

USVA INTERNATIONAL 2007

FINNISH SCIENCE
FICTION AND FANTASY

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Usva is a webzine publishing Finnish speculative fiction, articles and graphics.

Cover: iStockphoto.com

Graphic design: Eija Laitinen

Layout: Anne Leinonen

Pictures and graphics: Tytti Heikkinen, iStockphoto.com: Leon Bonaventura, Aliaksandr Stsiazhyh

Photographs: Anne Leinonen, Eve Leinonen, Jyrki Sahinoja, Lillis Werder, Emrah Turudu, Stuart Pitkin

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www.usvazine.net

ISSN 1795-6242

Usva International 2007, published 20/9/2007

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Pages worth visiting:

Partial Recall

<http://partialrecall.blogspot.com/>

Tero Ykspetäjä is blogging findom: telling what's happening in Finland, where to go and what to read.

Eating muffins in an agitated manner

http://eatingmuffins.typepad.com/eating_muffins/

The blog of Jukka Halme and Sari Polvinen. Halme is the head of the Finncon 2006 committee.

Enhörningen (Swedish/ på svenska)

<http://www.enhorningen.net/>

Webmagazine edited by Ben Roimola: news and literature.

Bakeknabel

<http://www.babeknabel.fi>

A virtual place for Finnish sf-enthusiasts. Although this site is mostly in Finnish, one can post in English too.

Finnish fandom

<http://www.tsfs.fi/sffaq/>

A list of Finnish organizations, magazines.

Rising shadow

<http://en.risingshadow.net/>

Finncon

<http://www.finncon.org>

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The world of Finndom

<http://www.emcit.com/emcit109.shtml#Finland>

An article in the Emerald City by Jukka Halme

Finnish science fiction resources

<http://kotisivu.mtv3.fi/jussiv/sf/suomisf.html>

EDITORIAL

Usva ("The Mist" if you translate it) is a fanzine started in 2005. Its main goal is to publish Finnish speculative fiction in the Internet - for free. The speculative element should be understood here broadly: science fiction, fantasy, horror, surrealistic and absurd stories. Usva is doing its best to narrow down the existing gap between mainstream prose and sf/fantasy genres.

Usva publishes Finnish literature - in Finnish. But because Internet is making publishing more and more easy, English issues became very obvious choice to present Finnish speculative short stories for readers worldwide.

In this issue 2007 there are examples from seven talented Finnish authors. Most of them are among the "new wave" of Finnish authors who have made their breakthrough around year 2000.

Enjoy the Finnish way of the weird!

Anne Leinonen, editor-in-chief



Photo: Eve Leinonen

FINNISH SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY AWARDS

The Portti ("Gateway") writing competition is the largest competition for science fiction and fantasy short stories in Finland. The first prize is 2000 euros. The competition is organized by Tampere Science Fiction Society. In the previous years, the winners of the competition have included Pasi Jääskeläinen, Markku Soikkeli, Anne Leinonen, Tero Niemi and Anne Salminen.

Nova is a writing competition aimed especially for starting writers. Its aim is to bring new names into the field of writing. The competition is organized by the Finnish Science Fiction Writers Association and Turku Science Fiction Society. Previous winners of Nova include Mari Saario (2), Katja Salminen and Natalia Laurila

Atorox is the Finnish Hugo and it is yearly awarded to the best Finnish science fiction or fantasy short story. Previous winners of Atorox include Johanna Sinisalo (7), Pasi Jääskeläinen (3), Anne Leinonen (2) as well as Tero Niemi and Anne Salminen (2).

The Tähtivaeltaja ("Star Rover") award is given to the best science fiction book published in Finnish. It is awarded by the Helsinki Science Fiction Society. The previous winners include M. John Harrison and J.G. Ballard. Finnish authors have won the award twice: Pasi Jääskeläinen and Risto Isomäki. In 2007 the Tähtivaeltaja-award was joined by Tähtifantasia ("Star Fantasy") award for the best translated fantasy book published in Finland. The first winner of Tähtifantasia award was Jeff VanderMeer for his novel "The City of Saints and Madmen".

Kuvastaja ("Mirrormere") is an award for the best Finnish fantasy novel. It is awarded by the Finnish Tolkien society and the previous winners include Sari Peltoniemi and Ilkka Auer.

LOOKING FOR LAUREL

by Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen,
translation: Liisa Rantalaiho



Did I talk in my sleep again? And of Laurel? Yes, I understand you are beginning to be a little curious. But what could I tell you about him, except that he is a mystery to all who thought they knew him. And a big secret – as in fact I myself, can you imagine? Yes, we all have our pasts. And wornout wrecks such as myself rather like to relive their pasts, especially in their dreams. Whatever kind of ordeal it was. You see, finally life always gets up and wrings our neck like a chicken's, grunts! And afterwards we tend mostly to stare back to where ever we came from.

Is that by any chance my dinner you have on the tray there? That's what I thought. A steaming plateful of St Sebulon's stew, unless I'm badly mistaken.

(In my old age I've become a real dormouse; my eyes just droop shut and immediately I'm heavily asleep, again looking for Laurel...)

They say traveling broadens your view, but I don't know about that.

I've been looking for Laurel in nearly every city of the world and met precious little except ruins, empty rooms and myself, always lost, abandoned and done for. Palermo. Rome. Florence, Christ City, Paris, Milan – on their endless streets I tread my time that is running out; the obscure clues that Laurel habitually leaves behind makes my migraine to get meaner and meaner, and when I buy a headache powder I always buy a newspaper, too, to read what Laurel has again done to deprive me, the Pope and the whole creation of our night's sleep.

(The Times, 12.6.1995: STRANGE ACCIDENTS CONTINUE – THE CATHEDRAL OF SAINT SEBULON EXPLODED! 1000 CHOIR BOYS PERISHED IN THE RUINS! IS THIS GOD'S PUNISHMENT? SEE INSIDE FOR AN INTERVIEW OF LEADING THEOLOGICIANS!)

Of course the papers never mention Laurel. He's a

secret. It's in the Church's interests to keep silent about the renegade bishop, neither does Laurel himself ask for publicity.

I'm on his trail, sometimes closer, sometimes farther off, and at times I feel that he would hear if I called out his name. But so far he has always managed to stay a step or two ahead of me. I enter empty rooms where the atmosphere of his presence still remains; he has left them for good, but at the closest only a couple of minutes before my arrival.

London, spring 1983; a cold drizzle sucks the last colors out of the greying cityscape. After getting out of the 14.23 train just in time to witness the destruction of St Paul's Cathedral, I ride the jolting city train to an address where, according to my information, a man corresponding to the description of Laurel currently resides.

I kick the door open and almost shoot the woman who is cleaning the dark little room. She glances at me quickly from under her shawl and says: – If you are looking for the gentleman who lived in this room, you are late, sir.

Monsieur Lerual left this morning, actually just a couple of hours ago. – A couple of hours ago, I mutter. I lift my hands in sign of surrender and flop exhausted into a rickety chair, the dark thunderclouds of a migraine already rumbling faintly on the horizon of my consciousness. Clues, again only more clues. The woman stands in front of the window, slender and delicate and in her own special way peculiarly graceful, and she watches me with amusement. – You obviously would have been really eager to meet Monsieur Lerual, she states sympathetically and giggles a little.

Monsieur Lerual indeed... In the rearmost lobes of my poor head a numbing steam engine of pain starts to pound, and I cannot prevent letting out a sigh full of self-pity.

– Dear madam, if you would kindly answer a few questions...
– Well by all means, she promises. – And of course with tea and St Hannah's cookies, mr...?

I mention a name that is not mine.

She nods. – Mr. Pie. (She tastes the name and seems even more amused.) – If you could bear to wait a little moment, I'll go and get us a bite. And a headache powder, for if you'll allow me to say so, you look rather ill.

As soon as the lady has left, I start examining the room. I look under the furniture (and the steam engine pounding off in my skull really gets going) and I leaf through the books on the bookshelf and the papers and magazines in the basket.

Thinking of the lady makes me smile. In her own special way she is rather charming, but the noble art of dressing seems not to be one of her gifts. Her shawl had looked strikingly like a shabby tablecloth, and the grey skirt reminded me of an old dusty blanket. The lady is obviously a woman of principle, strongly against all kinds of frivolity, and has decided to hide her scanty feminine charms from the intrusive looks of the outside world. And her voice – not exactly a tinkle of small bells!

I crawl on the floor on all fours and giggle to myself, thinking over the riddle of the lady's peculiar manner, and it takes about half an hour before I suddenly get the revelation that the promised tea and cookies will never arrive.

The steam kettle explodes in my head and migraine attacks in full force. Holding my head and moaning with pain I go to seek the "lady", and in the kitchen I find a ruddy-faced man who tells me he is the innkeeper and a widower for over two years. And no, the lady I describe is not in his service. He has no other servants except a male cook, who himself is currently on his statutory pilgrimage in Christ City. But would you like some sauce, sir? Or what about a headache powder, since the gentleman looks a little ill?)

Ten years ago I left for this mission, and now I find myself on a crisscrossing one-man package tour from one ruined sight to another. For ever and ever, amen and the Sign of The Chair. Sometimes everything seems to dissolve in my hands, just like the sculptured icecream goose that I tried to smuggle from the dining hall into my room on a New Year's eve in a Viennese hotel. Only food can banish the feelings of unreality which appear in the moments of exhaustion, and prevent me from definitively losing myself. The method has its disadvantages. But it's better to be a little, eh, well-curved than in a straightjacket, I think.

Even when I now and then succumb to gorging the bittersweet cream cake of despair, I do not believe that Laurel can endlessly escape me. There is an unbreakable bond

between us, which prevents us from losing each other and always finally brings us together. For years I have neither seen Laurel nor spoken with him, and I haven't the slightest wish to start guessing which cog in his cuckoo-clockwise skull has slipped since we saw each other last, but may the Creator be my witness, when I swear that the bond between us is strong, perhaps stronger than ever, and I'm right at his heels.

The seeker findeth, it says in the Emperor's Proclamations. In everyone's life, I think, there comes a moment when the person finds himself in his life's nadir, towards which all the earlier events, large and small, have secretly pointed like signposts erected by Destiny (by God? Devil? Chance?) and after which nothing continues, not like before anyway. Doesn't the real nature of death hide in exactly these moments rather than in the technical end of life, which is mostly rather undramatic and trite?

I found Laurel at last, and he could no longer escape. He was hiding in a little filthy room, sick, alone and powerless, mad as a mendicant's dog. His image is engraved in my brain: lying on a mattress shared by a whole society of vermin, sunken lower than an animal and twisted to a travesty of man. The chase had worn me out, but him it had nearly killed.

So let's start from the preknowledge that in the end I find Laurel, and at the moment of his end he is indisputably mad, in the delusionary sense of the word.

– **Do you think** of him often?

The Pope's seemingly innocent question makes me think of high-grown grass that hides a tigerful of hungry flesh. The coldness of the Sistine Chapel has penetrated my clothing and my flesh and is now gnawing at my bones. I miss my monastery, my roses and my regular penances, which have let me achieve a peace of mind as far as that is possible for me.

But one cannot refuse the Pope's summons. Thousands of quick thoughts dash to-and-fro in my head like frightened birds and from among them the dark shape of insight steps out – a tiger. When I look into its golden eyes I tremble.

(– Do you think of him often? the Pope asks again.)

Then I wake up. A dark shape is bending over me, a big raven. – Is everything all right with us? the raven asks. I blink my eyes and the raven is a nun, Sister Sugarlump, as I like to call her. She holds in her delicate little hands a tray, my breakfast. Or is it evening now? There's a starved sickle of a moon visible in the window. Then it must be evening meal on the tray. Tea and St Hannah's cookies, I presume.

Sister Sugarlump reminds me a bit of Anna. She has a well-shaped smiling mouth I'd like to kiss. Of course even a thought of that is a sin, but I'm old, tired and confused and there are too many deadly sins on my conscience for me to care about the smaller sins – that is when I'm able to remember them. (Which gets less and less frequent nowadays, thank God for small favors.)

– Everything all right? I answer. – Why not. All discussions have been discussed. Everything has already happened. I am an old ass sizzling of old age, fizzling in my skin, my present and my future shards of a broken past. Oh, everything happens again and again, did you know that? My time is broken to pieces. You know what, Sister Sugarlump? I –

I'd like to say something about her pretty pouting lips, but luckily the words crumble in my mouth before I have time to embarrass myself further.

I know I'm an old barrelbelly teetering between pathos and affectation and getting on everybody's nerves when awake, so...

Back to sleep.

I may sound grandiloquent now and then. The pathos is conceived and justified by old age, dead friends and the experience of ending, so I'm not going to apologize for it.

– **You are the only person** who can say he knows bishop Laurel, Pope Ignaz stated. – We others thought we knew him, but the latest events have indeed freed us from such irrational illusions. Our little bishop has really managed to surprise us all.

The Pope's forehead wrinkled deeply, and suddenly his hair and face looked several degrees greyer than a moment ago. I smiled uneasily and played with my violet tie with the picture of St Sebulon's slaughter. – I have not met him in forty years, your Holiness. I don't quite believe that one can say –

– You last met each other five years ago. The bishop was leaving for the Edge, and you – The Pope fell silent, grasped his high headpiece with both hands and began to straighten it with a look of extreme concentration. I correctly looked at the floor. It isn't proper to speak aloud about some things, so it's better to pass over them in silence.

When I met Laurel in the train I had been returning from Jerusalem, where a scandalous incident had occurred. That is to say, the theologian Agrippus Smith, who'd been eroding old truths with his wild speculations, had met with a violent end while he was lecturing at the university of Jerusalem. Three bullets from a close range, one in the head and two in the chest. According to the press, obviously the act of a Moslem fanatic, although there were some misguided eyewitnesses to say the bullets had been shot by "a stoutish

white man".

– We had a cup of bland tea in his private carriage and discussed for five minutes the tea we were drinking, I explained tiredly. – It happened to taste of the sewage the monks used to force us to drink at school. You see, that was one of their ways to punish us. Old school fellows rarely have anything else to talk about besides the trivialities of their school days – actually it's rather tactless to really start a discussion with an old school mate, if you see what I mean, oh Holy Father.

– Come on, my son, the Pope sighed, – don't bother to talk me any more about "old school fellows". I have my sources. We both know there was something much more, well, special between you two.

He paused for a moment and smiled strangely. – You know better than any other person in this world the way he thinks and what makes him tick.

Then the Pope conjured on his worn face the gentle smile so beloved by the press, the movie photographers and the public, and suddenly I was facing a patient, loving father, compassion-become-flesh himself. Seen up close the impression suffered a little, but still I felt a great need to fall for the illusion.

– I'm afraid, the Pope whispered and cast his watery eyes upwards, – that the Church and God once again have to test your faith.

Feeling dizzy I took a fumbling step backward and glanced up myself, towards the Pope's gaze. Through tears I could discern David striking off Goliath's head in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Numbly I received the short blessing the Pope served me instead of smelling salts and a headache powder: the thin fingers drew in the air in front of my forehead The Chair that Christ Emperor had left empty when he went away to the Edge of the world to seek his lost Father, and the thin lips of the old man formed a few indistinct Hebrew words.

My eyes hit the Last Judgment painted on the chapel's gable wall. I blew my nose in the silken handkerchief I had dug up, and the chapel echoed with an amazingly authentic-sounding bugle blast that reminded me of my day at the Henry Ford trumpet factory.

The Holy Father smiled sadly (the smile was now genuine) and said in a soft voice the words which refuse to ever leave me.

There are times when the tragic sense of destiny feels almost unbearable, Laurel said once when he was seven years old, and now the meaning of that sentence dawned on me with an unforeseen clarity.

