to a tranquil location on planet Earth.

'Maybe a nostalgia trip. For the time being, you should avoid overloading yourself with sensory impressions. You need to learn to handle the headset. It has special sensors that listen to the brain through the scalp and skull and stimulate the appropriate areas in line with what is happening in the film.'

As if I hadn't familiarized myself with this technology years before! At the beginning, even news programs were broadcast using the technology, but then reports of nervous breakdowns and psychosomatic overreactions started coming in, especially after dramatic events such as natural catastrophes, accidents, wars and crimes.

Safety systems were built in then, and anybody receiving news in MultiSens format too often now can expect a visit from friendly health board officers, at the very least.

The MultiSens pornography channels had led a successful niche existence for years. As they fulfill a basic human need, they have not – yet – been regulated, although they are monitored.

In any case, the increasingly successful regulation of violent aspects of sexuality with the help of genetic technology is reflected in the output of this medium. All in all, it poses the least threat to the harmony of mutual existence.

While I am still engaged in various skeptical remarks on the nostalgia programs – I'm more interested in the future – our journey begins.

Without any lead-in, I find myself in the half-light of an elongated room, covered by a down sleeping bag and resting on a base made from some sort of foam, with a faint whiff of plastic and gasoline in the background. Next to me, several shadowy figures lie, like me, in sleeping bags, some stretched out and others curled up. Through the windows, the dawn light glimmers weakly. I can hear sounds coming from the driver's seat, and electronic tones coming from an old-fashioned output device: over a rhythm that was increasing so gradually it was barely noticeable, a tune played out, simple and haunting, accompanied by transient impulses and electrifying effects that joined to form harmonies which drew in a listener, as if from wide empty spaces.

'Dr. Brandt, come out with us!' says Vera's voice; she has already peeled herself out of her sleeping bag and is standing in the doorway. The illusion is perfect, and I ask myself: why does a virtual travel partner need a sleeping bag? We leave the bus, an ancient jalopy painted green with a smiling turtle adorning the side, and we stand still, rocking our bodies ecstatically to the electronic music, our eyes wandering across a lunar landscape, resting on folded green and blue rock thrown up by the shadows of the night. The counters become more gentle, lighter, take on color; now a pale pink veil lays itself over bands of rusty red. We look around and end up gazing at the horizon, at the pale pink of the new dawn, the gradual disappearance of the morning star and the moon. A light breeze rustles through the jagged landscape, a coyote howls in the distance, and I draw in the pure morning air in long, deep breaths.

'The Badlands,' says Vera.

How can such a barren, hostile landscape be so beautiful, I think, and: how can someone as level-headed as I am be so sentimental? We sit down and remain in the lotus position in silence, until the sun has risen above the horizon and the driver signals to us that it is time we continued our journey...

'What sort of music was that, and what channel was it anyway?' I ask Vera on finding myself back in my bed, the headphones in front of me on the sheets, the walls white and empty again.

Vera's answer: 'A bus journey from coast to coast and through the national parks, popular with many older people. Those green buses with the old-fashioned diesel engines were decommissioned long ago, of course, not least because they didn't have satnav systems. The music during the journey was popular music from the second half of the 20th century; you won't have known most of the pieces. The two instrumental pieces you just heard, *Oxygene* und *Equinoxe*, were very popular in their time and count as early examples of electronic music.

Other sections of the nostalgia program are also quite popular. The current hits are the European Alps with a folksy evening in a mountain hut and a night spent up there on mattresses spread across the floor. The sensory experiences are incredibly varied.' I can remember various mountain hikes from my youth and feel no nostalgia for wet socks hanging over the stove and animal sounds and smells in crammed sleeping quarters.

'Thank you, Vera, I don't need you any more for now.'

Who did I need at all apart from Dr. Servant and his skills, for which I remunerate him so handsomely? Ever since Denis, my personal attempts to connect to people have all ended in disappointment, been failed emotional investments. Beth long dead, my son – disappeared. My son?

At once I see his bearded figure before me once more, and he stretches his hand with the ring towards me. His ring with the distinctive ornaments round the monogram, or whatever it was. Over the mad story of a madder author, I have forgotten it. And like yesterday, I feel as if I recognize those symbols, have seen them several times before.

Well! Let us weave strange lines and arcs to a rope which can use to descend into the dark valley, let us hammer the ring to a spade for breaking up hard ground. And let us convince the psychoformer on my left wrist that this will be an interesting expedition, a satisfactory, even an enjoyable task: we will retrieve treasure buried deeply and preserve it from being forgotten!

Over the following hours, I train my thoughts and emotions, deliberate over my choice of lunch, eat it with relish, and perform my physiotherapy exercises conscientiously.

Dr. Servant is satisfied with my progress and allows me a small glass of wine with my evening meal, a rich and deep-bodied Lafitte 2040. The alcohol content is not too high, and it strikes me as an ideal wine for convalescent.

He knows my tastes. As a result of global warming, the dominance of Old Europe is unchallenged.

'Keep it up! We'll drink our next glass of wine outside on the balcony together, maybe even as early as tomorrow!'

I smile back cheerfully and busy my mind with pleasant thoughts until I fall asleep, thoughts of finely chiseled lines and ornamental patterns surrounding a combination of letters:

SCM

'Stop that!' She batted my hand away, seemingly thinking I wanted to grab her breasts. And if I did? Given the strange way she was behaving, it would hardly have come as a surprise to her. So I did not allow myself to be deterred. I took the pendant and felt its weight in my hand, barely two inches across, almost round, platinum to judge by the weight and the color. A hint of ornamentation around the three letters: SCM. The neck chain, which also had a metallic gleam, clung to my hand: a serpent, its head and tail ending in the round pendant.

'Is it a monogram?' I ask.

'No', she said. And that was it.

What a day! I shook my head. First the complaints against the Shannon Corporation for patent theft; then the post terminal down for several hours, with complete information overload when it

came back online again.

A rainy day in March, not cold, but not the weather we expect in L.A. either. It was already getting dark, and I left the drive home to the autopilot, keeping my left hand only loosely on the steering wheel. My usual precaution: I know from experience that perfection is not part of human nature. And what is technology but a late-born child of human nature damned by the same mistakes: imperfect as long as the human element has not yet been eliminated.

The strange woman now sitting in front of my vehicle was proof of that: her forehead bleeding, her light-colored Syneprene suit stained. How on earth had that happened? As usual, the autopilot had braked at the barrier at Palos Verdes. I held my hand up at the side window and glanced into the iris recognition device. And right at that moment, no, in the fraction of a instant after the auto pilot got me moving again, a shadow, a scream, the obstacle recognition system reacted almost instantly, but not fast enough, and the vehicle stopped.

I got out, and there she was, sitting in a puddle, her bleeding forehead cupped in her hand. She looked up at me, her mien half-accusatory, half distorted by grimaces of pain. A suicide attempt? That would be the last thing I needed on a day like today. Suicide attempts have to be reported to the health boards immediately; I would have to turn back, bring her to the next clinic, make a statement, sign protocols. She would probably defend herself, kick me, bite me. Anything could happen.

'This area is not for pedestrians,' I said. The control terminals for pedestrians and visitors are on the other side. Strangers are unwanted here, and all attempts to gain entry illegally set off an alarm instantly. We, the residents, worked for a long time to get that, with my legal support playing a decisive role. I looked her sternly up and down, maybe she was an illegal from the South, and I repeated: 'This is not a pedestrian area.'

She looked down at the ground, was probably afraid to make eye contact, spoke slowly, carefully: 'I wasn't paying attention. I thought I would make it across. It was my fault.'

I was reassured by her admission that she was at fault. At least she wasn't going to make trouble. She didn't seem to be a Latina either; going by her accent, she had grown up in the better circles in L.A.

'Do you live here?'

'No'

'Can you walk by yourself?'

Of course she couldn't. I tried in vain to set her down on her legs. Each time she buckled and ended up clutching my shoulder.

'It's my right foot,' she complained. 'I can't put weight on it.' I could see that this was going to cause trouble after all. The time I would lose over this! She probably wouldn't be able to resist temptation and would sue me for compensation. She moaned and leaned on me more heavily. I was worried as well as annoyed now, my emotions mixing and causing me physical discomfort. My thoughts drifted off. Physical pain, my own and that of others, has always been something I find unpleasant. The mere threat of torture would be enough to extract any confession from me. I have no talent for political rebellion, against whatever there is to rebel against; in that respect I am a child of my time. I am happy to live in a highly developed civilized society, and since the invention of bio-stimulators, the pain problem has been more or less conclusively resolved. No more traditional painkillers with all their unwanted side effects from nausea and drowsiness right up to severe organ damage.

She let out another moan, held me tighter. Suddenly, a stray thought intrudes on my dream. I recognize instinctively that it does not belong to this time, is something I came to know only later: I would never have expected that she would undergo this pain voluntarily, would consciously decide to throw herself under my car. Her intelligence would easily have shown her easier ways to become acquainted with me. Why risk a major accident? I know the reason now, now that everything is over, irrevocably so, not to be made up for.