– You had a bad dream, a voice whispers. A cool hand touches my forehead. – The whole ward woke up when you

cried. Is there something on your heart? Would you wish to confess?

Sweat drips on my skin like congealed dew. Somewhere in the depths of my decaying carcass a tired heart flutters like a frightened bird that wants to fly out of its pressing cage of ribs.

– Sister Sugarlump? I whisper, and she affirms it in her soft alto voice and no longer even tries to teach me her proper name. I love her for that.

– Would you hold my hand for a while? I finally manage to ask, and let out a slightly embarrassed giggle. I bury the nun's slender little hand in my paws, close my eyes and drift yet for a while back to where I came from.

– Blessed are the ones who lose their soul for the name of God, says Ignaz, now passed away, and winks at me with a melancholy grin.

In the end I find Laurel. And I call that moment The End, even though my life officially continues after that. It's a question about the definition of the word "end": that is a moment when all past issues and events either gain or lose their meaning.

I have experienced my personal end and am suddenly able to perceive my life crystal clear. I see the mainstream of events, the branches from the river and the tiny brooks, the meaningless sidelines. And they form a pattern that may have something to do with the phenomenon called "Fate", if you'll allow my characterization for want of a better definition and a fuller understanding.

My end is not identical with the technical moment of my death, neither has my beginning anything to do with my exit from the womb. My personal calendar begins from the moment Laurel arrives in the St Sebulon's Orphanage School with the manners of a young king.

My whole existence up to that moment had been the dull torpor of a fat child curled up in himself, but on that cool autumn day, when a capricious wind kept plucking red-and-yellow leaves from the courtyard maples and throwing them at the thick classroom windows, I felt like the holy Beauty of the fairytale who awakens from her century of deathly sleep when the Pilgrim arrives.

The events outside our school reached our ears in faint echoes only, and therefore felt rather unreal and distant:

Riots broke out with regular intervals at the Edge of the world populated by the Moslems.

A heretic called Lee Harvey Oswald shot the popular Pope John X (I remember Father Casper rushing to the class on creationwork to tell about it, his face white as snow). The next Pope started again the crusades to the Edge to find the

mythical body of Emperor Christ.

After a relatively long theoretical unanimity, theological controversies over God's essence and intentions started again. A school of thought – later pronounced heretical – caused sensation and anger with their thesis that God's original intention would have been to let Christ die on the cross. The Church rejected the thesis, asking rationally how the Empire of Christ could ever have been founded, if the uprising led by Christ and accompanied by miracles would never have taken place.

Underground sects that declared God had forsaken the world of his creation also arose, trying to catch His attention with the most peculiar ways, and others, too, that insisted Lucifer, the Fallen Angel, actually had won his war with God and given Him the final blow.

Howsoever, most of the arguments were too abstract, hairsplitting, sophistic, out-of-the-way speculative and fond of technical details to arouse real interest anywhere else than among the bored theological intelligentsia – and in the dormitories of St Sebulon's School after the lights had gone out.

– **How could God** abandon the world he has created? What kind of a father could abandon his children?

– Fuck you, Rainer. Your parents may have died of a disease your honored father got from a third class whorehouse, but I was simply abandoned. They said my old lady left with a dickdangling monk a little after my birth. Daddy managed to take care of me for five long years and then he disappeared, too. Somebody said he had joined the Lepers of Paris, but I don't know about that. Anyway I would have had some use for him, but who'd care shit about me. Fatherly love is very transitory, and when it's the question of so malformed a child as mankind, I shouldn't wonder if God decided to find something new to occupy His eternity.

– This may come as a surprise to you, dearest Filippus, but your father can hardly be compared to God.

– Take your teeny-weeny willie in your pretty little hand, Laurel, and you'll see what you can be compared with.

– Perhaps God is not so much a father as a creative artist. Perhaps He does not see us as His children but as a picture He drew. And perhaps we are an unsuccessful picture which He'll crumple up and throw away to go and draw a new and better one.

– And perhaps you have wet rat shit in your brain, Teophilus.

– Judging by the smell you have an elephant's wet shits in your pants, Smith-Jonesy.

– Brother dear, the smell intrudes in my nostrils, too,

but in my pants, I can assure you, there's nothing but my thoroughly rubbed-up prick. The source of the smell is probably a meter above me, where as it happens we also find the tightly rumbling brown hole of the good Filippus.

– Filippus, you piss–arse fartbag!

– Filippus, you should be crumpled up and thrown away!

– Suck the holy pendulum of Father Francis, young ladies. I'm creating a gaseous world!

– Shut up, the warden is coming and we'll all have to drink sewage again, I warned when I heard the steps outside the dormitory, but it was too late, for the lights came on in the same moment and we saw at the door Father Casper, who was officiating as warden, and the tin bucket in his hand.

– We were discussing theology, weren't we, Laurel? I tried ingeniously, and we two got to drink first from the bucket.

We were not friends at first sight, Laurel and I. In the company of each other we were – if anything – reserved and uneasy, although we both undoubtedly felt from the beginning the existence of that peculiar bond which unites arch enemies, eternal lovers and other connected souls. We did not seem to have much in common, except that neither of us really felt like belonging to the noisy, narrowminded, and intellectually petty community of the school. I was too fat, clumsy and sensitive to be accepted, and Laurel felt too much intellectual superiority to really even wish to adapt to the mediocrities around himself.

I started keeping my eye on Laurel as soon as he arrived, and I waited for a suitable moment to get acquainted. I did not want to look like the overeager fool I felt myself. He was interesting, but ultimately I didn't really know what to think about him. He was a dreamy and serious child, full of holy and honorable and pompous intentions. That simultaneously both irritated and excited me. Among his other exercises he devoured the hagiographies he found in the school library and I saw the disquietingly intense glow in his eyes.

There, I suddenly had the revelation, there was the boy who in his time would get his picture on the school's chapel wall, where the saints were looking down at the pupils with a glorified visage and melancholy eyes staring at the darkness of the world.

I did everything I could to stop him. I sneered at the saints, at the great church dignitaries and at everything he admired. I slipped the grist of banal platitudes, tactless remarks, obscenities and heretic comments into the mill of his pious and lofty thoughts. I cultivated sarcasm with the fervour of a mad farmer and tired him out with the torrent of my nihilistic nagging.

At first his attitude towards me was solemnly patient, the way we have been taught the saints behave, but finally, when

I was nearly ready to give it up and to withdraw back into my lonely self-sufficient individualism, I saw a chink in his noble armour and realized that I was close to a triumphant victory.

Sorry, I must have dozed off again. Nowadays I find it extremely hard to stay awake. I keep falling asleep in my wheelchair on the sanatorium's terrace, in the corridors, and even at the dinner table – yesterday I had to dig a portion of chicken salad from my tattered ear, can you imagine?

The buzz in the lounge irritates me, but sometimes one may catch interesting pieces of conversation here. Palermo? Did somebody talk about Palermo? You there by the chess board? I've been there. That's where it all began. Actually I ought not to talk about it, but when the Pope had sent me chasing after Laurel, I journeyed in a steam ship to Palermo, where Laurel was supposed to stay.

There was going to be the annual procession for God's glory in Palermo: colorful dresses, images and puppets of saints, fireworks, torches and glorious polyphonal choir songs that ordinary people spent months learning to sing. The processions were usually filmed and shown all over the world as opening bits in movie theatres.

I had two days to look for Laurel and to find out what exactly he had in mind. But the time was not enough: in spite of all precautionary measures the procession blew up taking a big crowd of spectators with it. Myself I lost a piece off my left ear in the explosion. There's a section of film in the Vatican archives where I hold my wounded head and shake it looking dumbfounded. I often have a dream about the moment where I look straight into the camera and wrinkle up my forehead just as if the firestorm eating people behind me were nothing but a little practical joke intended for me.

To my mild astonishment the famous mosaic chapel of the Norman castle, Capella Palatina, that had been the Pope's chief worry, was still standing after Laurel left.

I followed Laurel's trail to Rio de Janeiro. The first failure had cut me to the quick, and to tell the truth, I was getting rather angry with Laurel, which of course is a cardinal mistake in trailing. From the first newsstand I bought a paper with an article of the statue of Christ Emperor suddenly crumbling. I had to climb to the top of Corcovado to look at the pieces, before I really could believe it had actually happened.

I found out Laurel had headed from Rio de Janeiro directly for Milan, and when I arrived there I met the 130 peaks and 2300 statues of the Milan Cathedral in marble

ruins. An old lady who had witnessed the collapse of the magnificent building, told she had seen a man looking like Laurel coming out from the church a little before it was destroyed. – The gentleman was babbling some kind of rhyme to himself, the sobbing woman commented to me. – Our church! Our beautiful church! Look at it now! Where shall I now go to light a candle for Virgin Mary? Where shall I now pray for my son who died on the Edge?

The woman whimpered like a stray dog that's eaten barbed wire. I looked alternately at a pretty picture card of the Milan Cathedral and at the ruins, and swallowed tears myself. If you've ever seen even a picture of the late Milan Cathedral, you'll understand the enormity of Laurel's crime in its proper scale.

I stayed in the city to scrape together some information about Laurel and to give my nerves some rest. The last time I had been that close to a final breakdown was when I had been obliged to work much too long in the Henry Ford trumpet factory in Sevilla for a contract. I visited the Teatro della Scala to enjoy the opera, I saw Leonardo's "Strategic Meeting" in the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, I ate strawberries with cream in a nice little tavern, and considered a suitable strategy to catch Laurel.

Then I received a telegram from my contact in Palermo, and according to him a couple of days after my departure, the Capella Palatina had without a visible cause collapsed over a group of foreign church dignitaries. In frustration I cried aloud, which probably attracted unfortunate attention among the people gathered in the hotel lobby.

The next night I had one of the strangest dreams I've ever seen.

Laurel and I were standing on the ruins of a strange cathedral leaning on a piano. It had been our intention to move the piano up the cathedral stairs for mass, but when I came back from fetching a rope, Laurel had succeeded in collapsing the whole cathedral. He was passing his fingers through his hair with an idiotic grin on his face. I pushed Laurel and yelled: – Now look what you've done again! Are you happy now? – He looked confused, spread out his arms and finally burst to tears like a little child, offering silly explanations.

The whole time somewhere from the background insane giggling and bursts of laughter were carried to my ears, but although I looked around with increasing irritation, I saw no one. (I don't attach great importance to dreams, but let this be a warning example of the consequences chronic stress may have for the depths of our mental life.)

The destruction went on. I followed Laurel's trail all across Europe, and after searching for him for two and a half years I ended up in Paris, where, for the second time during the chase, I managed to see him with my own eyes.

I also almost managed to lose my dear life in the clutches of the darkness following him.

The Pope's movie theatre was cold and dark as a snowman's grave. I felt uncomfortable, awkward and embarrassed: the chairs had not been designed for a man my size, and judging from the sounds, my seat's structures were breaking.

– The film you'll see has been taken a year ago. Bishop Laurel is there starting his second journey to the Edge of the world. You see, on his first trip he got this naïve idealistic idea of converting the Moslem fanatics to Christianity. He said that butchering Moslems could not be God's will, and he wanted instead to reason with them and guide them to the true faith with gentleness. Rather an ambitious idea, to baptize the Edge Moslems!

– But bishop Laurel has never lacked ambition. I was stupid enough to give him my blessing. And why shouldn't I? What would be the worst that could happen? That the Church got one more dead saint? There can never be too many martyrs. Nothing appeals to the religious feelings of the ordinary middle class person more than an impressive martyr's death. The churches and the offertory bags fill up, and people feel the need to make sacrifices themselves in one way or another. Most would rather give up their money than their life. And economic sacrifices is just what we need from the Christian people, so that the Reaching-Up-To-Heavens may go on.

– That's how I reasoned. The whole business looks remarkably like a mistake, but since I'm infallible, it would of course be a big mistake to talk about mistakes. Instrutable are the ways of the Lord, may He be praised.

It was quiet, and I wondered whether the Pope sitting invisible at a distance of a couple of rows might have become embarrassed for his talk. Along the years he was becoming more and more sarcastic, which wasn't doing any good for his public image.

The projector started and a black-and-white view of the St Peter's Square appeared on the screen. Laurel is shaking hands with the Pope on the balcony. People applaud. The brass band blows its instruments with darkened faces.

– As you certainly notice, the Pope commented, – the movie lacks sound. My technicians aren't able to construct a projector that would function without a hitch longer than a couple of minutes. "It ought to work", they say, "everything is as it should be". Holy Heavens! As if the fault were in the physical laws they try to apply. Same thing with the whole new technology. The radio station still has difficulties that ought to have been solved twenty years ago already, and unless my printing machines stop acting up, tomorrow's L'Osservatore Romano will not be published.

Quite provoking, I'd say. –

Now the movie shifted to the railway station. Laurel and a group of ecclesiastical dignitaries arrive on the scene on bicycles. Ceremonial handshaking follows. Laurel boards the train and waves at the camera smiling like any energetic, successful, dedicated man.

– The next bit has been filmed on the Edge of the world. There bishop Laurel goes about the Moslem camps distributing food and sweets. As you see, he seems to be having long conversations with the unbelievers. Soon after this filming the bishop left with a small retinue still deeper towards the Edge on cross-country bikes. He never returned. A couple of the members of his party were found wandering around the desert in a pretty weak condition, but they died before they had time to tell anything sensible. Bishop Laurel instead –

The projector whined, and the darkness returned.

– And there goes the picture, too, the Pope muttered.

– Yes, bishop Laurel was of course presumed to have died a martyr, and his canonization was under way. I was writing him an inspiring obituary full of rhetorical eloquence into the *L'Osservatore*, when he suddenly appeared in my study like a ghost.

The Pope sighed deeply. – For a while he talked incoherently, and then he tried to murder me. Luckily the security guards heard the noise and showed up, while Laurel escaped. Then I heard the rumble. It came from the St Peter's: the dome collapsed and killed a representative selection of cardinals and some other fairly essential persons. After some time I received a letter from Laurel, where he apologized in beautiful phrases for what he had done, and for what he was going to do. According to the letter he had no alternatives. He added his regrets, saying he couldn't help that those who'd try to stop him would inevitably be destroyed.

The collapse of the Notre Dame in Paris was an extraordinarily traumatic experience for the whole city. Its planners had wanted to create a building that captures the onlooker's eyes upwards, towards heaven and God. That finger pointing to heaven now existed only in the postcards of the souvenir stands, and the skies looming above Paris felt farther away than ever.

I hid for days on end in my room, which I had taken in a homely inn by the Seine, and watched over and over again the destruction of Notre Dame on a substandard film which a tourist had accidentally managed to shoot and the Pope's men to confiscate. I continued to watch obsessively, not remembering to eat or drink, and would probably have dropped off from exhaustion unless the little projector I had

rented had not finally caught fire.

The film is etched in my mind to the last horrible detail.

The beginning is happy and unsuspecting. At the front a pretty blond woman dressed in a silken blazer and two little girls dressed like dolls are posing, cheerful and stupid like papillons – the cameraman's family. Waving, kisses blown, coquetry, soundless words (sound was missing from this film, too – according to the man, the camera had been riddled with all kinds of faults from the day he bought it). In the background the massive stone walls of the cathedral rise up, seen from the western gable. Large crowds of pilgrims are missing, because it's still rather early in the morning. Here and there the film is irritatingly fuzzy, since for some incomprehensible reason it's been shot against the sun rising from behind the cathedral, contrary to all photography manuals, but I thought I could identify one of the figures moving in the background as Laurel.

The cameraman forgets himself for an agonizingly long while in sweet idle portrait studies of his wife and doll-children, and when the picture finally turns back to the church, one can see Laurel (if it is Laurel) standing quite close to the cathedral's middle door. He touches the wall on different points, feels the statues guarding the entrance with his hands, struts back and forth like a pigeon seeking corn and then suddenly leaves and walks out of the picture.

At this point, the photographer told he heard rumbling, and realized that something is happening. The camera makes a restless swing, shoots for a while insects crawling in the dust, and then starts, trembling, to record the beginning destruction.

The first to fall is a pointed tower. Big chunks fall down and the ground coughs dust and seems to be smoking. Then the flying buttresses break, one after the other. The rose window explodes in fragments, giving birth to a shortlived glass rainbow which the rays of the rising sun touch with wonder. The whole cathedral seems to be shaking as if suffering from a fever that attacks buildings, and the stone walls and pillars start to crumble down as if it had all been built out of dry sand.

The exploding stone blocks bombard the street. Of the collapsing cathedral people dash out, shouting without sound and waving their hands – architects on a pilgrimage, theologians and ordinary Christians. Some get crushed by a falling stone and they flounder and wriggle like little frogs at creationwork lesson, others cannot stop running even when they reach a safe distance from the rain of stone.

And finally the last sky-kissing structures of the Notre Dame of Paris sigh down in the dusty embrace of the ground. The human victims appear yet at this stage as insignificant as insects compared to the greater loss that almost surpasses understanding. The survivors return to the

ruins in wonder, shaking their heads, not believing their eyes; only later would come the time to weep for the dead.

At last I left my room. I quarrelled with the landlord about the broken projector and tried to console myself in the inn's parlour with a drop of wine and a morsel of food, although the newspapers I read took care that I would not forget the destruction of the Notre Dame for a second.

ALREADY 97 BODIES FOUND IN THE RUINS OF NOTRE DAME. ARE MOSLEM FANATICS RESPONSIBLE FOR MYSTERIOUS DESTRUCTION OF CATHEDRALS? IS THE WRATH OF GOD FALLING ON US? THEOLOGICAL ERROR BEHIND THE DESTRUCTION OF NOTRE DAME? HAS GOD CRASHED DOWN THE CHURCH BECAUSE OF HERETICS? A PROFET FORETOLD THE DESTRUCTION! READ ALL ON CATHEDRAL DISASTERS ALL OVER THE WORLD!

— Laurel, Laurel.

I shook my head tiredly and put the newspaper down. I felt vaguely uneasy and couldn't concentrate on the paper.

On the other side of the tavern, around a smoky window table a group of men were listening on a theological debate in the radio with utmost concentration. I looked at their grave countenances and was amused, I expected most of the intellectual fine points of the argumentation would be beyond their understanding. They were obvious couch theologicians who only understood a part of what the debaters were saying, but they enjoyed the intense atmosphere of the discussion and were betting on the winner.

— I don't believe that, said the first debater, and the men booed. — Not one preserved text mentions anything like that, and no theologian has ever been able to prove it. Actually I —

— Why couldn't God change His mind? the other debater intervened. — Prayer is considered a kind of possibility of influence for the ordinary person, which would be completely absurd unless God could in principle change His mind. To pray to a God who never changes His mind would be nothing but rhetoric.

The men were muttering their approval and clinking their mugs. I smiled at their enthusiasm; then I looked beyond them, at the window, and gave a violent start.

— **The meeting of old friends**, Laurel said to me once in the courtyard of St Sebulons' School, — may at its worst be very much like a graveyard suddenly hit by gunfire.

I can't imagine what a seven year old schoolboy could know about meeting old friends, but as usual Laurel got to the gist.

Behind the tavern's window stood a greyclad scarecrow,

an apparition that was pressing its face flat to the windowglass like a white mask. The apparition stared at me, had been staring for who knew how long. Deep within the desolation of the shady eyes a faint glimmer of recognition was glowing.

— Laurel, I whispered, and his face withdrew from the glass and disappeared as if everything had been just a dream.

The men listening to the debate were applauding and ordering more beer. Unable to move I stared at the stain left in the windowglass, evidence of really having seen Laurel's face in the window.

Eternity was ticking by me before I could wrench my bum off the chair and rush out, where I saw a dowdy grey form sprinting like a rabbit up the overcrowded street. Behind me in the tavern the men were cheering, when the second debater announced that God most probably changed His mind a billion times per second. I drew a deep breath, fought against dizziness and started to lumber with quickening steps after Laurel.

WELCOME TO PARIS! Among the many sights of our city one of the most famous are the SOUL—INSPIRING PARIS LEPERS. They include people from all social classes. THE LEPERS OF PARIS portray in an exemplary way ABSTINENCE and CONTEMPT towards WORLDLY MATERIALISM. The members of the group have been infected with leprosy on a pilgrimage to the TOWN OF THE MISERABLES on the Edge. They return among us to preach their elevating gospel of RENUNCIATION, HOLY AFFLICTION AND THE NOBLE CLOAK OF SUFFERING which they have voluntarily taken on their shoulders. The disease of the PARIS LEPERS is no more in a contagious phase, and every one may, for a small consideration, pick for themselves a SOUVENIR or an UPLIFTING PRESENT, a finger, toe or any other body part which a PARIS LEPPER deems he can give up. Alongside the Eiffel Tower, the PARIS LEPERS are surely the... (From a tourist brochure distributed in trains)

I ran and upset vegetable carts, stalls, old people, children, beggars, clerics and a whole brass band, and suddenly in front of me there was some kind of a procession; I heard the warning tinkle of a bell, and before I had time to even think of anything, my field of vision was filled with tattered colorless cloaks, uplifted fingerless stumps and scared deformed faces missing kilogrammes of noses, lips, eyes and flesh — THE FAMOUS LEPERS OF PARIS, SIL VOUS PLATES! as the brochure proudly proclaimed. I realized that nothing but the intervention of

the Almighty Himself could now prevent a collision.

I rushed into the procession declaring Renunciation and Holy Affliction, heavy and inevitable like a derailed train. I howled from horror and disgust. Crackles, snaps, whimpers, pops and rasps were mixed in my helpless howl. With a supernatural leap I tried to jump over the lepers fallen in front of me but my feet were caught in something, and still hopelessly howling I realized that I was falling towards several horrified rotting faces.

– I beg your pardon, I breathed and tried to push myself up as soon as possible. My hands sunk into the brittle grey wasps' nest of a chest that was writhing underneath me, and black teeth showing in the lipless mouth snapped together when the soul departed the flesh it had renounced. – I'm really very very sorry, I sighed hollowly, close to fainting, and crushed more flesh representing different degrees of rotting, while I tried to crawl out of the fallen circle of lepers.

– Never mind, dear friend, somebody from the heap answered without a trace of sarcasm. You were crushing flesh only. Flesh is not important. Only the soul is. God bless you!

– Same to you, thanks, I wished him and tried to stand up.

Then my ankle was seized with terrible force. Something sharp and filthy sunk into my flesh in several points, deep, into the bone, and I cried nearly fainting from pain and fear.

– Let him go, croaked a voice like the rustle of dead leaves.
– Let him complete what he is doing. Do not try to prevent him. Let the darkness come.

I cannot describe the effect the words had on me. My heart pumping ice water, I turned to look at the speaker in the eyes, but I had already wrenched myself free and run at least a couple of blocks from the Paris Lepers I had smashed.

I stood blinking and panting in the middle of a typical Parisian street scene: clerics, vendors, tourists and beggars. Rattling bicycles threading their way between each other. A rambling brass band in colorful attire – toot-toot-to-toot! and tra-ta-ta-ta! Debates, discussions, quarrels, the mumble of professional prayers (– For a coin I'll read a prayer for you, sir, just say what you want from God). A crowd of prophets with furrowed brows walked quickly down the street, beards flapping. The city train was banging and coughing past somewhere back, judging by the noise it wouldn't get farther than a couple of blocks before an engine breakdown. Shouts and yells: a swarm of ragged children were dashing after a wild rabbit, steps winged by hunger. The street was lined with decorative, ugly-beautiful buildings, which once on a time had belonged to the highest clerics, but whose present inhabitants would get their just rewards only in the Last Judgment. Advertising boards were hanging on the

walls: REACHING-UP-TO-HEAVENS – GIVE YOUR MITE AND WIN ABSOLUTION FROM THE POPE! COCA COLA REFRESHES YOUR IMMORTAL SOUL! PHILIPS' GRAMOPHONES – THEY WORK ALMOST ALL THE TIME! Over the roofs and the weathered decorative arches, winds were pushing ahead heavy granite-grey boulders of cloud, in the sky pierced by the darting of insect-preying black birds.

No lepers, no tinkle of the lepers' bell – the whole collision now felt rather unreal, like a dream.

It wasn't a dream, however, proof of the imaginary sharp-toothed beastie gnawing my left ankle; my ankle was hurting more and more all the time, and I couldn't help thinking about contagious diseases, gangrenous infections and the aesthetics of falling flesh. I mooched around the streets here and there, having lost my sense of direction and Laurel, and almost tumbled over out of fright when an old wreck of a pigeon flew up in front of me. I followed its flight with my eyes, and there, in a dark alley filled with trash cans, Laurel was opening a dirty door and disappearing in a high brick building.

The sign over the door had shone and glittered once in better days – MOVIE HEAVEN! it announced, advertising the ten-year old box-office hit of the Vatican movie factory, The Miracles of St Sebulon, Part IV, but now the dim glass of the neon letters had lost its glory forever.

I drew a fiveshooter from my armpit-cover and followed Laurel into the building. The darkness was impenetrable, weblike, almost solid. I stepped forward all senses keyed to the utmost on the sloping floor.

Suddenly I heard a swish above me, felt someone quite close and turned on my heels, ready to shoot.

Then I fell into a dark hole.

– **You'd better** put the gunnykins away, Laurel said pointing to my revolver. – Or someone might get hurt.

– Gunnykins? I repeated. I shook my head trying to gather my thoughts, which seemed to have disappeared like pieces of paper in a hurricane.

I was sitting in a big armchair by a fireside, and Laurel was slouching in his own chair in front of me, lighting his pipe. He wore a luxurious dressing gown, the red silk of bishops. Tobacco aroma floated in the room, and in its background I thought I was smelling toasted corn. We were in a small, dark and cozy room, and in the corner the newest model of Philips' gramophones was playing hoarse brass music.

For the death of me I couldn't remember how I came to be sitting in that chair.

– You ought not to drink so much, Laurel said. – I do understand that you have problems with yourself, but if

things go on, someone's going to get killed. Either you or someone else. Oh Lord, one more delirium like that and I'll have you confined! Laurel tut-tutted. – You seem to have quite a hangover coming.

– I ought to shoot you here and now, I muttered and pointed my gun toward Laurel. I might have been confused, but one thing at least I remembered: I had come to shoot Laurel. My migraine was increasing again and I intensely craved for a headache powder. Laurel shook his head smiling with amusement and then said: – Your wife wouldn't like that, what do you think?

– My wife? I do not have a wife.

– Oh? Laurel seemed even more amused.

– No. And I really have to shoot you, Laurel.

– Why?

– Because you smoke. God's whiskers, you know yourself perfectly well why. Do not try to confuse me.

Laurel blew the smoke from his nostrils.

I tried to hold my thoughts together, but it was difficult to concentrate. The gramophone started to blaze a nerveracking trumpetsolo. I realized that unless I shot Laurel quickly, I might never do it. Rule number one: do not start a discussion with your job. I had come here to shoot Laurel, I should not forget that. I only needed to pull the trigger, and my task was accomplished. Regret could come later (and in God's name, it would come, gentle as an elephant in a glass shop and merciful as a leopard sinking its teeth in a deer's throat).

– If you are going to shoot me, what are you waiting for?

– I don't know. You tell me.

– Perhaps your gunnykins is not a real gunnykins. Perhaps you were so pixilated you grabbed a toy gunnykins.

Laurel's expression was inscrutable. I pointed at the gramophone and pulled the trigger. The blast hit my ears and the brass music died in the gramophone splinters hurling around the room. – Yea, I think it's real, I said. – So what

could still prevent me from shooting you here and now?

– Regret?

– That comes only afterwards.

– Oh, indeed. Then I don't know, Laurel chuckled. – Perhaps then you really ought to shoot me now when you are there and I am here and the revolver is in your hand. By God, man, now pull yourself together! Come to your senses or give up to your madness and shoot me. At least I'll get out of looking at your degradation.

I lifted the revolver and looked at Laurel's head along its pipe.

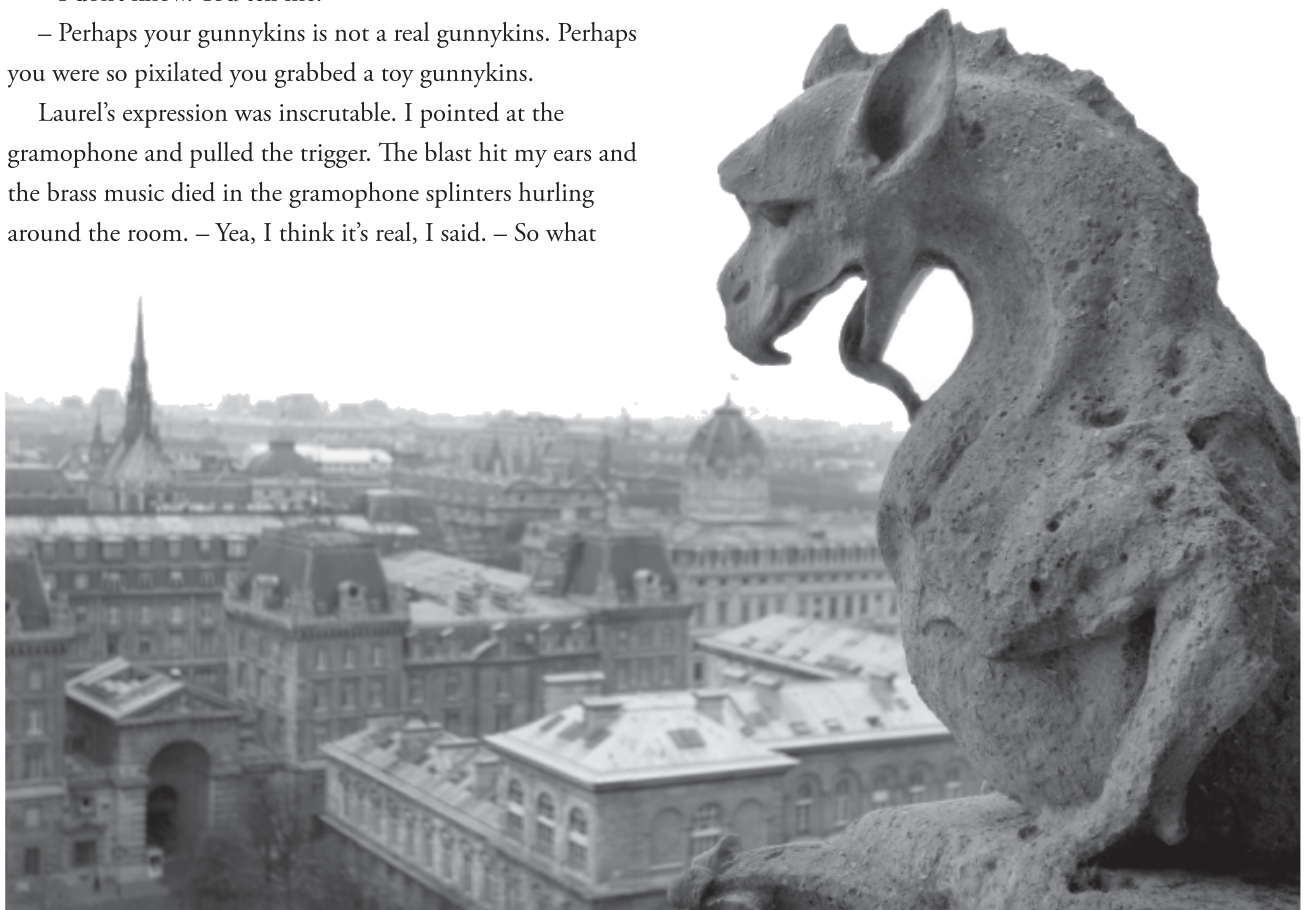
I was just going to pull the trigger when from somewhere outside the room there came a crash that filled my veins with ice. – What was that? I whispered. I could not understand how one single sound could fill me with such dread and anxiety. My heart was jumping like a rabbit fleeing a hungry hunter. My fingertips lost sensation. I felt my hair was changing into icy quills that spread cold into my brain and made me almost scream.