A second consideration from the future chimes in: why do intelligent people like me make the mistake of underestimating others again and again? Underestimating our equals, the people we secretly long to make subject to our pride. That evening, I saw only the young stranger, her hair damp from the rain, her clothes soiled – although the dirty marks were already disappearing from the stain-resistant Syneprene. I had no idea that she had been observing me for days, had found

out about the automated barrier system, coolly calculated the risk involved and decided to accept the pain. Certainly, she may have been exaggerating her helplessness, maybe she could have walked on. But there was another reason to risk pain, to provoke it deliberately: pain as a way to feel alive, as a final route to establishing the reality of one's own individual existence. I suffer, therefore I am! For me, before this, unimaginable...

My thoughts become tangled and I lose the thread of my dream, lose myself in my neural network, sink briefly into unconsciousness – and find myself sitting next to her in the auto, a little later. We parked in front of my property, there was light inside, a glance at the clock showed that only a few minutes had passed. I must have bundled her onto the passenger seat before I applied wound spray to the gash on her forehead and directed the autopilot to my house. Head injuries often bleed profusely. There's something I don't understand: Why did I not feel ill at the sight of the wound?

My eyes rested on the unusual necklace. Was it a medallion, an amulet? I had never seen such a thing, and I reached out to grasp it again, to look at it. This time she let me touch it, unperturbed.

'Where did you get that?'

'None of your business.'

I look at her again, intently, and knew that nothing need be as it appears. Her wet hair changed color with the light; it was almost shiny black a moment ago, but an instant later, when she shook her head, it was chestnut red. Her eyes were slightly slanted, deep brown in color – but contact lenses can conjure up every iris color. Her hair, damp from the rain, parted to reveal a fine red line at the hairline of her right temple. I let go of the medallion and ran my finger along the scar.

'A fresh wound?'

'Only a little accident, it had to be taped.' She brushes a few strands of hair over her other temple, the gesture seems almost involuntary. But I had already noticed the matching scar that signified the first one was no accident, but the result of a recent operation to change the appearance of her eyes. Was she an illegal immigrant after all, under pressure to change her appearance? Or was it something else, had she gone underground for some other reason, was she on the run? She didn't look like a criminal. She was not as young as I had first thought, maybe in her mid- or late twenties. Her Syneprene suit was of premium quality, and the body below it seemed well-formed. As I lifted her up from the ground, I had noticed her taut, trained body – and her smell. It puzzled me.

And again, next to her in the narrow space of my automobile, her smell seemed to draw me ever closer to her: an exquisite, possibly oriental composition, which could only be faintly detected and yet melded irresistibly with the damp from the rain, enticing my nose to bury itself in the hollow at the base of her throat and investigate the unusual whiff further.

I made a decision and gave short commands to the automatic opening system. The main gate remained closed. Instead, a green light for 'Go' lit up over the side entrance: the janitor's apartment and visitor quarters. I had never yet permitted strangers to enter my private quarters, and the concept of strangers extends quite far for me.

She followed me, limping and leaning on my arm, and looked around in the reception room, mustering the seating and the cupboards, the terminal for various deliveries, the door to the sanitary area. She remained standing in front of two holographic reproductions.

'I like these. Aren't the originals in the National Gallery in Washington?' She was right, and if I hadn't had to go off to a business dinner, I would have been interested in talking to her. I explained the in-house technology to her: 'If you want your clothes cleaned quickly, leave them in the service bin next door. In the kitchenette, you can find various ready meals, a fridge, and an automat for cooking and baking. In the built-in cupboards, you will find a camp bed and night wear.'

She had settled down on the couch and was following my hand gestures with her eyes and listening in silence. I found myself balking slightly at her direct, piercing gaze, and I hurried over the rest of my explanations:

'The janitor will look after you and order a taxi for you tomorrow when you are feeling better. You'll have to excuse me, I have an appointment for this evening.'

Her pain and its effects on me had created a temporary illusion of closeness between us, but now her brown eyes were cool and unemotional, she had herself fully under control. Nevertheless, I felt that I had detected something approaching disappointment in her face. My spontaneous thought as I left the room was that she wasn't the type to have brown eyes.

The business dinner didn't meet my expectations. During the starter, I had difficulty gathering my thoughts. When the fish course was served, Li-Wang spoke about the advantages of self-managing facilities, and Baker was called away to a visiofone conversation. During the main course, I began to suspect that the partners had already reached an agreement in advance, and I felt that my presence was superfluous. Cheese and fruit were accompanied by Bush's words on organizational change, which were only of tangential relevance to my professional fields. Afterwards we went on to a night club, where Glenn and two of her colleagues joined us as planned. I came home after midnight and knew, even as I pressed the gate opener, that I had been wasting my time.

The visitor's quarters were dark and forbidding, and no light burned in the janitor's apartment. I had planned to find some excuse or other to check and see how she was, but left it until the following day. In the morning, I got up earlier than usual and didn't pause for breakfast before going over to the janitor's apartment. Shultz let me in.

'She didn't want to stay any longer. As soon as her clothes were clean, she called a taxi. The only thing she asked me for was a walking-stick umbrella, because of her injured leg.' He gestured apologetically.

I reassured him, outwardly calm. How could he have held her back?

The guest room betrayed no signs of her presence. Only a glass and an open package of white paper napkins on the table pointed to the fact that there had been a visitor the evening before. I opened the cupboard with supplies, looked in the fridge. Nothing was missing but... *Please ensure that the emergency supplies of dehydrated nutrition are refilled*, reported the food automat, and in the compartment where these rations were normally stored, the display was flashing. She must have taken everything with her. For an illegal resident, probably without a credit chip, with no fixed abode and living in constant fear of discovery, the energy bars were useful in the struggle for survival. They even made their consumers independent of the need for water supplies, as they filtered water from the air within minutes of the packages being opened. In the empty space lay another napkin, crushed and then folded again by hand, but clean on the outside. I wanted to toss the paper into the bin, but began to unfold it, following a sudden impulse. Or rather, I intended to unfold it, but then I caught the fleeting whiff of her perfume, was half conscious of it. A sensual echo.

'Is anything up?' asked Shultz, who had followed me.

I finished unfolding the napkin, spread it out on the table and smoothed down the creases: 'Look!' My first impression had not told the full story. The napkin was spotted with red, probably from the wound on her forehead which had begun to bleed once more. Exactly in the middle, there was an imprint of red lines and arcs surrounding three red letters, printed in mirror writing, round and two inches high.

It was as if she had never existed. Her smell had finally dissipated, the smell of an exquisite perfume, as I told myself, one which was in no way fitting for an illegal. She had left no other signs, no news. I didn't even know her name, only her face, and my memory of even that became weaker from one day to the next. Over the following weeks, work was demanding and the evenings passed without event, other than relaxing in Glenn's company.

In the second week I began to behave strangely, studied news from the L.A. Area, watched the news often. Nothing. The usual reports that had gone on for years: crises, wars, measures against international terrorism, dangerous shortages of drinking water in assorted corners of the world, the world food situation. We Californians have not been living on the Island of the Blessed ourselves lately, not since the last big quake. The recent attacks of various Traditionalists were difficult to comprehend. Instead of praying in their churches and gathering places, as the more peaceful

among them tended to, they were agitating increasingly against the laws and science. If necessary, our recalcitrant society would have to be converted by force, some of their confused disciples had declared in front of whirring cameras. Humanity was not, in their view, permitted to make alterations to the natural world created by God.

An attack on the offices of the GEN-IM Corporation was ascribed to them, but they were also liable to attack the premises of competing faith communities, and I was increasingly alienated by the intolerance shown by many of those who had assembled under the banner of being children of God and set out to transform the world. Islamic, Jewish, Evangelical versions, and then various psycho-sects with methods and aims which were difficult to decipher.

As far as our Western culture is concerned: my impression is that the intellectual regeneration of the Christian churches, which was their reaction to the religious challenge presented by Islam, has gone into stagnation. The phase of reflection ended in another phase of aimless sectarianism and strife like the old conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland – hardly an example for other cultures to follow.

A paradox has occupied me for a long time: At the same time as the numbers of those who have dispensed with faith and search for salvation on earth rather than in heaven rise, so do the numbers of educated doubters and agnostics. It is thanks to the solidarity of this latter group that the great religious communities can still exert some shreds of their former influence. Perhaps this second group fears the vacuum which would result if the churches were to disappear altogether...

And I? I let the search automaton zap from channel to channel and was barely affected by the contents of the various reports.

I found myself in a strange situation: The more her face faded away, the stronger my memories of her became. Of course, I know that in general, it is not fate or even divine providence which determines the irrational attraction between the sexes, but the complex web woven from smells, pheromones and unconscious signals. Not impassioned declarations of love nor harmony between souls, but pheromones and their chemical inter-compatibility determine the beginning of relationships. I know too much about the roots of love in organic chemistry to lose myself in forms of seduction led by instinct. Those Baroque love poems affect me, I will grant them that. Just take this amusing conceit by the Baroque master Hofmann von Hofmannswaldau:

*Zwey Schnee-Balln / so unmöglich schmelzen können,
womit das Jungfern-Volk der Männer Seelen schmeist*

Snowballs not melting as virgins melt men's hearts...I derive intellectual satisfaction from mannerisms in painting, sculpture and literature, and I can still enjoy the linguistic fruits of a long-gone stay in Europe. Since I know how the mechanisms operate, I exploit female weaknesses in emotional matters, seduce without being seduced, cultivate relationships until they bore me, and end them with panache, but unrelentingly.