– She's coming. You ought not to have shot the gramophone, I think that caught her attention. Laurel knit his brows looking worried.

– Who?

Laurel smiled tiredly. – Your wife. Sorry to say, but she's probably going to be quite mad at you.

– I've never married, and I don't have a wife, I said vehemently, but no sooner had I said it than I realized that was a whopper. Of course I had a wife. How could I have



forgotten her. I still couldn't remember her face, but I could remember how scared I was of her. I had been on a binge, escaping my responsibilities, and the whole time my wife had been looking for me. I should not have come to Laurel, this was the first place my wife would think of seeking me. And now she was on her way. I had to think on my feet and find an explanation that would save me from a fate worse than death.

But my head was absolutely empty. My hands started to tremble uncontrollably, and I wiped liters of cold sweat from my brow. The wife would kill me, and that just for starters. I'd get to pay for my sins, and by the heaviest, too.

– You do look ill, Laurel said. – We could of course take a swig for fortification.

I nodded. – Just so the wives will not find out, I added rather hollowly, but then a demanding knock sounded at the door, making me cry out for dread.

Laurel got up from his chair, shrugged and smiled with compassion. – I think I'd better go to the bathroom to read railway guides. You, on the other hand, will have to open the door to your wife.

To read railway guides? I saw Laurel disappear somewhere inside the building. The knocking got steadily more insistent and noisy, until it finally changed to a hammering thump that made the breaking door swing madly in its frame.

I swallowed and wiped the sweat from my brow. – Wait a moment, darling, I managed to cry, – I'm coming, I'm coming.

I opened the door with an ingratiating, terrified smile frozen on my face, and realized suddenly that I still was hanging the revolver in my hand. I dropped it with a frightened cry, kicked it aside and lifted my eyes to what had been waiting outside the door. Married? I had never even been to dinner with a woman!

– **You again**, Sister Sugarlump whispers in a reproaching tone.

I look around and feel flabbergasted. The lights are on in the dormitory, and I'm receiving malevolent looks from the neighbouring beds.

– Go to a confession. If not for your own soul, then at least for the good nights' sleep of your fellow patients. A good conscience is the best pillow. And oh my, you are soaking wet.

Sister Sugarlump starts to draw off my pyjamas shirt, and I feel a little embarrassed, so does she. She's seen my body before but it startles her this time, too, even while she tries hard to control her expression. I see her eyes following one deep scar from my neck through the left breast to my groin, and another that crosses the ribs on the right side and then curves over to my left armpit. Her look makes me itch. Every time she washes me she acquaints herself with a new scar in my skin. They terrify her, but I know they also make her imagination

fly. And she'd like to ask me about them, I see that from her furtive eyes.

I floated in a darkness, where silvery fishes of pain nabbed different sizes of pieces off me and whispered secrets in my ears, until I finally opened my eyes and learned that I had been in a coma for two years (although I had now and then woken up to thresh and scream to the great terror of my roommates and the nurses who ran to attend me).

I heard that a group of children had followed a rabbit into an old movie theatre, where they had found me, or rather a twitching and gurgling heap of red mess that only with great difficulty could be identified as a human being. I had been diagnosed still marginally alive and brought to the St Veronica's Lazaret for the Burdened a couple of blocks away.

According to the only doctor in the Lazaret, I had been treated out of sheer human/scientific/morbid curiosity, and the attendant personnel had been betting on how long the spirit of life would remain in my body. The boldest had given me twentyfour hours. That my heart stubbornly continued to beat and my lungs to draw in oxygen had aroused great wonder and even superstitious fear among those following my case.

When I asked for a radio and a fresh newspaper, I was told that broadcasting had been discontinued half a year since because of technical difficulties. Neither did newspapers any more come out regularly, owing to the ever-aggravating problems in printing technology. However, I was given a heap of old newspapers, and leafing through them I could update myself to a certain extent.

Laurel had been busy. All over the world hundreds of church buildings had been destroyed: Madonna della Steccata, Siena Cathedral, Lausanne Cathedral, the Baptisterio in Pisa, St Andre's Cathedral (the Bordeaux destruction included also the archbishop leading the special divine service), Exeter Cathedral... Most large religious events had been postponed far into the future because of "recent heretical attacks"; the procession organised in Palermo in spite of last year's tragedy had been buried under an avalanche the next year. Technology was failing everywhere, and then, just when nothing seemed to work any longer, Vatican announced that the final stage of the Reaching-Up-To-Heavens had started: **VATICAN SHOOTS A ROCKET BEYOND THE EARTH'S SPHERE!**

There were endless disputes in those days about the flatness or roundness of Earth in the newspapers, both in the Editorials and in the Letters to the Editor; although after horizontal measurements, Earth was shown to be most probably at least convex, which the people writing Letters to the Editor couldn't possibly swallow. Many a daredevil had tried to prove that Earth was actually a globe, but no expedition, whether by sea or land, had ever returned – the unexplored regions of the Edge had been fatal to them all. The adherents of the Flat Earth naturally took advantage of the situation and claimed that the reckless ones had fallen off the Edge of Earth into emptiness. Both the Ptolemaic Geocentric and the Copernican Heliocentric theories had their ardent followers, who campaigned in city trains, in supermarkets and in the Letters to the Editor.

Some high placed clergymen maintained that there wasn't necessarily anything outside the Earth's Sphere and that all phenomena in the sky were nothing but lights gliding on the firmament, put there by The Creator for our pleasure. This provoked great hilarity among the vast majority, since mathematicians had centuries ago succeeded in proving rather convincingly the existence of most heavenly bodies with their complex calculations (although I gather the validity of those had been rather convincingly disproved with other, even more incomprehensible calculations).

According to a physicist-theologian Albert Einstein, it was extremely probable that a huge turtle carries the world on its back, and I have to confess that from all the theories I've heard, precisely the turtle theory of Einstein has always seemed to be the most credible scientific cosmology.

The newspapers that I read presented all the possible cosmologies, popularized the functioning principles of the rocket which were based on an explosively combustible fluid developed in the Vatican laboratories, and rejoiced in that the journey beyond Earth's Sphere would finally explain the structure of the universe, and that the millennial programme of Reaching-Up-To-Heavens, the Official Meaning of Life of all Christendom, would again take a big leap forward.

"Jacob" was successfully launched from the air base founded on the Apulian plain, accompanied with the prayers of ten thousand official intercessors. It was navigated by the venerable veteran of the Edge, bishop Alexander, characterized "the bravest man in the world's history" by the press.

The rocket disappeared in the atmosphere and Christendom cheered (so far as it learned about the whole project since communications had deteriorated). As was to be expected, there was something wrong with the radio contact and the rocket could not be contacted except for a couple of minutes six hours after the launch:

- Vatican here, do you read, Jacob?
- Jacob here.

– Thank God! What can you see there, bishop Alexander?

After a long silence, Alexander answered. – I have seen the roots of heaven.

– Please repeat that, bishop Alexander.

But the contact had been broken again.

At last, "Jacob" returned. It dropped most of itself off ("like a lizard drops its tail", as the Vatican's technicians characterized the functioning of the ship), and the capsule that was left over fell in the Dead Sea, using an air-brake called "landingchute" that had been constructed after the plans of Leonardo da Vinci. The up-to-date part of the world was holding its breath while it waited what bishop Alexander would have to tell about the outside of Earth's Sphere.

But the headings announced the greatest anticlimax in the world's history: BISHOP ALEXANDER'S WITS DIMMED! ALEXANDER CHANGED TO A VEGGIE! Not a word was got out of the bravest man in the world's history. He didn't react to anything, and had to be fed like a baby. Two months after his return he died quietly, whereafter he was canonized as was only proper.

After reading the papers I felt more miserable than ever. What did we have left, now when cathedrals had collapsed, the Reaching-Up-To-Heavens had suffered a bad reverse and "Jacob" returned as loser? One hardly dared look up at the sky; mankind had been beaten down into dust and ashes. My heart was overcome by despair for a long time.

I wrote to the Pope, explained that I had been hurt while on the mission and told that I would yet for some time be unable to continue the quest. The Pope sent to me an agent who told that the Holy Father had wished me a quick recovery and promised to read a prayer for me. I received a short letter stating plainly that several good men had been sent after Laurel after my disappearance, and that each of them had either been found dead or vanished without a trace. At least some of them had died by their own hand and thus committed their souls to certain damnation. The letter ended in a request to continue with the search for Laurel, "for God, for the Church and for us all, oh dear friend, as soon as possible".

About five months later I left the hospital and Paris. I had obtained certain information about Laurel's whereabouts, but when I had traveled to Bretagne I again found only an empty hotel room and some clues about his new whereabouts.

The nights were difficult. In my dreams I opened a

crumbling door and saw the incomer. Sometimes it wore the face of the Pope, dead and decomposed, sometimes Laurel's. Once I found behind the door Father Francis, mold flourishing on his moustache; he wanted to show me the hole gaping in the back of his head and to talk a bit about Rule 24 which said that leaving the dormitory after silence was forbidden. Perhaps one of the mildest was a bat-faced prickly-toothed demon, straight out of the best-seller some Christmases back, *The Illustrated Home Book of Demons*, such as I myself had received from the abbot of my monastery in gratitude for my work in the garden.

In the worst version, which invariably made me wake up in my own scream with a taste of steel in my mouth, I found behind the door myself, the killer.

The next four years I followed again in Laurel's trail, suffering from nightmares, migraine and the itch of my healing wounds – more ruins, empty rooms and confused clues. An all-devouring Frustration was my new god. The world around me was filling up with nonfunctioning new technology and the trouble caused by its tragicomic representatives. Radios fell silent, lifts killed people (I myself spent three days and nights without food in a lift stuck between floors) and even the manufacture of a functioning bicycle seemed an insuperable task for the technicians; in the midst of all that, Vatican announced optimistically that it was starting a new space programme – in spite of the setbacks, the Reaching-Up-To-Heavens would go on, which slightly improved my mood.

In the May of Berlin I happened to sniff at the flowers of romance. Boisterously infatuated I interrupted my search for Laurel and stayed to hang around in the inn, where the object of my romantic feelings worked as waitress.

Anna! Anna Kröeger, a girl as pretty and fragile as a porcelain angel! In her hair lived a golden lustre and in the seablue depth of her eyes frolicking singing silvery fishes were swimming. Her smile (a quick pearly-white flash between moist, blood-red lips) made me tremble of restrained ardour.

If at first I dared not even hope for a response to my feelings, I suddenly felt that I was receiving that, although I assumed her to be too shy and well-behaved to express her feelings openly. I did not want to spoil everything by being too hasty, so I proceeded carefully. I sent her flowers and sweets (anonymously of course, in the name of propriety) and surprised her with exceedingly polished little compliments. Sometimes she accidentally touched me, and then I felt my blood rushing to-and-fro in my body and sometimes stopping altogether.

There was an electronic charge crackling between us which prevented me from thinking clearly. My mind was tortured by shamelessly detailed fantasies of the fulfillment of our love, and I had to have her as my own, as soon as possible. I wanted

to map the white fields of her skin to the last wonderful square centimetre and explore with all my senses the most secret parts of her breathtaking being, where I imagined my own lost paradise was concealed.

I decided to propose to her already at the first night, and yet I waited for months before I dared make my move. I had decided that everything else could go: the Pope, the Church, Laurel, my mission. Only my Anna mattered. I would start a family with her and stay in Berlin to lead a conventional middle-class life. My larger-than-life feelings would free me from all obligations I may once have had. Somebody else would have to search for Laurel, for the bond between us had now broken.

And one night, when Anna was hurrying past my table, I held her sleeve and asked her to sit with me a while.

– Become your wife? Anna cried in amazement when she heard my proposal.

I felt an idiotically happy smile split my face. – Yes. Allow me to slip this ring into your teeny tiny fingerdinger, I spluttered blushing and giggling like a schoolboy.

But Anna hid her hand behind her back as if teasing, and then laughed happily. – Oh you darling, darling man. This is a great honor to me! I'm the most flattered girl in the world, believe me.

Anna kissed my brow in a way that made my flesh turn cold and then my soul, too. – But dear friend, she then said, confirming my worst suspicions, – I'm already engaged to another!

And so she was. The man was a well-featured officer who had reaped honor and glory on the Edge deserts, almost too sensitive-looking for a soldier and a man. Anna held before my eyes a photograph she dug up from her bosom (whiter than snow), and smiled, in-love, unable to take me or my pain seriously. – We'll get married as soon as he gets homeleave, she chirped. – You know what, my father died when I was little, and it would be a great honor to me if you would give me away...

I heard no more. Suddenly I saw myself with her eyes. I realized that she didn't even take me for a man! In her extreme naiveté she had already forgotten that I had a moment ago quite seriously asked her to become my wife and life-companion. She saw me only as a big fat clown whose feelings were nothing but a comic sideline to her real romance.

I managed somehow anyway to walk into my room. To avoid murdering innocent people I packed up and left the inn the same night, secretly, without saying good-byes to Anna or anybody else. I was welcomed by a whirling

snowfall; the winter had marched into the darkened town as if emphasizing my last failure. I walked seven blocks to the ruins of the Pope Wilhelm's Memorial Church, disappearing in white oblivion, and felt Laurel's closeness again.

Now I had never really had anything else except Laurel, and would never have anything else. I understood that at last perfectly. Only through him could I achieve my fulfillment and follow my fate. That's what the bond between us meant, destinies tied together. I rummaged up from my pocket a wrinkled letter received a couple of days earlier; according to that Laurel had been seen in Brussels, where the Cathedral of Ste Gudule stood – or at least its ruins, if I was already too late.

Two hours later I was sitting in the train.

– **Have you noticed**, the lady opposite me asked, – that we are all the time ahead of our schedule. She wowed a thick booklet in front of my face and stared at me, lips tightly compressed, black eyes demanding attention. Altogether she looked remarkably like a dry twig. – Which is quite significant and peculiar, considering certain facts. As for instance, that after Hannover we have stopped already three times because of technical difficulties and lost time, and yet we arrive in Cologne in a moment, an hour before the time quoted in the timetable. I don't know about you, but I think this train is going slower than usual, not faster. And I sit in this train every week. Makes one wonder, doesn't it?

I tried to look interested. I wasn't able to share the lady's excitement, although I had noticed that lately surprisingly many seemingly sensible persons had managed to get carried away with the inaccuracies they found in the timetables. – Well, well, I said. – Late or vice versa, the main thing is that Cologne is still where it should be. I smiled and toyed with my tie, to make the lady's forbidding expression thaw down. She looked at me sternly.