By now, seducing women bores me. I understand them too well. Young women are still unaware of their powers and the danger as they begin to play with fire they can ignite but cannot yet control; most of them never seem to learn this control.

Older women have undergone the efforts of reproduction and derive rights from that: every child a financial burden, every miscarriage a mental ball and chain for the unknowing inseminator. And old women? It's true that rejuvenation techniques have improved greatly, who would know more about that than me. But I generally register surplus color, of exaggerated activity and false youth. Pink, wrinkle-free skin, all smiles and laughs – laughable!

Oh, I am just enough to see the other side as well. Men, otherwise in command of their fates, with brain and brawn – only a shadow of their former selves once the chemically-induced disaster strikes. Former tigers – rich old goats now, showing off their younger female playmates, and equipped, too, with a collection of spare parts. One doesn't speak about these things, just as one doesn't talk about money above and beyond a certain sum, in one's own interest. I regard the activities of such libido-optimized idiots with contempt.

And the others, the ones whose brains still seem to work? Their behavior also undergoes strange changes. Old warriors suddenly preach reconciliation; peacemakers not because they have

matured ethically or morally, but simply because they lack testosterone. Or, as in my case, because the usual dirt, blood and foul smells which accompany wars are an offense to my sense of aesthetics. I never fell for the doctored pictures of targeted selections and clean surgical strikes, no more than I was deceived by the harmless terms used: protective custody, selections and special treatment, security partnerships, limited-scope missions, deployments to calm conflicts around natural resources and secure them, living space, revenge strikes, added up in net tonnage and Hiroshima units. Daisy-cutters.

I can't change it. And I'd rather not think about it. Better to take precautions against my own natural disintegration. The system looks after almost everybody, albeit at different levels of quality, and I belong to the preferred category; I pay enough for it. Most recipients get transplants from dead donors or xeno-transplants from genetically-manipulated animals, with all the usual disadvantages.

At the beginning of the third week, a Lawyers Association meeting was taking place in Monterey, and just as I was on my way from the helimobile landing point into the building, I saw her coming towards me, wearing a dark red Syneprene suit cut like the one she had been wearing that evening. It occurred to me that the most up-to-date Syneprene material could change color shades and intensity with simple manipulations. It was the same item of clothing, one more piece of evidence for the material constraints of life underground. She must have seen and recognized me well before I saw her; she looked into my eyes and walked towards me without slowing down, her face inscrutable. My colleague continued his address to me; I feigned interest, keeping my features as inscrutable as hers, but my thoughts raced on, although I came to no conclusions.

'We're here now. Or did you want to keep walking?'

He gave me a friendly shove towards the entrance and led me through the floating door, which opened soundlessly, and on into the hall. I followed him, woke from my paralysis and forced my inner voice down. The conference room was half-full and I was greeted by colleagues, congratulated on my successful conclusion of the negotiations between the government and Biotech-Energic: 'Nobody could have made a better job of sorting out a lasting compromise than you did, laughing wolf that you are.' I didn't answer, showed only a thin smile which hid how uncomfortable I feel when I hear this epithet, laughing wolf, my nickname among colleagues. It started after a photo of my first multi-billion contract: both partners engaged in a handshake frozen for the photographers, both with the feeling that they were losers after a disgraceful compromise, and me standing in between them with a satisfied, genuinely wolfish grin. That was how others saw it, and I learned from the experience and can keep my face inscrutable now: I show no feelings of triumph or defeat, I hide them successfully from the world and from myself. That is why I dislike the nickname, it is damaging to my reputation as an honest go-between. At the end of day, every party emerges from a contract I have negotiated with the secret feeling that they have triumphed, not least over my powers of negotiation. Too much lightness, too much satisfaction on my part could rob them of this conviction.

This time I led the meeting, productive conversations were had, and only afterwards, as I packed up my documents, did the inner voice return to perturb me:

'Another chance lost.'

I spent the afternoon in the club, looked through various transcripts, spoke to Sydow from the Federal Health Agency by visiofone. The new legislation on virtual health-care had been going through the committees for weeks and GEN-IM and its sister companies felt that the deliberate delaying tactics were being deployed.

For a while, I played with the thought that I could meet Glenn, but then I left it. Glenn was good company, but not the person to bring clarity into my confused thoughts. Dr. Servant, a busy medic, probably on the island? Shultz? I usually only talk to him about the house and the garden. The fact that he likes men automatically induces me to keep my distance. It is amazing that our genome technicians still haven't isolated the gene responsible. My son long gone, the only survivor after two abortions and a stillbirth. It would have been a daughter, Beth had never gotten over it...

I stayed in the club for longer than I had planned. The afternoon gave way to twilight, the rooms filled up, and I was still sitting at my table, watching the sun sink into the sea and playing with the thought of a daughter. Why now, after so many solitary years in which my own company had been

satisfying enough? Unused to these mental scenarios, I found them strange, they didn't suit me. I have mistrusted the unknown since my youth, always expecting nasty surprises and strangers pulling strings behind the scenes.

I cut off my train of thought abruptly and called myself to order, leaped to my feet (somewhat too energetically, as the amazed faces of other guests told me) and turned to go.

It was already dark when the air taxi dropped me in Palos Verdes. I walked the last five hundred yards, past the green villa gardens, some walled and some open, all secured electronically. I strode with long fast steps, breathed deeply and listened to myself. My heart was working reliably, I couldn't feel it. All was as it should be. Nevertheless, I resolved not to postpone my next appointment with Dr. Servant.

Shultz was waiting for me at the side entrance; he must have seen me on the screen for monitoring goings-on outside the house.

'There is somebody here for you.'

He moved his head towards mine confidentially: 'It's her!'

She was waiting in the visitor's salon in an olive-green Syneprene suit, her eyes green and her shoulder-length hair chestnut red. Straight and relaxed it framed her face. We used to call that a pageboy haircut. It's an illusion, I told myself, deceiving. Soon her hair will curl in wild locks, her green irises will be gray, her suit yellow or blue, ach....this female metamorphosis! Much as I reject it, it fascinates me even more. And under all the differences I sense that we have something in common, are somehow kindred spirits, share a commonality I never experienced with Glenn or other lovers, not with Beth, not with my son, with Denis, yes, but that was so long ago, almost forgotten now.

A thought: I must maintain the initiative, my head springs up, and tips back to muster her from above. At the same moment the same gesture from her, involuntary or conscious? We look at each other, smile, grin; she stands up, gives me her hands, no, she takes my hands in her strong, slender ones. We stand opposite each other, both the same height, and I detect her perfume once more. The same almost oriental composition, sensuality included, and suddenly I know: She is it, my third chance! Without thinking – I have been thinking about it all afternoon, after all – I open my mouth to say: Do you want to be my daughter? And I say 'Would you like to work for me?'

Her eyes widen, but there is no joy in them, almost something like disappointment. She regains her composure almost instantly and answers, vaguely:

'Perhaps...'

'Do you not want to tell me who you are?'

She smiles and remains silent.

'Well, you could at least tell me your name.'

'Call me Anima.'

An unusual name. False, of course. I think for a moment and make my decision: 'I'll call you Ann, that's short and practical. I have to let you know that I don't approve of long-winded names like Alexandra, Yvonne-Chantal and so on.' She gives me an inscrutable look and does not reply. So she agrees. How well I remember that evening!

Our discussion went on for several hours, during which we scarcely ate and drank. She disclosed few details about herself and her life up to that point. She had never known her biological parents or relations; everything that she was – her training, her college study of ethno-biology, her artistic hobbies – had come from her family and the boss, obviously the titles of this organization or sect and its leader.

'I would be nothing without them. I have a duty to be grateful.'

What had driven her to go underground?

Underground? She had not fled from anybody, was just taking a sort of sabbatical, She had a duty to fulfill, if no other solutions present themselves. Perhaps she would return to her previous place of work, perhaps not.

'If I can.'

I didn't understand what she meant, preferred to ensnare her in a discussion of what she had studied and was interested in. Besides ethno-biology, she had an interest in the arts.

Her answer reminded me of my own innate musical ability, which I had kept a tight lid on since my youth, abandoned for practical-rational reasons, replaced with jurisprudence and economics. A retreat from questions to certainties, a comfortable, albeit sparsely funded room, in which I had made myself at home.

Biology and art: she obviously wanted to combine the most disparate inclinations.

'Very different fields, they can hardly be reconciled with one another,' I commented.

'On the contrary. They are both complementary approaches, and I'm looking for the point where they intersect.'

'Approaches towards what?'

'Human nature.'

I mentioned her perfume, the unusual smell which had fascinated me. She beamed:

'So you like it then? A present from my..' she hesitated, '...from the father who raised me. It's made especially for me in a small factory. It would be much too expensive for everyday wear, I use something fresher most of the time.'

So why this perfume on the evening we had first met? Why was she wearing it now? asked my rational faculties. And is this economical use not a clever move, sensual bait for my nose, tempting me to move closer than usual to her? Whatever her reasons, she was making intelligent use of it.

It wasn't that Glenn's varying perfumes had struck me as cheap, but my nose has been trained through fantastic wines and I detest perfumes in genera after suffering for years in the thick cloud of scent that went wherever my wife did.

'What is it called? And do you know what it contains?,' I asked, preparing myself for one of the flowery but thin-on-content descriptions women are liable to come up with, something as vague as the usual description of medicines as green or yellow capsules, round or oval ones, with nary a mention of the brand name, let alone the active ingredient.

This time I was wrong.

'It is called *Veena*, after the Southern Indian stringed instrument. I have informed myself about the ingredients.' Ann was lecturing me now: 'Animal components together with resins and noble woods form the base, balsamic and spicy notes the heart. The floral nuances blend together in a restrained manner, and the entire composition would be oriental, if it didn't take its weight from the cool green aspects of the top note. It is really ingenious. The top note corresponds to the notes from the light and clear upper range of the veena.'

I persisted with my investigation: 'And what is the story with the animal components? Real, or synthetic imitations?'

'They are real. Musk and an even greater treasure, ambergris.'

As I knew, the musk rat was extinct in the wild now, like so much else it had fallen victim to traditional Chinese 'medicine.' But at least it is now bred in captivity and can keep its life, like the civets, although it suffers in the 'harvesting' process. The perfume industry continues to use synthetic substitutes on price grounds.

'Didn't the sperm whales for the ambergris die out? As far as I know, there isn't any other demand for whale products now, and the last treaty protecting them spat in the miso soup of the Japanese?'

'Beavers are still killed for the perfume industry, but not sperm whales. Apart from that: Ambergris has aphrodisiac properties, but it is formed in the stomach of creatures that have a form of gastritis.'

'Perhaps from the frustrating hunts for the giant squids of the deep sea?'

'Maybe. They cough the lumps up of their own accord. These are worthless until they have drifted for two years in the sea or been stored in seawater until they set their incredible perfume free. So it's the same story as with the musk, which stinks to high heaven when it's fresh and has to mature for a very long time. The lecture ended: 'As you see, the more whales with sick stomachs swim around, the more ambergris there is. These days, it is much more expensive than gold.' That I had already known, but I enjoyed listening to my young guest, why, I don't know. I remember that there was some research carried out into the genes which cause ambergris to be produced. If that should succeed, who knows, then luxury restaurants might be able to offer the famous Baroque ambered fruits for desert again.

Whatever the whys and hows, she smelled irresistible, and I caught myself beginning to entertain affectionate feelings for musk rats and, in particular, for sperm whales...

Later on, I got the chance to come back to my idea of adopting her as my daughter.

She didn't react as I had expected. She put the glass she had just started to raise to her lips back down on the table, hard, and turned her back on me. My suggestion had obviously thrown her, even though adoptions of adults were far from unusual when names, titles and property were there to be protected: all three could be left to a suitable person after forming a bond through adoption.

I was startled and a little upset, stared at her back, saw her throw her hands up in front of her face and saw her trembling shoulders, heard small meaningless, confused sounds from her mouth and felt unwell.

Of all reactions... tears. I had detested Beth's tears.

Why was she crying? Was it the way people cry when something unexpected ends their suffering and brings happiness? Was she moved by my generous offer? She was a stranger, and we had not yet formed any relationship. Perhaps I should have held back with my suggestion, gotten to know her better first, checked her out. Had my common sense gone out the window? And where, in the name of goodness, was the pristine white handkerchief she would most certainly demand in a minute to dry her tears and blow her nose.

'Ann?' I asked cautiously, and again:

'Ann, what's up?'

Her right hand groped for the hand rest of the armchair, while her shoulders trembled all the more violently. She turned around slowly, let herself sink back into the cushions and took her other hand down from her face. I stared at her, speechless myself now. What I saw were tears of laughter, what I heard was laughter, gurgling, high-spirited chuckling which died down only gradually.

'No,' she shook her head, couldn't calm herself. 'No, I can't believe I didn't see that one coming. It's only logical.'

Now I was completely baffled:

'If you would rather not, if there's something off about it for you,..'

'No, I'm perfectly happy to be your daughter. That's what I am and what I want to be.'

A headstrong answer. Her face was inscrutable, and I couldn't think of an appropriate reply.

'Can I explain the advantages of an adoption to you?' I asked, stiffly and awkwardly, and then I launched into my specialist lecture without waiting for her to grant me her permission. Several minutes later, during which she had listened attentively, I ended it with the words: 'Only, of course, if that is what you wish and if the conditions are acceptable to you.'

She nodded in silence. So she accepted the advantages and conditions of an adoption, including the change of name that was part of the process. She had listened, smiling, to my offer to finance her studies of law, and later on perhaps make her part owner and heir after my death. It didn't seem to have made much of an impression on her.

It was almost midnight when I left, leaving her the guest rooms for the next few days and promising to rent an apartment in the neighborhood for her. Again, she seemed disappointed, but accepted my offer. What other choice did she have?

I was satisfied, at any rate, sat in my house doing nothing for a while, forming ideas about how we would work together in the future. In our argument I had noticed her powers of persuasion, her skill in winning over others to her position with a mixture of charm and competence. She would learn quickly, no doubt about that with her intelligence and her gift for logical reasoning. And: the company could use an injection of fresh blood!

In the next few days, I had two appointments to keep. It was high time for my body scan in Dr. Servant's clinic, and I met my private investigator. As I only had a few images from the visual observation technology, Anne would have to be monitored by traditional methods for the time being, whenever she left my property. She was already registered as a visitor to the area with the residents' administration, so she could move freely in Rancho Palos Verdes. What she didn't tell me, I would find out, sooner or later...

Dr. Servant was in good humor when he received me:

'For the time being, we needn't worry at all. Your test results were perfect, the medication is dosed

optimally and the results are stable. It's unfortunate that your planned donor didn't just destroy himself, but also the existing cell cultures,' he paused momentarily, 'which contradicts our theory that the whole thing was an accident, of course.' For a few moments, he seemed about to retreat into deep thought, before he went on with his explanations: 'New cultures of current cell material have already been started, but you know about the associated problems: the lifespan is reduced. At the moment we can grow substitute organs from new cultures or resort to animal or humanoid replacements. We also have artificial organs which have proven their worth. One way or the other, you would need to take medication to prevent thrombosis or rejection of the organ. Inevitable disadvantages.'

I made no effort to hide my displeasure:

'I have invested large sums over the last thirty years. Was there no advance planning, no substitute for such a situation?'

He leaned back, looked uncomfortable:

'We couldn't have expected it. You must know that you are a special case, the likes of which we haven't had in the last forty years, I have studied the records. I have to tell you that he was number two, there was already another potential donor.'

'And?'

'A mistake must have been made during the genetic optimization process. The transport virus for a replacement gene led to an unknown metabolic disease. He was no longer suitable as a donor.'

'What happened him?'

'He is still alive. The disease is not infectious, at least not directly, as long as there is no exchange of blood and other bodily fluids. We are already familiar with this problem from other diseases.'

I remember the epidemics of the previous century. AIDS and numerous forms of infectious hepatitis for which cures were only developed in the last few years. They changed the face of Africa and Asia.

'Can I see him?' He hadn't expected the question.

'You can rest assured that he is well, under the circumstances, and we will not make the same mistake again. Apart from that,' he raised his left index finger in a pregnant gesture, paused for a second, before continuing to speak with a raised voice: 'We could perform immortal experiments together. His case, after all, was extremely valuable for research, it helped us enormously.'

He let his hand fall and went back to his normal tone of voice: 'Back to your case! There is nothing better than a genuine donor; we avoid the word clone since it was dragged into many a confused argument over the last few decades. Let me outline a few problems in brief. As you know, accident victims supplied the initial organic material. Machines for kidneys and hearts were used to bridge the gap before transplantation. I mentioned some of the disadvantages already. Many people also refused to give consent, either out of religious considerations or out of sheer laziness. The result was that the demand for organs was far greater than the supply, a lucrative area for criminal organizations, surgeons who took spare organs from the poor for a few Euros or dollars, killed people outright, or turned initially healthy bodies into brain-dead spare parts depots, wheelers and dealers who acted as go-betweens between customers and suppliers. Live donations between blood relations can only secure a small part of the potential demand, quite apart from fact that these donations are not always entirely voluntary...

In short, we had to find another solution. Of course mistakes were made at the beginning, and some of the paths explored ended in dead-ends. You probably know that humans are born without a cerebrum from time to time, mutants with a genetic error. Mind you, that can only happen if pre-natal diagnostic tests are skipped. It's a weaving error in the pattern of life, unfortunate people, actually not people at all, since the cerebellum is the seat of human intelligence. They vegetate without help for a short period or are quietly euthanized. Well, –for better or for worse – such brainless creatures were created deliberately.'

'So biological spare parts depots were created, presumably in the strictest of secrecy?'

He shook his head disapprovingly:

'We don't use such expressions. But never mind. The idea was seductive, the results miserable: First of all, it was expensive, and secondly, the organs didn't meet our quality criteria. Hardly surprising given the preparation of the objects, lying flat nourished through drips with all the

complications that go with the territory of intensive care medicine. A complete flop.

A colleague experimented for a short while with humans of reduced intelligence.'