– Maybe it isn't there, the lady whispered, bending over to me. Her cinnamon breath warmed my face and I was beginning to suspect that she wasn't exactly in her senses. – My brother who works on the railways has told about the rumours that are going around close to the Edge. A small village where the troops have fetched foodstuffs is said to have disappeared without a trace. Puf! Phui! Wham! Just like that! On the previous time it had been there with its hen, its sheep and its inhabitants speaking gibberish, but a couple of days later when the foodstuff patrol returns to get eggs and bread, the village doesn't exist any more.

The lady straightened herself, looked at me, the corners of her mouth twitching, and laughed shrilly.

– Come on, sir, now don't look so shocked! Stories are

stories, and those we've heard all the time. It wasn't my intention to scare you, I'm sorry if I did. There now, we arrive in Cologne. You can breathe again, it's on its place, hah hah! I'm getting out here, and a good journey to you, sir. Don't you waste your time brooding over my stories.

– **You aren't ill**, are you, Sister Sugarlump whispers. Concern over me shadows her gentle face. My hands tremble and I hide them from the nun's eyes, ashamed of my weakness. She tucks me up better: a beautiful gesture which normally would warm my mind as much as three coverlets. But now I breathe with difficulty and stare at the ceiling, gripped by a vague anxiety.

– Please, speak to me, she begs. – What distresses you?

– Past conversations, I say quietly. – They are like a scrapbook that one has altogether too much time for in the end.

Sister Sugarlump stares at me without saying anything; then she kisses my brow and goes away. I look after her, then I close my eyes and listen to her soft steps. A thought is teasing me like a fly, but since I cannot catch it, I draw my lungs full of sleep and sink in the darkness, heavy as a stone.

In the end I find Laurel.

The clues take me to the slums in the outskirts of Christ City, to a house where – so I've been told – beautiful girls, supple boys and a complete selection of venereal diseases are available. Steep staircases rise from the narrow alley to lightless storeys that echo with the subdued sounds of pleasure (or perhaps pain). Small insects dart over my shoes, concentrating in their own insects' hurry-scurries. The stairs beneath my feet sigh and whisper a rhyme of the beauty of giving up.

Though the house harms the sensitive soul, for a while it stimulates the self-indulgent body: the impudent charm of the fresh bodies available makes my nostrils widen and my heart quiver eagerly. But then, through the cheap perfume the smell of dirt, despair and disease intrudes, and after the illusion is broken I shy away from the inviting touch of the little fairies.

– Upstairs we have a sick man who corresponds to your description, tells one of them when he gets a coin.

– He came to us three weeks ago. He has paid half a year beforehand, but the Madam has threatened to throw him out anyway. He smells like an animal and makes us all nervous. He's not quite all there, you know. If he's your friend, you'd better take him away with you, before he ends up as dogfood in the alley.

Door number 32. Laurel's room. I feel his presence, my belly tingles, and I draw in my nostrils the smell of wet, rotting leaves which reminds me of the autumn preceding this long winter, cold, rainy and grey.

I brush the dark surface of the door with my knuckles but enter without knocking.

Matches are my only source of light, electricity has not worked for a long time in this part of the world. Only the eleventh match consents to catch fire. I hear a torturous, wheezy breathing; what's left of Laurel is undoubtedly in this room.

– Laurel?

– **Oh my**, isn't that the Christ Emperor's Cathedral in Christ City? Sister Sugarlump cries, holding a postcard that has slipped from my numb fingers to the floor. – You know what, I've always wanted to visit it! It's magnificent – Sister Agnes told that its highest tower shakes hands with heaven. Is it true that it's higher than the Eiffel Tower? Actually I haven't seen the Eiffel Tower, either, except in pictures, funny isn't it, when it's only a couple hundred kilometers from the sanatorium. But the Christ Emperor's Cathedral – some blessed day I'll go and leave for a pilgrimage to Christ City. Have you been there?

– Most certainly, I assure her, smiling.

I'm not going to break her little heart by telling the whole truth. The Christ Emperor's Cathedral was namely the last one Laurel managed to destroy. No other great ones were probably left, either, and this greatest one that was called Humanity's hand reaching to God, he had left to the last. Even I could not save it from him.

– And a really splendid cathedral it was! I affirm, since I see her expecting it. (And I close my eyes and stand again in the Christ Emperor's Cathedral during its last moments. Laurel reappears into my view, now on the gallery, and I shoot at him twice, without hitting. He disappears behind ornamented marble pillars, where the long shadows of the vaults swallow him.

Stone saints stare at me from their heights, when I run after Laurel. I stop in the middle of thickening twilight.

The sun is just setting, shadows rush on the center floor and the colourful stained-glass figures dim quickly. Laurel's voice echoes from the stone walls – he mumbles an incantation or a prayer, persuades the surrounding marble structures to give up.

I run up the stairs and fire the revolver towards the voice.

Missed: steps drawing away. I try to run after, but the cathedral gives a violent start as if shaken by a giant, and I fall flat on my face to the floor.

When I lift my eyes I see Laurel embracing one of the largest pillars and whispering to it strange words in a foreign language. The stone walls rumble when the marble starts

to move. From the lightless heights where birds flutter nervously about, an image of a saint spins down and falls on the center aisle, smashing to pieces.

Down there people are yelling as if applauding a grand spectacle that has started around them. The stone's substance screams and bellows and moves, and human cries are lost in the massive, larger-than-life sound of the stone's rising storm. One after the other the stained-glass pictures of the windows shatter and rain in a glittering downpour on the people trying to reach safety – the Christ Emperor's Cathedral has twelve entrances but just now nobody seems to remember where they are.

The kingdom of heaven that Michelangelo has painted in the ceiling fractures, cracks up and starts to fall down in pieces. Now I'm crying out, too. I don't know how I actually succeed in what hundreds of others fail, but suddenly I realize I'm outside, under the darkening evening sky. A drizzle is slowly soaking my clothes. It takes a long while before I'm able to turn and look at what Laurel has once again accomplished.)

– Are you feeling sick? Sister Sugarlump asks, and when I open my eyes I feel myself a little hollower again. Memories are eating at me like termites.

My little nun is holding the card before my eyes, but I beg her to keep it as a little present from me. A touchingly grateful smile spreads on Sister Sugarlump's face and makes me smile, too – she is so very easy to please.

– Now look, I have a big boxful of them underneath my bed. You can send me a new one when you get to Christ City.

– **Laurel, I whispered** once more and lighted the candlestick I'd found by the door. At the centre of the floor there was a group of furniture and hidden behind them a narrow bed. An indefinite bundle sprawling on the bed stirred and uttered a weak sound. I took a deep breath. – I've come now, Laurel. I know I'm eighteen years late, but that's your fault again: you should have given me a more precise address. Have the other guests gone home already? I hope you saved me a piece of the cake. Hah, hah!

A little joke to liven up the atmosphere and wave your tie once on the bargain. To be honest I was terrified by the idea of meeting him. Not only because of what had happened last time. I still thought of him as a young boy, and I knew that something would break forever the moment I looked into his eyes and saw an old man instead of a child. I knew he was now over sixty, but as long as his face would stay hidden from me, he would be a young boy to me. And the moment his old age would be exposed, I would age myself. My God, I was only two years younger than he!

– You have made this very pretty, Laurel, I said politely. The wallpapers were dark, perhaps brown or green or maybe red, and the furniture huddled in the shadows seemed peculiarly disproportionate; they were like sullen, crouching animals who wondered about my presence considering whether to attack or not.

I strutted about the room trying to pretend that I'd just dropped by to have tea with an old acquaintance and the revolver I dangled was just for the chance that we would later decide to go duck-shooting. There were pictures hanging on the walls, and I started to examine them in the candlelight like a visitor to an art exhibition: poor quality copies of famous paintings (including the "Strategic Meeting" by Leonardo, the original of which I had seen in Milan), coarsely grotesque portraits of unknown saints, dirty pornographic drawings. And a map.

Already at first sight the map appeared to be obscurely imprecise, and the longer I examined it, the wronger I deemed it. It seemed to be a funny crystallization of geographic ignorance and indifference downright close to genius, with nothing but aesthetic value – by its outward aspect the map namely was extremely polished, with its gold and silver ornaments, its careful calligraphy and endless details.

Perhaps just this strange combination of false geography and brilliant graphics made the map so irritating. It was missing cities, countries and whole continents (of which some actually could after a little search be found in more or less incorrect places), and on the other hand, it had a great deal that completely lacked a counterpart in reality. The map represented a world which pretty far resembled our own and yet wasn't even close to it.

I shuddered. When I turned my back to the strange masterpiece, I was bothered by a queer thought that had I examined the map with a magnifying glass, within the details I'd have seen still new details, and within them again new and still new...

I frowned when I realized the direction of my thoughts.

– You must have paid a fortune for that map, I said trying to be flippant (since I was sure the map belonged to Laurel, not to the Madam of the whorehouse). – And don't you try to claim that you have done it yourself, I burst out laughing, and then, gripped by a sudden terrible suspicion I turned once more to look at the map.

And indeed: on the lower left hand edge was Laurel's signature.

I felt a slight irritation and a premonition of migraine – I had forgotten the kind of accomplishments Laurel was capable of when he wanted. But then again, the map's geography was undeniable evidence of that Laurel knew something no one else knew, or (the likelier alternative, in my view) he really had lost a cog or two.



In the night I wake up absolutely having to go. I do not want to wake up Sister Sugarlump, so I prize myself into the wheelchair and ride along the dark corridors to the bathroom, the Abode of Eternal Gurgle, as we use to call the place here in the sanatorium.

– **What do you want** from me anyway?

I almost piss on my legs. When I turn, I see Laurel standing at the bathroom door in the white school nightie. It's the small hours, and neither of us ought to be here – Regulation number 24 of St Sebulon's School: Dormitories may not be left after silence.

– I've been pals with you, haven't I? I've indulged in childish pranks with you. I've drank sewage with you. What else do you want from me? All right, I admit I may have had fun now and then. But one should not forget the order of things if one wants to achieve something in one's life, you see. And I have noticed that you try to confuse me about things that have always been clear to me. I have goals, do you understand? No one may prevent me from trying to reach them. Not even you. I don't know whatever it is that binds us together, but from now on you have to leave me alone.

– Little Laurel wants to become a saint, is that so? I snap with a tight feeling in my chest. – Little Laurel wants to keep his glory.

The cruel smile spreading on Laurel's face turns his bright features shadowy. – Exactly, he whispers, and now I see the hammer in his hand. – You will swear here and now that you'll never speak a word to me again, or I'll crush every bone in your body.

Steps in the corridor. – The warden is coming, I mumble, open my eyes for a second and look around myself in amazement: I'm sitting in a wheelchair, young Laurel is gone, and even the steps pass. Everything has already happened over half a century before.

I remember what I've come to do, but then my eyes droop shut again; the eternal gurgle of the urinal must be the drowsiest sound in the universe. – We have to leave from here, Laurel, I sigh. – Quickly. The warden is coming.

The steps halt behind the door.

Moment of the hunter: Laurel slips in the toilet-box, but I cower like scared prey in front of the urinal when the door opens and Father Francis steps in the bathroom, a sewage bucket hanging in his hand.

A-ha! he cries. – Penalties to be suffered! (Unlike other wardens, Father Francis doesn't kick up a row when he catches boys in forbidden circumstances. He enjoys it when he gets to discipline us, and I wouldn't ever have broken Rule 24 had I remembered that Father Francis is the warden tonight.) – Now what might be the penalty for breaking Rule 24? he sighs, pretending forgetfulness. The smell of monastery wine surrounds him in a dizzying cloud.

– A large portion of sewage, I try. I feel nauseous.

– Oh no, Father Francis shrieks and lifts the hem of his gown, grinning like a wolf. – Try again, my pretty little meatball.

– Not the pendulum, I breath, but Father Francis licks his moustache and assures me: – Oh yes, my boy, the pendulum it is indeed.

Through the thumping of my heart I hear the door to the toilet-box opening and quiet approaching steps. I want to scream. Christ, I want to breath!

I startle awake, obsessively gasping for air. I start moving before I remember where I am, and collide in my wheelchair with the white-tiled wall of the Abode of Eternal Gurgle. Christ! Laurel should not have done it, at least not for me. Stupidity always has its price, and all that sneaking to the urinary had even been a quite unnecessary stupidity: as a child I had been good at holding in, even for a long while (an ability I've forgotten in my old age), unlike poor Laurel who had started to wet his bed almost every night, as I had noticed. In spite of his weaker bladder, his legs were faster than mine that night, and so the janitor who turned up found in the bathroom only Father Francis, the hammer stuck in the back of his head, and me, and the court of St Sebulon's School of course drew its own natural conclusions of the situation. There

was the corpus delicti and the culprit, together in a nice package, what's clearer than that.

One did not snitch on one's mates in St Sebulon's School. I refused to say a word to the interrogators, neither did Laurel step out. I did not blame him for that, he had his goals, anyway, higher than either of us. I was saved from the gallows only because the pendulum punishment of Father Francis was, after all, known to the board of trustees of St Sebulon's School; Father Francis was buried in the school's own graveyard as an "accident victim", and I was sent to a new school where I was trained to become an assassin for the Vatican.

– Laurel, I whispered.

I waited an appropriate while and even a little longer and then carefully lifted the blanket's edge with the revolver pipe.

Fusty air smelling of mould and decay wafted out from under the blanket and I saw an army of tiny black dots retreat in panic to safety from my eyes. For a fleeting moment I imagined I had again fallen into some devilish trap, but then I met the vacant look in the bleary eyes that almost broke my heart.

– Laurel, it's me!

His face was simultaneously 7 and 300 years old. His hair was like frostbitten hay. On his skin his whole mysterious life story was written in unrecognizable curliques.

When he recognized me, he smiled with childish pleasure. – Oh, hi Ollie. Nice of you to pop in. I haven't had any visitors, not since it left.

He looked at me, blinking innocently. I nodded, frowned and patted his shoulder lightly. – My name is not Ollie, Laurel. Do not call me Ollie. I'm Oliver, Ollie sounds like a dog's name.

I set the candle on the head of the bed and gently stroked Laurel's thin hair. His brow felt hot. I noticed that the keen intelligence which formerly had sparkled in his eyes was now gone – whatever he had been through, it had burned his brain to cinder.

– Laurel, tell me something.

Laurel blinked. – Yes, Ollie?

– What happened to you on the Edge?

Laurel looked at me as if I had been the moron, and I realized with irritation that he had no idea of what I was talking about.

– Why have you been destroying cathedrals, Laurel? I tried again and patted his hand with a patient smile.

Now realization lighted up his face. He smiled cunningly, cast a quick look around in a furtive way and asked me to bow closer to him. – Teophilus was right, he whispered in my ear and nodded emphatically as if he had just told me sensational news. – He wants to crumple up His picture,

throw it in a wastepaper basket and sleep a couple of eternities.

– Teophilus?

Laurel shook his head. – No. He. Laurel glanced upwards and gave me a wink. – And you see, they kept Him awake.

– What?

– The cathedrals.

I felt migraine touching my brain lobes. – We have to go away from here, I sighed. – I'll take a headache powder for a start, and then we pack up your things and go somewhere you can get proper care. You see, the Madam is going to throw you out.

Laurel's face fell. – I cannot leave, he explained in a weepy voice.

I poked Laurel's chest with my finger and announced firmly that I had not searched for him eighteen years to only get to abandon him.

– But I'm sick and not allowed to go out, Laurel wept.

– Besides the Pope is mad at me, isn't he? He would punish me harshly.

It was true. For a moment my mind was filled up with crazy plans where I traveled with the mortally ill Laurel all across the world with all the Pope's assassins after us.

– We'll think of something, I assured Laurel trying not to show how little I believed in my own words. My head started to ache, and I gripped my temples with a miserable sigh.

Suddenly Laurel stopped crying. – Shakespeare, he said, and I answered in a reflex: – Longfellow, for even if all else would vanish from a man's head, the silly rhymes learned in school years obviously never wear out.

– What comes out of the pipe? Laurel asked.

Instinctively I started to ponder on the solution to the rhyme's riddle, but realized then that we did not have the time for such puerilities. Annoyed I turned to him, pushed him lightly – and almost shot my foot when I saw his eyes.

When I wake up, Sister Sugarlump is in my room. She looks out from the open window pensively. The wind flutters the white curtains of the sanatorium.

I say her name, and she glances at me quickly, a perplexed smile on her pouting lips. – How strange, she says. – I knew it was somewhere in that direction, but I've never before actually realized that in a clear weather it's visible all the way to here.

The look implies a clear request, and for a fleeting moment I see the familiar understanding and intelligence storming in Laurel's eyes (– Please, Oliver, he's saying, – do whatever you came to do), then it all falls in twirling sparks back to the darkness in the remotest corners of his soul. He passes his fingers through his hair, raises his eyebrows and blinks with his dimmed eyes, in vain trying to catch his lost thought.

– Good night, Laurel, I whisper. – You had better rest now.

Laurel nods. – Good night, Ollie, he answers, puts his head on the pillow and closes his eyes.

With trembling hands I lift the pipe of the revolver to his bluish, pulsating temple. Undoubtedly he is a tragic figure, much like a really old and wornout stuffed toy bear that's going to be thrown away to garbage when it starts coming apart at the seams.

– Sweet dreams, Laurel.

– Sweet dreams, Ollie, he says. I open my eyes and Sister Sugarlump is still standing by the window. The wind has grown stronger, a storm seems to be rising from the horizon. Sister Sugarlump has a postcard in her hand. – Sister Agnes, she says waving the postcard, – is the only one of us who's been anywhere. Last year she visited Paris, the Eiffel Tower, and she sent us a card from there. I envied her, for I thought I'd never see the Eiffel Tower or actually anything with my own eyes. Oh, I of little faith!

I smile at her tiredly, listen for a while at the restful sighing of the wind and feel I'm sinking back underneath the dark surface of sleep. There everything keeps happening again and again, for at the moment of ending human time is definitively broken apart. (And in general, the subjective human time, the only time that's real, is just about as sensitive to disturbances as those cheap clocks with St Sebulon's image that are sold on the marketplaces.) And in the end, when I find Laurel, he is undoubtedly mad, in the delusionary sense of the word; his brain has burned out, and all the questions that took shape during eighteen years remain without an answer – what a splendid anticlimax! Yet the circle closes: some events achieve their final meaning in the whole while others crumble and vanish in the dark holes of memory. My destiny is fulfilled in the moment of Laurel's end, which is also my own personal end, and all the events thereafter are just a meaningless epilogue, which in a movie would be covered by the text of acknowledgements flowing on the screen. I ...

(After burying Laurel in a pretty little graveyard in Christ City I return to the Vatican, where I hand the map drawn by Laurel to the Pope, since in my view it belongs to him more than to anyone else – myself I do not even want to see it again. I announce that I have accomplished my mission and collapse dramatically at the Pope's feet to the cold floor of the Sistene Chapel. An apoplectic stroke, the Pope's personal physician diagnoses when he arrives. Only two days later Pope Ignaz would succumb to an acute brain haemorrhage with Laurel's map in his hands, but now he blesses me, presents his thanks and sends me to recover in a cozy little sanatorium in Verdun, in Northern France. I'm neither happy nor unhappy, such states are foreign to a

person who's gone through his end, but my circumstances are daily sweetened by a nun I call Sister Sugarlump, with whom I've hopelessly fallen in love with an old man's privilege.)

...snap at a dream, and Laurel is again in my arms. He seems to have finally fallen asleep, the rhythm of his wheezy breath has stabilized and his eyelids flutter. Just when I'm going to press the trigger, he suddenly throws his eyes open as if he had remembered something extremely essential which simply cannot wait. – Ollie, am I still awake?

– Does the Pope have a funny hat? I answer, a little peeved.

– Listen, I almost forgot to tell you something. It's actually a secret, but you see, Ollie, I made Him promise that next time –

The end of the sentence is drowned in the revolver's thunder.

I nearly soil my pants. My finger wasn't even on the trigger! I think, and the thought stays circling in my head like a trapped wasp. My ears ring for an eternity of time, and finally I realize that I ought to clean up before somebody comes and makes a terrible fuss (and on the border of sleep and wakefulness I look again behind that splintering door years back; I wrench it open and in front of me stands a figure difficult to see clearly – like a man or a woman with an enormous swan spreading its wings on his or her back and lustrous golden eyes;

– Agrippus Smith, it utters, and in that very moment something black and tearing attacks me, and while the figure utters more names more shadows enter from behind it with each name, and each of them wants to leave a deep memory of

itself in my flesh ...)

When I open my eyes, I wonder for a second that the sheets are so white.

– **Sister Sugarlump?** Ho–hoy! She holds the tray with my dinner, has been holding it since I woke up and saw her again by the window; from the window an ever–strengthening wind is blowing that tears at the nun's black robe, and whatever they have for dinner tonight, by my tie, it has to be by this time thoroughly cold! – Sister Sugarlump, could I have my dinner now? I appeal to her once more, patient as an angel, but Sister Sugarlump is looking far, far into the distance and smiling in an absolute ecstasy.

– Now this really has to be the brightest day of the millennium, she whispers with eyes sparkling of joy, and although I do not understand it yet, I have to wait for my dinner a long, long time. Longer than I can even imagine.

(...and always when I fall asleep, I'm again looking for Laurel ...)

"Now there's another fine mess you got me into!" (Oliver Hardy)

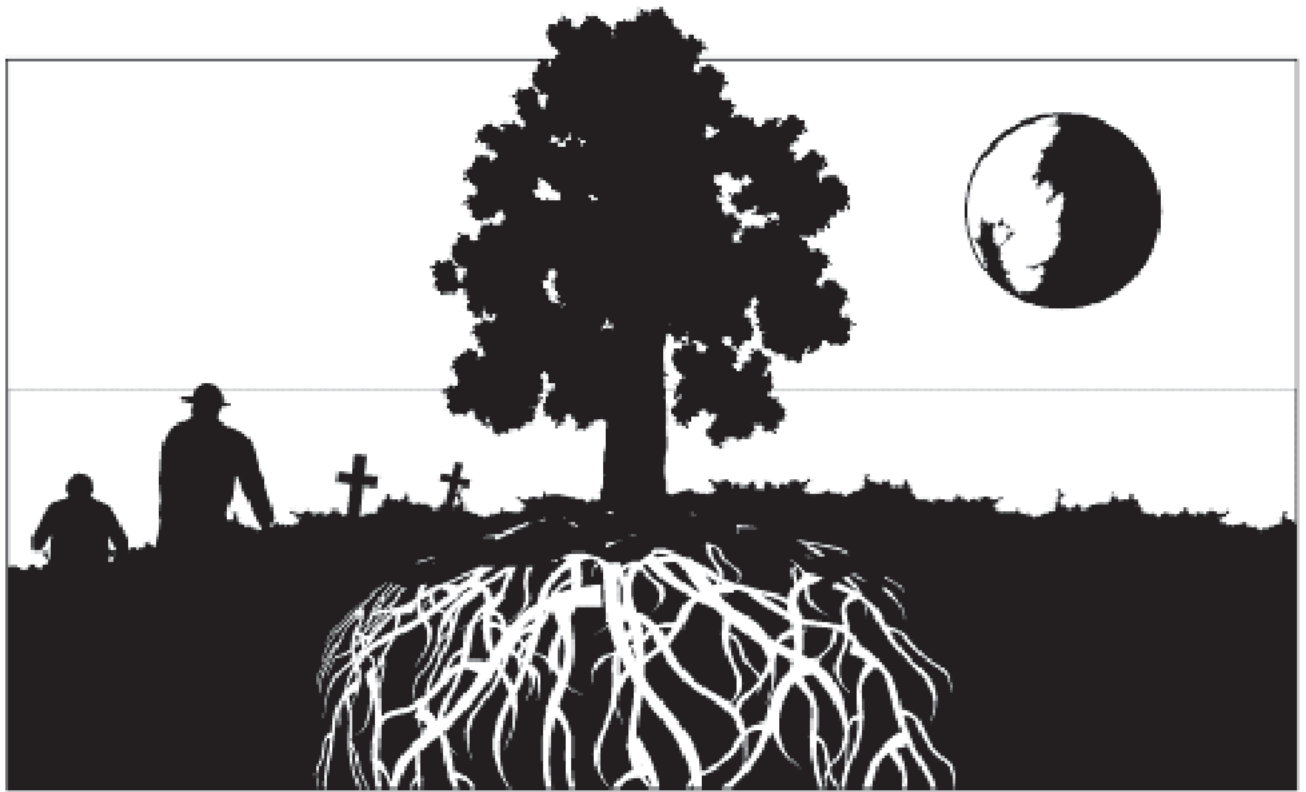
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About the author

Pasi Jääskeläinen (b. 1966) is a writer and a lecturer of Finnish language, who has published a short story collection "Missä junat kään-tyvät" ("Where the Trains Turn") and a novel combining fantasy and mystery "Lumikko ja yhdeksän muuta" ("Lumikko and Nine Others.") Jääskeläinen has won several Portti and Atorox awards for his short stories. "Missä junat kään-tyvät" received the Tähtivaeltaja award in 2001.





SUBTERRANEANOUS

by Tiina Raevaara,

Translation: Petri Salin

Illustrations: Tytti Heikkinen

The ground shivers as the spade enters it. The stones croak beneath the metallic blade, the dirt compresses. If I were to prick up my ears, I'd hear how the ground screams. All the tiny worms and creepy crawly things.

They die, the worms and creepy crawly things. I, however, listen as the spade digs away at the earth. Thump, the dirt says, when the foot forces the spade deeper inside of it.

I try to collect my thoughts, my memories, my shattered remains, because soon the questions will begin once again. They question me as if I knew or saw; as if you could see anything else in the darkness than the shadow of yourself. I can't even see death, because the darkness hides that as well.

Thump thump – clack! The diggers are soon here.

My fate was pure chance. This is how they told me: that chance waved its enormous extremities and slapped me with its hand. The slap still tingles.

It didn't take long before everyone was excited about my fate. Wanted to see it in practise; wanted to be a party in carrying it out. Or maybe they hoped to be the exception, hoped that it was their blow and no one else's that somehow would be divine and reverse it all. Their blow or hit or shot,

whatever they tried. While they tried I suffered. Did they think I can't feel any pain?

I felt a lot of pain; still feel it. The pain is juicier than before the slap of fate, it carves and delves and hollows me full of holes and cavities.

The gravel rustles and screeches. The sounds are closer now: the sounds they can hear and the sounds only I hear. The sounds of the shovelling and of their speech, the shivering of the ground, sand flying in the air. In the background whining and moaning, the roar of beetles, snaps, sighs, the humming inside my head, the crackle by my chest.

The spade is already tickling the uppermost boards.

A shot. I fell, cried with pain; they gathered around me their eyes filled with curiosity. And gratification – maybe the shooter thought he'd succeeded.

Then I arose and they screamed. Again.

Suddenly I felt pain in the back of my head, warm blood on my temple, made out a flash of metal in the doorway and a man's grinning face. I fell.

I arose, they screamed. Again.

They tie the lines around the coffin and lift it up. A stream of air blows in through a narrow crack. For a moment I dangle in the air, on nothing, then the ground welcomes me with a bump. The grains of sand stuck in the cracks of the boards fall to the ground with a tingle.

Someone pushes a crowbar through the upper corner of the coffin and right at my face. Slashing pain.

I don't know whose idea it was – the burial. It was supposed to be a good plan; they'd all benefit from it. But really they no longer wanted to look at me. I wouldn't have, nobody would. I can understand that. But why can't they leave me in my hideaway and just let me be? If only they'd forget all about me.

The damp boards whine when they're torn off the nails and each other. I expected to see brightness, but no, I can only see a dim glow, dim lamps glowing in the night. Too ashamed to come when it was light.

How many times has this happened already? I can't keep score – I can't do a lot of other things either, I'm simply not able to keep things clear in my head. The bustle makes away with my sanity, my memory, my memories, my self. I always hope that this will be the last time – I haven't got the strength any longer, I can't – and yet they will still be back. I can remember some of them, I can remember that I should remember; the names however are lost. Gone with the worms. Carved into oblivion.

One board is already coming off. The hinges creak.

He who doesn't die. (No matter what.) He sees the truth. (Why should he, with half his head shot off?) He sees the beyond death, he knows what awaits us, he sees our future, through him we can contact God. (Who is that? There's nobo-

dy like that here.)

Are we going to get ill? Are our loved ones going to get ill? Which of us will die? When? Will somebody be born? Who will give birth? Whom should we love? Who loves us? Does it matter? Where will we get money? How much money will we get? Does it hurt when you die? What will happen next year? What's the point of it all? What is there after all of this? Do we really exist? What's our reward for it all?

That's what they ask, greedy to know, keeping their eyes off me because they don't want to see – perhaps they don't want to show their eyes, thinking that I know more than they do, that I would see their truths. That's what they've asked before, that's what they'll ask this time. Once they've got enough they cover me up again, wanting to forget the freak of chance, or fate.

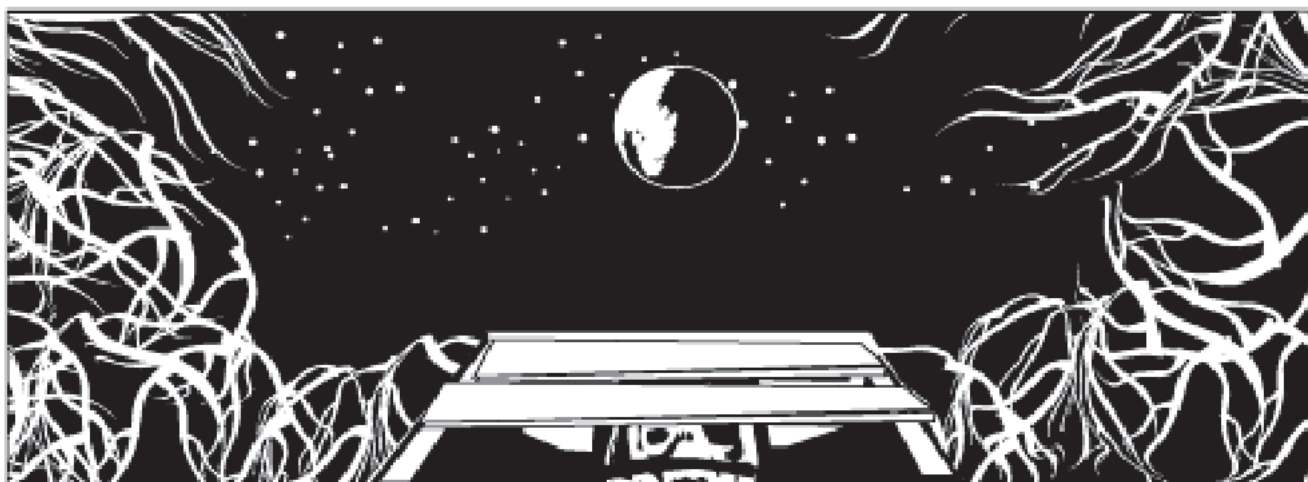
What's the big idea, whose idea was this? That the dead could see through to the other side, see where everything exists in formal purity; that I'm the only one who can come back to tell it?

I know nothing apart from the screaming of the ground, the sound of life, the sound of disintegration.