'Aha! Alpha, Beta, and Gamma humans,' I added, 'just like in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World!*' and he nodded, without going into any further detail.

'It sounds plausible, but it didn't prove to be practical. To sum up: A storm of public protests broke out, the colleague was overcome by scruples and abandoned the work.'

'I was among the protesters. Intelligence is the best thing we have, we should be increasing it and not reducing it.'

He nodded towards me again.

'I agree with you completely. Don't forget that our aim is to protect and conserve intelligent life. Even in the twentieth century, prominent scientists supplied sperm banks with their ejaculate. We are only taking that one step further. And don't forget: we are not stupid!'

As he spoke the last words, his voice had become raised again. Now he stood up, and while his words became more and more impassioned, he threw me a scrutinizing glance from time to time, as if he wanted to keep an eye on my reactions. He paced through the consulting room with large steps, from the window to the opposite wall and back again, repeatedly, stopping briefly every time he came to the window, without looking out before he turned and strode back to the wall and on with the performance. And I followed him with my eyes, heard him speak on:

'Cases from the turn of the millennium, such as the case of the child with a genetic condition which could only be healed through a live tissue donation from his sibling, showed us the way forward. Interventions in the germ line of unborn individuals, barely a few days old, and – not to put too fine a point on it – the creation of a human for this purpose.'

'Was the embryo killed?'

'No, of course not, in this case. The pregnancy came to term and the child was born like any other, with the difference that bone marrow was extracted from his spine regularly until his brother had been cured. It wasn't a pleasant procedure but when he was asked about it years later, he gave his permission. He had understood, better than most of the critics, that he had two mothers, his biological mother and: science! You should never forget that! Science itself is value-free, no matter what its results are ultimately used for. And you can also note that human straining for knowledge is boundless. What can be done, will be done, if not in my country, then in another where I am offered better working conditions. The Europeans with their moral scruples had to learn that. Their restrictive and clerical laws led to a veritable exodus of hard-working scientists. My grandfather was one of them.'

'But how did you continue along that path?'

'Before I go into that, let me round off my lecture with a few notes on the alternatives. Cell cultures from stem cells given appropriate treatments may be able to produce a decent steak. If the muscle fibers are stimulated electrically, that certainly helps. But we still cannot, unfortunately, produce organs in a factory setting reliably, especially not ones with a long lifespan. The initial euphoria was misplaced. As you know, stem cells are theoretically, note, theoretically, capable of developing into any required organ if given the required stimulation. The problem is just that it doesn't always work. Sometimes the entire story goes through a sort of metamorphosis, and we don't know why. Do you remember the thing with the teeth? Or have you not yet heard about the patient who was bitten by his second stomach after a successful operation?'

Or the awful story of the vagina dentata, a concept that makes the hair of us men stand on end, touches on our primal fears. That case was the source of an inexhaustible flood of jokes among medics and psychologists for years...' His face bore a broad grin now:

'Since then, we recommend that patients who wish to bear children after a hysterectomy rent a surrogate mother.'

I have a dim recollection of the story. The more vulgar television channels had relished the story and covered it extensively.

'With that we have landed at the cloned donor, the imago. There is nothing better, although the offer is not for everybody. At the end of the day, two operations have to be paid for, as in your case. He remained standing in front of me, checked the chronometer: 'You'll have to excuse me if I save the details for later. But you should note one thing: Our donors are not compelled, and receive the

best of treatment after the operation. We give them a lot of freedom, for example, we have a special heli-glider which brings them on a daily trip to the mainland every two weeks. Almost all of them take advantage of the offer, and your imago was no exception. That's why we don't understand why he wanted to kill himself. What he was like?'

He glanced across to me sideways:

'A strong character. Unusual ability to get things done, matched with sharp intelligence and a will to live. Somewhat unapproachable in a manner which can be treasured, cool in his emotional life. And as well as that proud, very proud. You should know the answer better than anybody else.'

Of course. I have to admit to myself that my last question was superfluous. In fact, I don't feel that I have learned much at all from our conversation. Dr. Servant had told me a lot, but very little that I hadn't known already, and I was once more suspicious that he was concealing something important.

Lost in thought I went down the steps into the entrance hall, declined the offer of an air taxi and found myself on the busy street after a few more steps. As every time, I asked myself involuntarily why Servant had his town practice here, so close to downtown, and figured that he needed that contrast to the peace of the island. And Beverley Hills, with its financially well-endowed clientele, was not far away.

The street was full of environmentally friendly hydrogen-cell and electric autos and the smell of spring hung in the air. The green double-circle logo of the 'walk and bike' movement hung over the entrance to the underground, with the modern slogan *everybody walks in L.A.*, and I decided that it would be good to stretch my legs.

I had only been walking for a few minutes, breathing in deeply and thinking back to the smog-filled Los Angeles of my youth with a shudder, when I heard light-footed steps behind me which were synchronized with my own. A hand groped for my own left hand and slipped a piece of paper into it, and I heard a male voice whisper: 'We are waiting for you!'

Maybe I would have caught the stranger if I turned around and grabbed him immediately. But I had been caught unforeseen by the contact and I reacted too slowly. I grasped the piece of paper with my fingers, held it up to my eyes, read an address and turned my head back only then. He must have turned around immediately; I only got a fleeting impression of him, a light-colored windbreaker disappearing behind a portal.

And maybe that wasn't even him, perhaps the stranger with the curious invitation had blended inconspicuously into the stream of passers-by in the street.

To my right and my left people flooded past me without paying any attention to me. I read the address again and looked at the time given. If I hurried, I would be in time for the beginning of the event; what else could it be? My route took me through two intersections, then past a fenced-in green area which almost reminded me of a botanical garden. At the end of the complex, a gate appeared in the fence, and groups of people streamed towards a round, domed building. Suddenly, I knew that it could only be a temple of the true tradition, a place where disciples belonging to various different religious groups met, many of them apostates, converts who wanted to stop society and their own old faith communities traveling, as they saw it, on the path towards hellish damnation. They combined ancient Christian thoughts with strict food laws and borrowings from various sects, some of them Asian.

Up to the most recent attacks they had been able to operate unhindered. But, as a spokesman for the homeland security department had explained, those days were over now! On the way to the temple, I could see that officialdom had the group well and truly on their radar now. Various civil control staff could be seen hanging around inconspicuously, and various vehicles of the same type were parked neatly at the edge of the road, each the same distance as the next as from the vehicle behind.

I strode through the gate and over the neatly kept path to the entrance of the domed building behind two young women wearing the same caps over tightly plaited pigtailed and long blue-checked cotton dresses cut in an old-fashioned style.

It was almost dark inside, or at least, my eyes needed to get used to the weak candlelight which lit the center of the arena-like room within. On the ground, surrounded by candles, lay a stubby cross made from some indefinable material. I was surprised: the crowd in the round area remained silent,

as if they were waiting for an unusual experience. The last whispering voices went still. The silence contained a hint of a sigh from hundreds of throats. Then it happened:

All of a sudden, a holographic projection of a golden torch, perhaps thirty feet high, rose from the point where the arms of the cross met a column of light that slowly revolved to electronic tones, seemingly changing its shape and color as it did so. The object was beautiful, more beautiful than anything I had seen and experienced up to now, yes, it was holy, and like the faithful around me, I wanted to kneel down, or at least bow deeply. I closed my eyes to listen more closely to the strange harmonies. They reminded me of traditional European organ music, then of old Indian music, sitars and tanburs, and yet it was something else. As I tried to analyze its structures, still with my eyes closed, something fell like a veil from my consciousness, and I understood. The visitors of this religious temple – and it had temporarily affected me as well – were submitting to a light suggestive influence. Without a doubt, the impression was created by the moving holograph, which was controlled by invisible machinery in the dome.

I had difficulty restraining myself from voicing my sarcastic admiration. Confusion of the intellect had always been their method, whether through the holy smoke of the Elusinian mysteries, monotonous drumming on shamanic journeys, or incense in the celebratory rituals of the Una Sancta. From my earliest youth onwards, I had resisted their deceptions, since I refused to follow their most senior leader. More precisely: I don't bother with him anymore. Not, like Buddha, out of a sense of insight into the borders of what humans can recognize, although I, like him, refuse to engage with senseless questions. More than that. The wisdom of Buddha, which offers a loophole to those incurably affected with faith, is not my path; nor the moral outrage of the 20th century French man of letters who rebelled against the Gods.

No, they are of no interest to me. I let others push the rock uphill. My actions are governed only by reason, I analyze, extrapolate, functionalize and assess. The profit and loss account of my life has always seen me on the profit side. It should be easy for me to withstand the attraction of this religious spectacle.

Taking my eyes off the seductive fire and letting them wander around the outside circle of the curious sacred building would be a good start. I did so, and was impressed once more. Right around the building, up to the base of the domed roof, stained glass windows, interrupted only by narrow supporting pillars, showed paradisiacal scenes of the harmony of man and nature, rich harvests of the fruits of fields and forests, humans in the middle of it all, sometimes relaxing in peace between the wolf and the lion, sometimes working the earth with plow and spade, archaic images which bore no relationship to the reality of our planet.

New techniques for generating oxygen had to replace the tropical forests which had shrunk to the point where only shreds remained. Wolves and lions are almost extinct in the wild, like all the other large animals. Their descendants lead a quiet existence in our zoos – well fed, safe, clean – like old people and those in need of nursing care in our well-organized homes.