Men without names pry open the lid. The outside air attacks me, moist and wide; the cold reminding me of a cold I've felt before, somewhere. Perhaps I remember something, a nocturnal moment, stars, a smiling face. The face of somebody important to me. Warm hands and skin; thoughts far behind the eyes.

I rise, and they scream, again.

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About the author

Tiina Raevaara (b. 1979) writes a variety of texts: science articles, book reviews and, most importantly, prose both in short and long forms. She is a Doctor of Philosophy and a geneticist, but is now devoted to writing full-time. In 2006 Raevaara won a significant Finnish short story competition. She lives with her family at the edge of a forest and draws material for her writing from the nature, dogs and family life.



About the artist

Tytti Heikkinen (b. 1969) is a graphic designer and a student of Finnish literature and philosophy. She also writes poems and science fiction novels. Her novel "Theov" got a honourable mention in Portti short story competition 2006.



Anne Leinonen, translation: Liisa Rantalaaho

Jooim always wanted to do the ritual during the meeting, even though it found that somehow shameful: it did not look one in the eyes, just wiped its hands in the towel and quickly drew on its pants.

- You are staring at me, Jooim said.
- This one begs pardon.
- I don't want you to stare.
- Is done as Jooim will.

This one looked past for a moment, kept observing what happened, sideways. Jooim stretched out and stared at the ceiling. It did that a lot, when it was bothered by something. This one stayed sitting on the chair, quiet, not moving.

Jooim had given a transparent tunic. This one's thin bony shape was visible through the gauze – Jooim liked to watch this one and to do the ritual. Afterwards it trembled peacefully and was easier to be with. This one stared at its sharp nose ridge and broad face, at first so strange but now already familiar. Jooim had lived thirty-five revolutions of sun, it said, but difficult to tell how much that was in The People's time count. According to the scale of Humans, that was prime age.

This one took the towel from Jooim's hand and sniffed it; the aroma was strong and sharp, the way Jooim was strong.

- Stop that.

This one put the towel in the garbage grinder that sucked the fabric within, sent it to be disintegrated and re-assembled. The gadget was charming, worked like the mind of The People but was made by Humans.

Jooim sighed; soon it had to return to the star-craft and report to the duty officer. Its own patrol vessel had made a forced landing on the hills and was now in maintenance, would be for several light-revolutions yet. Jooim was a star pilot and there was nothing to do on the ground – patrol duty could not be skipped, however.

- It's a wonder you people haven't been occupied before.
- But...
- Don't start that bullshit about Firstlings and Otherlings and whatever bloody goblins.

One had to be silent. Some things Jooim just did not want to hear. Maybe they were too complicated. Was enough that Jooim found this one thin and gentle-voiced. It wanted to see qualities pleasing to it. No matter. This one was there for Jooim. But this one was sorry that Jooim was so unhappy. Grief was hurting its whole being and drawing its face into a frown. This one felt like suffocating in the mouldering taste of the pain, and something had to be done. So, this one watched Jooim carefully and waited for a window of opportunity.

This one would make happy. Yes. This one knew how to make happy.

Jooim caught the hand and pressed it on its cheek.

- You have slender hands. Cool.

This one murmured and let Jooim stroke the limb, which formerly had been something more but now was only

something called a hand.

– While you stay and watch by the bed, I dream. That’s funny. I never have dreams on the ship. And I remember things I thought forgotten. The smell of hair. And a woman I loved.

– This one watches the sleep, yes. This one loves Jooim.

Jooim stretched on the bed and this one stayed by. Jooim’s breathing quickly became peaceful. The being of Human was so fragile and so appealing.

This one had chosen Jooim when Jooim was seen to climb out from the wrecked sky vessel. The Otherlings had surrounded the vessel and helped the Human back to the star-craft. This one had gone along, marked Jooim with one’s scent, and the others had allowed this one to have the honour. When Jooim’s vessel had been brought back to the star-craft for maintenance, this one had followed and helped to move the mechanism.

Later then, out on the town, had been easy to impose oneself on Jooim’s company and ask about the vessel. Finally, this one had offered to entertain. Jooim had not rejected, and allowed this one to get near. At first, Jooim had smelled strange and sounded alien, even repugnant, but during a few meetings this one had adapted. One had to learn to sit on a chair and lay on a bed, for Jooim liked everything that was reminiscent of Human customs and things in the far-away home world. Finally, this one knew more and got closer to Jooim.

But sometimes, when Jooim had returned to the Human’s star-craft, this one hung up on the roost head down and purred the sounds and scents of The People.

The change could be sensed; perhaps in the scent or in the gestures of the passers-by, in the way the many-coloured fabrics swelled in the wind blowing from the desert. The city buzzed with energy and life. Exchangers had put up their booths and were singing to the passers-by. Acrobats were twisting their bodies to the strangest positions while Humans stood by to wonder. Builders had constructed cottages and carriages in which runners were pulling fun-loving Humans along. Before the arrival of the Humans, the city had been almost empty; every one had been at the hills shaping the other city, the one that was not a Human city but woven according to the system of the Keruchas.

This one glanced around at fellow Otherlings, those who carried, helped, interpreted or just followed the Humans around aimlessly. The People had learned the tongue of the Humans, although Humans “felt” when they talked about the hands and “smelled” when they talked about the protrusion on their face. Otherlings could easily produce the vowels and

consonants, whereas Humans needed interpreters to tell the meaning of the symbols and etchings on the products. Humans did not bother to learn the sound and vibration of tongues. They said they did not have the time.

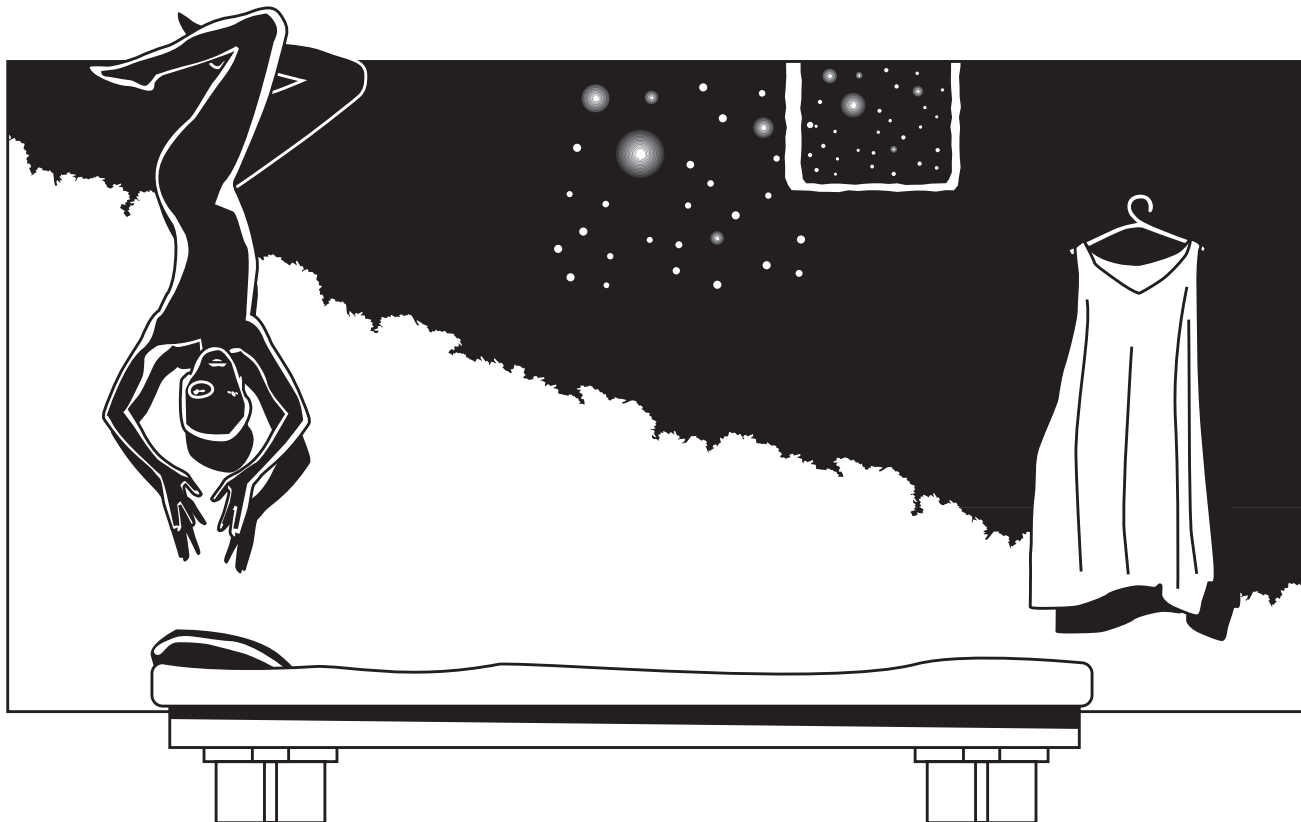
Everywhere the Humans went they attracted deserved attention. The Otherlings walked after them so that the space between the booths was jammed. If any Human stopped by a booth and went to a table to take a cup of sahrana, the place immediately became popular. If the Human’s cup got empty, it needed not ask to have the cup filled again. If a Human as much as glanced twice at an object of the exchangers, the thing was presented to the Human, and the Human got to keep the object by just accepting. There was no wish The People would not have fulfilled. Sometimes the Humans gave off their own stuff, and The People accepted everything, even when they did not need the things. The Humans had un-necessaries, all kinds of things they did not actually need. But how interesting to study and touch and sniff at them. And soon the booths were presenting just the kind of objects that were pleasing to the Humans.

Some of the Humans were embarrassed about the attention, but those who had stayed longest by The People were easy to distinguish. They had learned to enjoy the attentions, when every wish was fulfilled even before there was time to wish aloud. The People were skilled in observing and learning and this pleased the Humans.

This one wandered around, looking for suitable objects at the exchangers, such as might delight Jooim. Everything there was intended for the Humans. This one exchanged products, finally found some suitable looking un-necessaries and took a new pillow for the living apartment’s bedroom. The colour was the same as Jooim’s uniform. The fabric was thin, but this one knew Humans liked soft materials that stroked the sense cells of the hands.

This one walked in the labyrinth of the simple stone buildings; their round windows looked gently back. The sand caressed the soles. This one had sandals, but those were now swinging from their strings at the back – this one did not yet quite manage to walk with sandals, and now as Jooim was away in the star-craft, this one could abandon Human customs for a while.

A representative of the other kind of Humans went past; this one had heard about them but not smelled before. Its scent was strong, almost intoxicating, in spite of an attempt to cover the scent with some artificial perfume. The creature was smaller than an ordinary Human, with a gentler face, broader hips thrust forward, and soft tissue on the chest. The uniform covered and hid the forms, though not completely. Now, this one understood what Jooim had



wished to see with its eyes under the gauze. Jooim wished this one would have buds like that, too.

If that would delight Jooim, the wish would be fulfilled.

The street ended with a high domed building glittering darkly in the sunlight. This one often visited the place and enjoyed sensing how the air around the tower stood still, sounds died away and scents faded. This one stopped at the foot of the building and looked up on high. The wall surface was not even, but full of curling forms, bulges and knobs. This one pressed its head to the building and listened to the building's un-rhythmical breathing. Jooim ought to experience! Jooim would have to understand the beauty of the construction, the cleanliness and all the hard work dedicated to the building. Then Jooim would understand the nature of The People. Jooim would understand what an Otherling was prepared to do.

– What is the other one looking for? a figure said; it was a darkish citizen with piercing eyes and menacing smell. It had sneaked up from behind, had perhaps followed since the booths.

– This one is just admiring the scent of the scenery.

– The other one is contaminated by a Human. Fusty.

This one was startled and looked closer. Was this fellow Otherling one of those who did not like the Humans, who said that the influence of Humans was contaminating, that they should never have been named Firstlings and accepted at all. That the Humans did not understand the cosmic balance of giving and taking, just selfishly wanted everything. But the way had always been that The People who were here first, gave place to those who came from the stars. Why should this time be different?

– Should stay away from Humans, the strange-eyes clicked.

– This one says will do no harm. That is the role of Otherlings. To be the Other. Let Humans be Firstling.

– Humans do not understand, will never understand. The People must stop worshipping such low beings.

– This one believes Humans are needful.

– Humans cannot give anything. They do not even know how to study The People, though they wish to do so. They do not know how to study, they just give the excuse they have no instruments, and hide inside their sky-machine.

– This one believes Humans can give much!

– The other should just forget the Human. Not take its scent into own cub.

– How does the other one dare! This one would never hide its Human!

The tone swayed over to indignation. Jooim was special and behaved properly. This one felt good with Jooim, wanted to study it thoroughly.

– This one has warned the other, it hissed and sneaked off into the building's shadows.

Had anyone followed? Had anyone noticed? No good came from dealings with such ones, might catch a dirty, filthy quarrel-scent that would make difficulties with other People.

To go around with Jooim anywhere was fine, this one would do so. This one would take Jooim to see acrobats and builders, and Jooim would feel good. Jooim was this one's own Human. This one had marked Jooim and no one

would touch it, as long as this one would not lift its scent off Jooim. The only worry was how to make Jooim understand The People better. Was hard, telling a Human of anything, since Human did not want to listen and did not sense the same things. Perhaps this one should give Jooim a gift, even though giving would bind Jooim. Perhaps Jooim would understand the gift's meaning and would then be able to share better.

This one went to wait near the sky-base. Was not possible to get close, but behind the fence one could see the star-craft. Humans had arrived two sun-revolutions ago in their plastic-and-metal craft and constructed a base. This was just a way-station for them; the journey would go on beyond the stars, once they would get what they wanted from the planet: metals and fuel for the star-crafts. Or so they had promised, anyway – now there was talk about a more permanent base, because the mining was taking more time than the leader of the Humans had expected. They had dug themselves in the depths of the earth, burrowing with their machines. They did not let The People close to the star-craft or the mine; that's why there was a surrounding fence which gave one a stunning shock.

When the shadows lengthened, was time to withdraw inside the living apartment. This one stroked the body and hummed and rocked until the upper body started to grow. When the body had grown small buds, this one stopped.

Jooim was angry. It puffed and told to look elsewhere if this one tried to steal a glance. Jooim wanted this one to sit on the chair with legs crossed. This one left one hand hanging free and kept the other over the buds on the chest. In this phase, Jooim never touched though it needed contact. This was hard to understand in the Humans. They were so fragile, wanted to isolate themselves in their loneliness even though the other would have been quite close.

When Jooim was ready, it sat on the bedside and put its head between the hands. It stroked the top of its head. This one got up from the chair, curled up behind its back and sniffed the Human's sweaty skin. Jooim startled at the touch, but soon relaxed.

Jooim was the first Human for this one, and that was something to be proud of, as one always could be about a first one. With a first one, everything was about getting accustomed to and the scents were stronger; with the next one such surrender was no longer possible because one's own scent had already changed and the connection formed.

- Why is Jooim anxious?
- This is unnatural.
- What does Jooim mean?
- Visiting you like this. Yes, they think it's unnatural. The

code says Well, it says all kinds of things. Things are different here. You are different. It just happens with you ... when you always want to please and do just as you are told. In everything.

- Giving means receiving.
- You would even submit to beating. But I'm not going to beat. Some people like to beat.
- This one does not understand.
- We ought not to get involved with... but I'm not doing that. They are crazy. How would I get involved with you? I just want to be there. That's all.

Now the Human laughed. Jerking, nasty laugh that told it was not enjoying. When Jooim was unhappy, it wished to hurt itself. That was strange about the Humans, too. Why hurt oneself?