I look at the glass band again. Daylight illuminates humans, animals, plants, shines through generous greenery on the sky and its feathered inhabitants. Now I understood why this group was having its celebration by day, even though more and more communities were moving their meetings into the early evening. Only by daylight did the stained-glass images live. The entire width of the dome was sky blue, covered in stars, like a giant observatory, with the golden flame reaching its peak in its zenith.

I had difficulty not allowing myself to be drawn in by the overpowering impressions, and this was presumably the intention. From the lit-up arena to the raised gallery around the ribbon of windows, the rows of chairs were all occupied, and while I tried to estimate the number of people gathered here, a murmuring went from one row to the next and ended in a melodic hum which grew slowly louder. From the side of the building opposite me, dozens of figures dressed in white walked, no, they floated towards the center, obviously on a conveyor belt of the type that has proved so useful in the great places of pilgrimage around the world in order to manage the masses of the faithful congregating at certain points.

They raised their arms and grouped themselves around the cross with the projection of flames, singing. The humming of the masses suddenly gave way to silence, and all eyes fixed on the conveyor belt, now transporting an older, smallish white-robed man with white hair and a white

beard towards the center. A moan went through the rows.

'The prophet, oh, just look at him, look at the prophet,' whispered the man next to me, and I saw tears in his eyes. The prophet spoke to us. All the usual criticism that comes from these piety movements, criticism of our sick society, of the excesses of the day, culminating in the call to turn back, to repent, and always out of the same motivation: fear of progress, inevitable progress.

I was more than familiar with it all: they had been doing this for centuries: the wrong answers to the right questions! I heard sobbing, saw faces lost in contemplation, featureless, receptive – and others in which the lines grew stronger and harder as decisions were made, fanatical preparedness shaped. The prophet ended his sermon with a final 'Repent!' before turning around to the projection glowing in gold.

And then he reached into it, grasped something within the flame in both hands, pulled it out and held it towards the crowd. It was a large-format book, the weight of which visibly weighed him down and which he laid carefully onto a lectern formed from transparent material. He lowered his head and remained in that position for a while, his forehead resting on the book.

All was quiet around me. Reverent silence, as I suppose this quietness is called, the white-clad choir was silent as well. When the old man lifted his head again, something happened which was a surprise for me, but obviously not for the crowd and the choir. The book began to exude light from within, the choir began to sing again, and the stronger the light, the louder the singing, in which they were now joined by the community. A wave went through the rows of chairs, people stood up and then – in a single wave which was animated and yet also disciplined – they streamed forward, taking me with them, and waited patiently at the entrance to the area, in front of the prophet with his holy book. One by one they walked forward and bathed in the shine of the book, lowering their foreheads to touch it reverently. The prophet himself seemed to be in a sort of trance, his eyes half-closed and his body rocking to the rhythm of the song and the resounding organ music.

From time to time, he laid his hands on one of the bowed heads and said something. I didn't bow my head when I stood in front of him: I tried to make eye contact, but he looked straight through me. I wanted to go on – I felt no particular inclination to kiss the superstitiously venerated relic – when he put his hand on my shoulder and said, with the trembling voice of a very old man:

'Look into yourself,' and again: 'Look into yourself.' He muttered a few more incomprehensible words. I tried to pull myself away. His eyes cleared for a moment, he looked at me and, his voice changed now, said: 'Stay with us. We have been waiting for you for a long time already.' Those behind me pushed me onwards, and I felt a sudden urgent need to reach the exit, past the donation boxes which glowed in flares of bright light when donations were received. That, of course, that was the whole purpose of the event, and a particularly efficient form of recruiting members, too!

He probably uttered the same words to every one of the credulous idiots, banal platitudes such as the *Know thyself* of the Apollo of Delphi the God of reason and, incidentally, the only God I would subject myself to.

'Know yourself!' Its endless repetition through the millennia has damaged even this enlightening formula.

Anyway, I already did know myself.

To what end did he want to use the faithful? The memory of medieval assassins emerged, the secret oriental organization which drugged its helpers and let them waken in a paradisiacal garden, before it sent them out to commit a murder. It merged with the image of the Saudi millionaire who entered the realms of myth himself, together with his organization Al-Qaida. His murderous charisma had set horror and disgust free on one side, fanatical enthusiasm on the other.

'He is a seer, one sent down from heaven,' said a man who was leaving the sacred building next to me.

'He is mad.' I replied.

I had had enough. The people and the traffic in the center of town were getting on my nerves, and I ordered an air taxi to take me straight back home to my unusual guest. On the way, I noticed that my thoughts drifted back to the prophet and his holy book several times, and I believed I could see the moving column of light and hear the electronic organ and then the Indian sitar tones. I had to admit that the whole performance had, in aesthetic terms, been extremely satisfactory...

Ann wasn't there, but a video control of the visitor's quarters reassured me that she would soon return, and I waited. Hours went by, a 4-D journey to Hawaii did little to relax me, and as I waited and waited, I gradually grew tired. At midnight the warning system alerted me to her return, and I found some pretext to say hello. She was tired too, and said so in no uncertain terms. So we agreed to meet the following evening, and I found myself in my bed within minutes.

The thought must have been lurking in my subconscious unnoticed the entire time. I was almost asleep when the sentence returned, two short sentences, meant for me and only for me: 'Stay with us. We have been waiting for you for a long time.' Who was behind this anonymous 'We'? Missionary zealots or a pragmatic fisher of souls attempting to convert influential members of society? Or even friends of my lost son? Was some vestige of guilt – that's what these religions feed off, after all – trying to tell me I had lost a chance, as I had back then with my son?

'Not with me!' I said aloud, before rolling over and soon falling asleep.

In the morning, a leasing representative from the Cleveland Museum of Art announced that I could have the two O'Keefe originals I had ordered for eight weeks. In addition, I could have the Hildesheim silver treasure trove for an extra fee, a relict from the confusion of war in the 20th century, but only, of course, if I had suitably secure glass exhibition cases. The current leasing objects would be collected when the new ones were delivered.

So I sat in front of the Picasso drawings for an hour and took leave of them. No copy can replace the aura of the originals, and like many wealthy people, I am prepared to pay considerable sums for the pleasure. Art leasing saves one from tiring queues at museum entrances and having to listen to the incompetent comments of other visitors, not to mention the nuisance of noisy school classes, and the museums finance themselves in this way.

In the afternoon, the visiofone announced a call and my assistant Shriner passed on an invitation from the European Patent Office. I immediately thought of Ann, I could show her Munich and maybe a few of the castles of the Bavarian fairytale king. Europe may lag behind America in terms of technological development, but it still offers a wealth of exciting discoveries to historians and art fans. Still, the Islamization of Europe is rapidly gaining ground, more so than the fundamentalism in Christian churches and sects, and new acts of iconoclasm are to be reckoned with soon. Since I had to undergo a special personality test before I could conclude my first leasing contract, I know all about this field. Mostly without the general public noticing, endangered works of art, especially those which could be seen as provoking religious sensibilities, are being withdrawn into the museum depots, where they can only be viewed by specialists and by members initiated into the select fellowship of art leasers. America, you still have it better! But even we are not fully free from suspicious officialdom and fundamentalist infiltration.

Ann didn't react as I had expected to my invitation. She looked at me with a fixed expression, the muscles in her face unmoving, and then she shook her head slowly. No. A definite no, not to be changed through accusations, nor by the suggestion that we could tag on a few days in Paris. It wasn't hard to get to the bottom of it. She was afraid of the strict identity controls at the borders of the European Union. And she had her reasons. After all, she still hadn't told me her name, and the detective agency had failed to ferret it out. Once I had had a chance to look in her variopouch, which could transform itself from a small handbag to a capacious shoulder bag. It was empty apart from an unsecured Syneprene bag. I was surprised by that, and all the more startled by the contents of the bag: a syringe, canules and two disposable bottles with scratched-off labels. I thought I could still see the outline of a skull on one of them.

In a clear plastic envelope, I could see a ten-dollar note and the credit chip for 5000 dollars that I had given her. I almost oversaw the small Mesoamerican sculpture showing the tenderly cut features of a girl or a young woman, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open, a sort of ribbon on her skin. Apart from the ears, which were ornate, it was a realistic copy.

But a copy of what? I felt that I knew what the original was, had seen it some exhibition or museum; it might have been a few years ago. The reverse side was hollow, as is typical for cast replicas. Where the headband – or was it a crown? – ran over the right ear the object bore traces of a stamp. With difficulty, I managed to make out the word *Jalapa*, the name of a Mexican city, and worked out that the full stamp would read 'Museo de Jalapa.' It could only be a replica of an exhibit, as museums all over the world sell them to visitors, a souvenir reminder of an original,

which had perhaps made a particular impression. It was an especially well made replica, and a new puzzle to be solved.

So over the following days I attempted to find out more about her. We conversed, discussed questions of science, art and recent history, I took her out to dinner once – and yet she remained an enigma. She seemed to have similar reservations or a sense of insecurity about me. We were circling one another like two dogs, each waiting to discover the other's weaknesses and get in with the first bite. Oh, they would have been love bites, and yet poisoned by our common fate...

During the return flight I ran through the past week in my head. The negotiations in Munich had been a resounding success. Our European partners had been convinced by my arguments and had seen things from the point of view of our government. At the closing dinner in a four-star Munich restaurant, Glenn had impressed the assembled company with her appearance, her wit and her quick ripostes to the degree that Herr Breuning, the leader of the German delegation, had addressed her as Mrs. Brandt again and again and asked her about the Californian art market, Californian wines and even about the last Californian earthquake.

I had to admit that my high-class courtesan had done an excellent job. I was happy with her performance, although we only slept together once in that week. Our expectations of partnership seem to be shifting gradually. In general, advancing age liberates us from the slavery of our sexual urges and gives us greater freedom: select pleasures replace the constant lust for sexual satisfaction.

I had been able to dedicate one day to my interest in paleontology interests and had driven up to the Upper Jura area north of Munich after packing Glenn off to Paris, where all was calm, for a shopping trip. In Solnhofen, I hired a competent guide, and we spent a day going through the quarries with hammer and chisel: slabs of marble-like limestone in warm shades of yellow and ochre with red staining and many fine black-veined fossils of plants and insects.

The slabs had been laid down in the numerous Bavarian castles for centuries and formed the floors of many a grand banquet-hall where once the upper nobility celebrated and where tourists in extra-large felt slippers had been performing their awkward ballet since the collapse of the kingdom. After the second world war, when the old elites had fallen into poverty and the usurpers had lost power too, the noble stone had been used in ordinary apartment blocks, then in the houses of the middle classes, and finally in the renovated *Reichstag* building in the new, democratic Berlin. Over 150 million years of geological history...

Towards the evening I came back, happy with my booty: a few fossilized mollusks and ferns and a piece I had bought locally for my collection, the size of my hand, with one of the rare insect impressions.

The entire week a success!

And now and again I had thought of Ann: we had only exchanged two short messages during the week, and I had missed her less than I had thought I would.

The return flight in the jet passed without event. At the beginning, I heeded the captain's recommendations to look out the window, and I saw the typical picturesque towns below us with their church towers and minarets, and the odd zeppelin of the type used by modern airship companies: comfortable cruise flights with long flight phases followed by short, tightly-monitored excursions on land. I slept through the ocean and missed large parts of the American continent because I was asleep in the bed my seat had transformed to.

Shultz was waiting for me at the airport with a long face:

'She's gone, she went yesterday. And it's worse than that: we had a break-in last night.'

The locks of the visitor's area had been tampered with and somebody had gone through the cupboards and compartments. When I opened a cupboard, the household automat requested that order be restored, in a tone of voice which sounded almost offended. The unwanted visitor had stuffed the contents of the cupboards back in a rough-and-ready manner. If he had been looking for personal traces of her residence, he must have been disappointed. Standing in the door frame, I looked back: The rooms were as if Ann had never existed...

I was relieved to note that the invader had not entered the main building. At least my innermost zone had been spared – the mere idea that somebody could have violated this space was

unbearable. Anyone who is in the public eye as much as I am needs to pay attention to the inviolate nature of private space.

I was able to stretch out on the sofa, reached out for the remote control and selected a news channel – and promptly sat up straight and began to pay attention. The news story was about life-saving medication and ended with an appeal to all who were able to give information, followed by codes for various government offices which I automatically took note of. Even though I had only seen the picture for a fraction of a second, the face of a young woman, unclear, as if the picture had been taken as she walked past, I knew it was Ann, her attentive gaze directed back over her left shoulder at her observers, no, her persecutors. She knew that she was being followed; that was why she had left the apartment before the break-in, leaving no traces.

Who was behind the search for her? Of course I wasn't going to betray her, and I could rely on Schultz' discretion, he has been in my service for years and his inclinations tend to bring him into situations in which he depends on my help. Apart from that: distrust of government offices, state officials and their edicts is second nature to me. I have, after all, played a major role in the legal protection of the structures of society.

Having arrived at this point in my considerations, I tried to get a connection to the detective agency before I realized that nobody would be there at this late hour. That was the case, and I left a message via memochip. The waiting game had begun, as I attempted to solve the puzzle of her renewed disappearance. I used my powers of logical deduction to add what I could to the information I already had. I sorted various documents over a cup of tea, I bridged gaps with hypotheses in front of the mirror in the bathroom, and I fretted over contradictions in bed until fatigue forced me to stop. I had not come up with anything useful.

There was no trace of Ann over the next few days. Everything was just as it had been when she had first disappeared, but now I knew more about her. More than enough to think about after work. The search message had thrown up more questions than answers. I was suspicious of the argument about her life being dependent on medication. She was a fit young woman, not chronically ill. I could remember the muscles from her upper arms from when I had helped her up that first evening, her firm handshake from later on. But then I remembered the syringe and the two ampules from her handbag, and my certainties collapsed.

Only one thing was obvious: Somebody was after her, and she had had reasons to keep her identity secret and change her place of residence often before she had coincidentally run in front of my wheels. My very first impression of her had been correct. She was an illegal, maybe a terrorist. Shreds of news, images and concepts merged to form a picture: the Traditionalists! There must be some connection between her and the group. She hadn't given me the impression that she was infected my fundamentalist religion, but she could be an apostate, hunted by both sides now.

The problem grew more and more interesting as an intellectual challenge, especially as Shultz reported an unusual observation. The video observation of my property showed the same person strolling past the house on three successive evenings, a blond young man in white leisure gear. Each time he stopped briefly in front of the janitor's apartment and the guest complex, and then continued on his way. There was only one good image of his face, complete with mustache and beard. There was something familiar about the face, and I mentally sorted through various faces of people I knew as I drove to the office. I drew only blanks.

The autopilot stopped the parking area, and my brain continued to work on the problem of the stranger. I had no choice but to continue to wait.

Later on, I heard from the agency. They had one thin piece of information: the search message in the news had not named the woman searched for, which could only mean that she lived under a false name or had different aliases. A connection to the Traditionalists was suspected. I was about to say goodbye with some meaningless platitude when a photograph appeared on the monitor and the employee told me that it had been taken shortly before her disappearance. It showed Ann next to the bearded blond man, the stranger who had walked past my security camera a few times. The more pieces I added to the puzzle, the more confusing it all became.

So I lay awake for a long time and then fell into unquiet dreams. Once I saw Ann's image from the search message, and I saw her clearly in front of me: her face, her watchful glance over her left shoulder straight into her observer's eyes.

That was replaced by another image, or rather another image merged into it: the picture of a young woman in a light-colored long coat, captured in motion by an unknown photographer. Standing with train tracks behind her as if she were on a journey – but already at her last destination. Dark hair, her high forehead free, a clear, clever face, but not Ann. Their faces were different, but both had the same watchful expression, the same look over their left shoulder into the eye of the persecutors. Uniforms, a crowd of people spilling over the tracks...

The following evening, I found a personal message on my memochip. I opened it and looked, slightly disappointed, at a map of the state of Utah. A place was marked between Hurricane and La Verkin with a date. It was, I took it, about twenty miles south of Zion national park, not far from Brian Head Alpine, where I had a house. I enlarged the cutout and read the time: Saturday, next week, nine o' clock. I knew the place to which I was evidently being invited from various short stays: an old healing place of the Paiute Indians which had later been used as a place of recreation by the Mormons and was, as I had heard, popular with other groups due to the hot springs. Who was behind the brief invitation? It was plausible that it could be Anne, but it could equally be the disciples of the true tradition. I made a snap decision and booked two nights in the hotel.

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It was already getting dark when I reached the hotel complex on Saturday evening. From Cedar City onwards I had been reluctant to rely on the satnav system. I had set the autopilot to *warn and stop* and driven with the appropriate care. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed driving again. Sometimes doing without technical aids helps us re-activate our natural skills.

Mr. Anderson, whose family had looked after the restful spot for generations, greeted me in person. 'All my guests' names are stored up here. Even the ones that don't come often.' He pointed to his head; he seemed to trust it farther here than the company computer system.

The rooms were furnished in much the same way as the ones of my first stay forty years ago – perhaps the decor had never changed. I stretched out on the bed for a few minutes. The mattresses met modern standards anyway, I noted with satisfaction, and the communication center was up-to-date. Anderson had probably checked my data here before greeting me. He couldn't know, after all, that I wasn't here to freshen up old memories, but to create the basis for new ones. Nevertheless, it had been a friendly gesture, – and in the interest of the business.

The evening meal was vegetarian. Everything was perfectly prepared and seasoned. As I ate, I sized up the other guests: various couples long out of the first flush of youth, a few hikers, no white-haired prophet, no Ann in a Syneprene suit.

Well, it was still before nine pm. And I decided to head out into the gardens. If nobody came at the appointed time, I could bathe in the hot springs.

Nobody came. Nine struck, and soon it was half nine. New guests sat in the dining room and strolled around the complex. I recognized nobody. An emotion which I would not have believed possible welled up within me, bitter disappointment. I went to my room and returned in trunks and bathrobe, went to one of the pools. Around a dozen guests were moving around in the warm mineral water, too many for my taste, and I continued on to the more sparsely lit springs. It wasn't much more tranquil there. The members of a group whose bus was parked in front of the campsite next door were splashing around in the warm water and conducting a noisy conversation.

300 feet further up there was one more spring which most of the short-term holiday makers knew nothing about, and there it was, abandoned and quiet, lit up only by the light of the full moon. The moon which I had been unaware of before coming up here! To be honest, I don't notice it often; I have better things to be doing with my time than staring into the sky. I folded my bathrobe and placed it on a shelf, shivered for a moment in the April night and then let myself slide into the warm water of the spring, which had the dimensions of a comfortable pool. I lay stretched out in the water, looking up at the moon and trying to identify the location of the international station in the Sea of Tranquility, aware of the monotonous splashing of the water and the voices of the tour group growing fainter in the distance...

'Jason,' and again: 'Jason.'

A quiet voice, gentle and feminine, a pleasant dream with sensual smells from which I don't want to wake up. I feel a slight movement in the water, a body next to mine, a whispering mouth close to my ear: 'Mr. Brandt, hurry up and wake up! Or should I call you father?'

It really is her. I must have dropped off, had been sure it was only a dream.

Now I open my eyes and there she is: sitting next to me, enveloped in the light of the moon, hugging her knees with her arms, only her kneecaps sticking up out of the water. She is wearing a swimsuit with spaghetti straps, and one of them has slipped down. Below I can the outline of her breasts, full and firm, on my estimation, and as I add to myself: neither too small nor too large.

I call my thoughts to order, but I regret for a moment all the same that we are required to keep our clothes on; many of the guests here are conservative.

'Jason, excuse me for my lack of punctuality. It wasn't possible for me to come any earlier.'

Jason? Not Mr. Brandt? We had addressed one another formally up to now, despite the adoption plans. Now she calls me by my first name, and I'm happy with that, all too happy about it! I touch her forehead with my lips, carefully:

'I've quartered myself here for two days, although I could stay for longer. Will you come back to L.A. with me after that?'

'Not yet, I'm laying a false trail at the moment. Maybe later.' Clever girl, you needn't be afraid of nosy questions. I know almost everything about the Traditionalists and that you will manage to shake them off. Even I didn't succeed in finding you.

'Do you need money?'

'You're a practical man,' she establishes in a neutral tone, 'attuned to the requirements of every situation. Yes, I do need money.'

She wasn't residing in the hotel, as I was, but in one of the rustic huts on the campsite.

'It's perfectly adequate for my needs,' she replied to my suggestion that I book a room in the hotel for her.

'Apart from that, it's safer if people don't see us as belonging together.' I was baffled. For as long as we had known one another, our relationship had been determined by a strange mixture of mistrust and inexplicable attraction. We were both intent on concealing our real motives from each other, all the while trying to discover what motivated the other. For the first time, she had uttered something which was occupying my mind under the surface, the idea that we belonged together in some way that went beyond the plan of an adoption, which was mainly inspired by business considerations. I asked myself if it had been a slip of the tongue, or if she was serious? She responded to my questioning look: 'There's a paddock with horses and stalls next to the campsite.' A pause, then: 'We should go for a ride in the morning.'

It was less a suggestion than a demand, and I was taken aback. My excuses – lack of practice, gear etc – carried little weight. Her powers of persuasion did indeed seem to trump mine.

She was already wearing boots, skin-tight jodhpurs and a check shirt when she appeared to breakfast, and she had a bundle of textile material under her arm. She reacted to my look of recognition with an inscrutable smile:

'I managed to locate some riding trousers for you. They should fit.'

The textile bundle landed on a chair next to me, almost new, clean jodhpurs, obviously from the hire stock of the riding school. My last chance to retire from the exercise with my dignity intact receded into the far distance, and I abandoned myself to my fate. The trousers were comfortable, slightly too generously cut rather than too tight, which transpired to be a disastrous disadvantage.

Ann seemed familiar with an Arabian stallion already. She stroked his mane, patted his neck and back rhythmically and leaned her face against his neck. The animal lifted his head, shook his mane, whinnying, and sank his nose into the palm of her hand, let her saddle him before she mounted him without any visible effort. Like a cat, I thought.

She had picked out a tall gelding for me, of gentle temperament, according to its owner. With a little help, I too made it into the saddle. We had a sketch showing the marked trails, and we trotted off. My black gelding, which responded to the pleasant name of Romeo, was not only quiet, but also lazy. I soon established that his laziness was paired with devious intelligence. He lagged behind

despite my cries of encouragement, plucking a herb here and a leaf there and even trying to scratch himself against a tree, which I could only hinder him from with brute force. Suddenly, just as I was beginning to worry that I would never catch up with Ann, the black devil under me broke into a canter. He burst forward with no consideration for his rider, his neck down, through low-hanging branches. I ended up hanging on to his neck, breaking every rule in the book, just to avoid falling off.

He caught up with the stallion amid much triumphant snorting, and as Ann looked us over coolly, he resumed his usual lazy gait.

'You're slightly out of practice,' she remarked, with only a touch of light sarcasm in her voice: 'Talk to him, show him who's boss.' For the next two hours, I spoke to him and showed him who was in charge, or rather, each of us tried to demonstrate just that to the other. It was a struggle among equals; cruel instruments such as bridle bits and spurs had been forbidden for decades now. I had only my superior spirit to break the will of my stubborn mount. I addressed him, sometimes softly, sometimes in a more authoritative tone, patted his neck, dug my heels into his flanks to get him to increase his pace. It was all in vain.

Our power games repeated themselves, again and again. Out of practice, as I was, I adapted to the rhythmical up and down only unsuccessfully, and my rear, unprotected through the wide trousers and their creases, was rubbed raw, and then soon covered in blisters which started to burst, one by one. Long before the end of our ride the result was clear: a victory on points for Romeo. I had to dismount when the pain became unbearable, and for the last quarter of a mile I walked, leading the animal, now well behaved, by the reins and making a huge effort not to limp.

I had been humiliated by my defeat. It was certain that the animal had been unimpressed by my superior mental strength and my commanding tone. It had ignored the insult 'Abaelard' and instinctively sensed my lack of practice. We had struggled against each other and failed to keep the communication lines open, something unfortunate which I am always able to avoid when I am negotiating contracts. I clearly lacked experience with animals, perhaps because they had no value for me above and beyond their practical functionality.

As a child, I was generally happy without a pet. Later, when the dog virus attacked humans and there were mass culls until many cities had no dogs at all and the over-anxious also put cats to sleep, the wish, if I had ever entertained one, was no longer realistic. Animals were uninteresting for me, as they were not thinking beings, although I welcome the fact that experiments with cell cultures and artificial organs have replaced most animal experiments.

Our society is humane.

Before I said goodbye to Romeo, he turned around to me and snorted into my face, his horsey breath warm and not unpleasant.

'He likes you,' said Ann. I understood nothing now; did the animal actually have a sense of humor? I spent the next few hours lying on my front after I had treated the open blisters with wound spray, an awkward process. I was not in good humor, was no longer thinking about extending my holiday and felt no desire for Ann's company. She seemed to possess a robust egoism, left me after a few friendly words of sympathy and disappeared for the entire afternoon, hiking, as the hotel manager disclosed to me.

She came into the conservatory later on, cheerful, and found me sprawled on a water bed. She poked her nose into a tropical flower for a moment, and then bent over me and the display which I was using to work through my strategy for the next meeting, and inquired:

'How are you?' I breathed her in involuntarily, sensed the almost gone traces of her perfume, mixed with the smell of the juices of a healthy body, the fresh smell of air, sun and the forest. My strategies took flight, and I replied without thinking:

'When you're here with me, I'm good.' It wasn't the answer that had lain ready for hours. She pulled over a cushion and sat down at my side, draped an arm over me loosely and said:

'Romeo taught you a lesson, didn't he?'

How could she guess at my thoughts after the power struggle I had lost, if not through an inner relationship? She didn't seem to expect an answer, turned her back on me, and observed a Monarch which had settled on the blossom. I wanted to make a remark on the imago of the varieties of butterfly, on the imagines of insects in general. In my house, an entire wall is covered

with the most splendid samples from my collection. But my gaze remained fixed on her left shoulder.

'What's that? A leopard? May I stroke him?'

'You may. But it's a jaguar, the largest and strongest of the American predatory cats.'

'You're scaring me now,' I joked, sitting up and laying a hand carefully onto predator's head, feeling the typical markings as small raw bumps. I run my hands over her shoulders, feel her taut muscles, down to the shoulder blades, her shoulder blades.

'It is the most beautiful jaguar I have ever encountered, a fantastic tattoo,' I say, with genuine conviction. 'And nobody could wear it better than you.'

Strange thoughts of painful rituals run through my head, my questions, her answers about pain, about voluntarily subjecting oneself to pain, and again and again the thought that I already know the images, that everything repeats itself and I have become irrevocably caught up in a time loop of eternal reincarnation. I see myself kissing the jaguar on her shoulder, see how the ornaments around the large cat take on a life of their own, merge with the lianas of the conservatory to form a decorated, glaring >|< before they wind themselves around me, around my neck, and strangle me. The last image: her face. Her lips were pressed firmly together, her eyes were open and looked as if she was alive. *The tip of the large iron needle had gone through her forehead.*