Jooim's head turned suddenly. Only now did it notice the buds. – You have changed. I've heard people say that you look daily more like us, but I hadn't quite believed it.

- One passer-by had these. What was it?
- A woman, of course.
- What is a woman?

Jooim's face got red. – Oh you are something, you people. Well, a female, does that say anything to you?

- No.
- Of course not.
- This one is just learning the ways of Humans.
- And you don't even understand that you are just being used. And all humans laugh at you and your simple-mindedness.

- Not being used.

Now Jooim again had the bad expression, the kind that wanted to hurt even when it was saying otherwise.

- You just keep whoring here to the whole universe.
- What does that mean?
- You sell each other to every passer-by.
- This one does not understand. The People exchange.
- There've been others, haven't there? Jooim demanded.

It pressed the arm and stared deeply into the eyes. – Have there been others? Before me. How many have you entertained? That's what it's about; you fix yourself to anybody for pleasure.

- This one swears there have been no others. This one met Jooim when Jooim came out of the ship...
- I'm not talking about humans.
- What then is talking about?
- Other visitors. The Cardinal thinks there's been other species before us. Where else would you have got your present technology? Do you understand? Other species. There have been others, haven't there?
- Certainly there have. The Humans are the sixth

Firstlings.

– The sixth!

Jooim snorted and this one scented it did not believe this one at all.

– Yes. During The Real this one has known. First the Naaqui came, those who were slow and tasted of soil, then the Kerucha, the ones who brought the stars close to The People. The last before the Humans were the Kiihani, with them one could not vibrate at all.

– And that's long ago, you claim?

– Since the Naaqui, two hundred revolutions of The People's time-count. This one had its own Firstling then, too.

– You had. You are lying.

Now was this one's moment to laugh. This one had learned to make noises the way Jooim did, but still had to find out when to laugh which way. Laughing had tones like scents.

– Jooim thought this one was young ... thought The People would let a Human be with a young one?

– You're saying you are old?

– Yes. The People do not allow interference with the life of cubs. Cubs are safe. Cubs are clean of scents. And Humans will never see any cores; that is not meant to be.

– I don't know if I ever want to see any cores. I've heard you just split off and that's it.

The scent of Jooim was yellow. Now was the right moment.

– This one has a gift for Jooim.

This one got up and went to the trunk in the corner, opened that and gave Jooim a box. The package was big, almost half of Jooim's length. There even was a bow; the weaver had skilfully copied that according to a ribbon Humans had lost. A special box: Humans gave each other important things in such boxes, hid them first so that the other Human would get a surprise when it got a gift. Must remember: first to hide and then to show. For that reason none of The People told anything to the Humans before they had asked about things several times.

Jooim smiled. It took the box over its knees and drew off the ribbon, but when it got the box open, it flinched. The box fell on the floor, with the gift.

– Jooim liked the hand of this one? This one is giving Jooim a hand.

Jooim got up, face white, and left the room without a word.

This one took up the single hand from the floor and stroked it. What had gone wrong now? A hand was just a hand, easy to reconstruct from any material, one only needed to command the core. Perhaps the material was wrong?

Or else Jooim wanted something more significant. Maybe the hand was not a big enough gift, not sufficient for showing affection.

Jooim stayed away several light-revolutions. Each revolution this one waited for the Human outside the star-craft, never leaving for a moment. Jooim had nothing to do, it had free-time, but it did not come out. Other Humans passed remarks, however. How's things, abo? they said. What's it cost? You do a blow-job? You like the rough trade?

This one understood the coarseness was just fear, anyway. Humans talked about things that were forbidden to them, things they simultaneously hated but were attracted to for strangeness. Humans were not capable of exchanging such gifts with the Otherlings, so this one did not listen. As Jooim said, Humans themselves thought they were behaving contrary to their species, even when they sought company. And they claimed an Otherling disgraced its body, submitting itself to gazes.

But this one had looked into the matter of females. Female and male were connected to reproduction, like the smell of Jooim's ritual. Jooim wanted cubs, or behaviour connected to cubs made him feel good.

When Jooim finally came to the gate and walked close, this one spoke no more about the hand or gifts.

– Will Jooim want to go to the apartment again?

It shook its head.

– Perhaps will be refreshing outside. Have party on the street.

– Some stupid party, sure.

– Not stupid. The People have a party. In honour of the Firstlings.

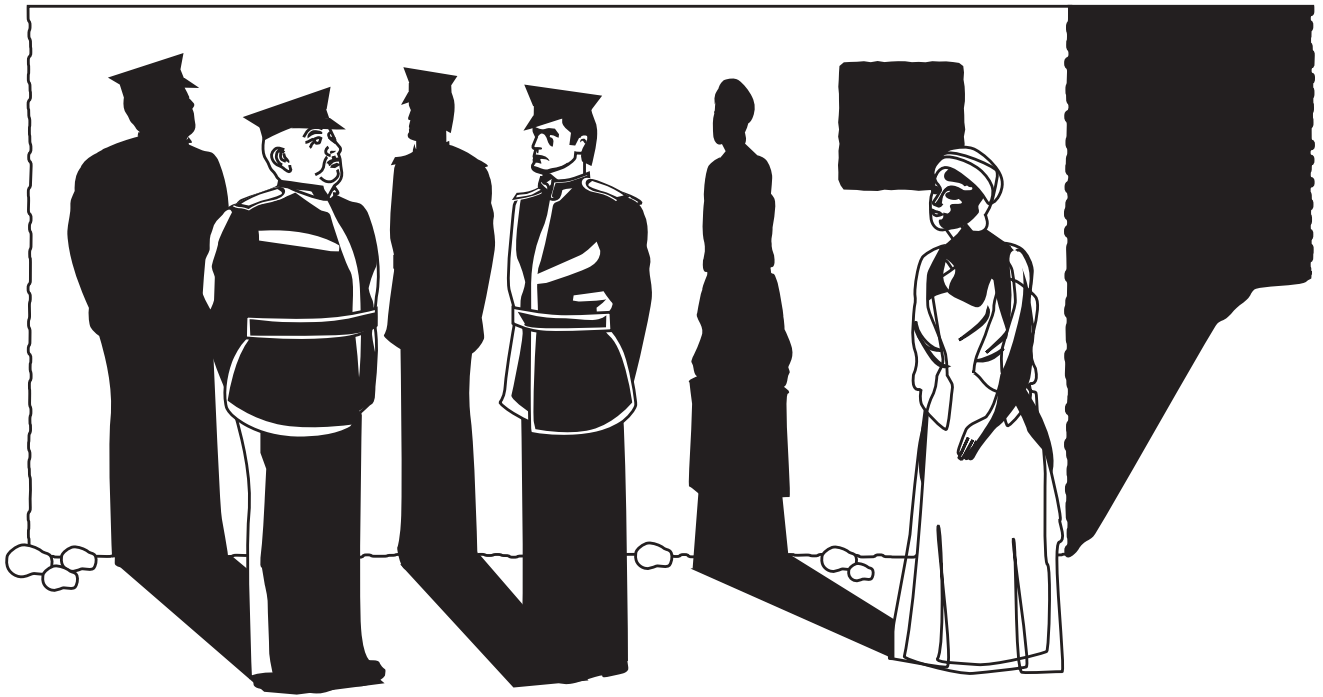
– Okay then.

Jooim walked in front. It was common to see Firstlings and Otherlings together on the street. Humans walked head high, with long strides, and The People tripped along behind, like shadows. Always one step behind, would have been disrespectful to walk ahead of a Firstling. The People had gathered and sang to the Humans. The People had dressed in fabrics brought by Humans, walked and behaved like Humans. The exchangers had produced drinks to the Humans, and The People saw how Humans talked more energetically and how their scent turned livelier or more peaceful at the same time.

Jooim felt better when it saw other Humans on the street. It stopped to talk with them. This one was used to stay quiet, to listen. Was improper for an Otherling to participate, even when it knew what Humans talked about. One Human, obviously, was a command-giver, for Jooim became reserved and tense.

– I've wondered how this place has been preserved like this, the command-giver stated. – Idyllic. You'd have thought some other species would have stayed here.

– Perhaps the circumstances aren't so favourable to



others here, Jooim answered.

– And hardly to these, either, if you look at those emaciated figures.

– Still, they are very much like us.

– You shouldn't fraternize with them too much.

Jooim's sweat was bitter. – I've got this for an assistant, helps to carry my stuff. You know them, they do whatever you ask. And I'm trying to get some sense of this culture.

– Our soldiers are taking this all too lightly. We've been stuck here so many months already; vigilance should not be allowed to relax.

– No, indeed not.

The command-giver looked past as if this one had not existed. – We've autopsied so many of them, the command-giver said. – Every single one of them has that damned stone inside. Even if they look like us, they are far from it. They don't even care about their dead. Just leave the bodies lying around wherever they die.

Jooim glanced, but this one did not care about the words. Of course Humans tried to study The People, brought them inside their ship, made tests, cut open and tried to understand. But what was there to learn that way? Humans did not understand that bodies did not matter. A body could be constructed from rock, or organic material, or gas. Whatever was necessary.

The command-giver picked up a metallic article from a booth. – What about this?

– That's a can they've got from us, said one of the group.

– No, it's a copy manufactured by these aliens. They are skilled in constructing all kinds of things; we've already noticed that.

When the command-giver and the group had gone, Jooim

was silent again.

– We are close to The Edge. This one will show a place.

This one started to tug Jooim by the jacket. It would finally understand the stone slab. This one took a few steps.

– Just to follow now.

Jooim softened. It smelled of repentance, of warmth. It took this one by the arm and leaned on the flank. It smelled the scent of this one and could not help following.

The way to the stone slab was through a narrow alley. Fellow Otherlings stepped aside for Jooim and bowed, and some followed a stretch and might even have brushed at Jooim's clothing.

Until one came on who did not step aside. This one had never seen so strange a member of The People. Its scent was broken and it was reeling forward as if intoxicated. It did not step aside, it did not slow down, it walked straight to Jooim's arms.

– You should watch where you go; Jooim said and pushed the strange one away with its hand.

– This one does not step aside! the strange one said.

– This one does not step aside, Human steps aside, you step aside, I do not step aside, I do not, I go first, I, I, it mumbled, eyes bulging. Jooim remained standing.

The hand of the strange one moved fast, too fast.

Jooim tottered and pain flashed around.

And the strange one laughed and laughed and walked past, a burning shine in the eyes.

This one caught Jooim but Jooim weighed much more and this one fell underneath. Jooim held its stomach, red fluid was leaking between the fingers. The life of Human. This one dug out from underneath Jooim. Everything was red and screaming; fear and hate and pain and danger

rammed into the senses and this one almost fainted under them.

Must do something, quickly. Human was not able to shape itself. Human got broken and the scent of Human turned pale and fragile.

This one lifted Jooim up in the arms and ran, ran until The Edge was there and the world was quiet. Here They watched, here They observed the world, were present.

Suddenly one of Them passed by.

This one said nothing, for one could not speak with Them: They just knew when to come, since They were able to see and observe everything. They were able to sense what anybody felt.

The shadows rushed. It came from behind left, from the corner of the nictitating membrane, where eyes would never reach. In the air, nowhere but still obliquely in front was a surface, and bright light grew and came towards. This one was blue oval from joy; They came to help, They would not abandon.

Jooim's eyes were half open. It had to understand what was happening, for the Being kept it awake. The Being could not be seen, only its shadow reflection in this reality. But this one knew what the Being did; through its own dimension it moved its limbs inside Jooim. It was a small surgeon: for it, the body of Human was open and legible. But it could not come out off the surface; therefore this one moved Jooim back and forth through the surface. Needle sharp limbs pinched Jooim's broken bowels together, removed the broken cells and burned the life-gushing veins fast.

Finally, the Being detached itself from Jooim and wavered close, as much as the surface allowed. This one placed itself in the interface and purred aloud as the Being floated through, stopped for a moment and warmed the Otherling's cells. This one promised to help it, to give a part, to give anything, whatever it would ask. But then it was already gone, and once again this one was unable to achieve unbroken contact. This one vibrated and sizzled, but there was nothing to be done.

This one was shut inside the star-craft and every cover for the body had been removed. Those were just Human un-necessaries, but this one already knew to miss them. The Humans thought this one had done something to Jooim, they wanted justice and revenge. They interrogated and demanded to know who else had been involved, but this one always answered the same: this one would do nothing to Jooim. Never. There had been an accident. The strange one had a mishap; the reflection of the strange one had gone all mixed-up from everything it had learned. But was difficult to know whether the Humans believed this one.

When the Humans were gone, this one went into the cell corner and curled face down. The skin knew the star-craft and



this one felt more assured than in fabrics. This one hummed and rocked. Many light-revolutions passed, no Human came to the room. No liquid was brought, so this one stopped the functions and turned to stone. This one stopped counting time. The star-craft's eyes and ears and noses kept observing, but this one did not care, just wondered about what Jooim had said and what it might really want and how the connection would keep up. This one went through everything filtrated into the mind and reorganized the knowledge into new patterns.

Finally, the room opened and Jooim stood there and the work was interrupted.

– You are free, Jooim said.

This one was not able to answer anything; Jooim had come so suddenly that the body was still numb.

– Stop that.

This one managed to move a limb and life started cycling again.

Jooim half walked, half dragged this one out of the star-craft. This one was wrapped in a long coat Jooim had given. The limbs would not hold up. The guards stared.

– You'd have been executed but I assured them it was not your fault.

– What is troubling? this one asked, for there was pain on Jooim's face. The Human had been wounded, sure, but that was not the issue, for Jooim had been completely healed from the symptoms caused by the metal. It smelled of examination tables, of different substances.

– We are leaving. Altogether.

– Because of this one?

– No. That had already been decided earlier.

Jooim was silent a moment, then whispered. – It's the city on the other side of the planet. The one that's appeared there. It worries the Cardinal.

– But why? The city is fine. Just like the cities in Human pictures. But the city is not complete yet. We have not studied you enough.

Jooim shook its head.

– Is good to know ... even if Jooim is leaving, something will stay here.

Jooim looked at this one, sighed; Jooim tasted the departure in his mouth and drank of that. Everything was not lost; was still a moment of time left. This one leaned on the Human and the Human leaned on this one. Jooim was warm; exuded a kind of life of which this one could only snatch faint notions. There were the smells of metal, plastic, faraway water and crushed stone in Jooim. And the past; this one was able to smell Jooim's dam; the one of whose core Jooim had been formed. And the dam before the dam, the whole chain of ages. This one was not able to see the first core, for The People did not reminiscence such things.

This one vibrated and rocked infinity. This one had lost Jooim. The Human Jooim would never return. Perhaps there would be somebody else instead, but that was not the same thing.

This one stopped the humming and then said it wished to show something, the very thing that had not been shown when the accident had taken place.

Jooim followed to the stone slab. At the base, this one pointed and looked high up: – Look, see what The People are used to sacrificing.

Jooim looked at the construction, shook its head.
– Marvellous architecture, definitely more advanced technique of stone working than the living apartments. Must have taken years to polish this so smooth and make all those ornaments, but what's this got to do with...

– Feel! this one got exasperated and pressed Jooim's hand to the stone.

Jooim went silent, and little by little it experienced that the activity of the stone could be felt. The building pulsed and thought and spoke, and on the stone surface there still could be read what had taken place: even Jooim could discern limbs of citizens, heads criss-crossing and figures hanging upside-down. All still breathing, all still present.

Jooim quickly drew off his hand.

This one's voice was soft, just a whisper of wind. – When the Naaqui visited, The People tried to talk with them, but the Naaqui did not understand. They live a different time than The People. A slower time. That is why The People changed, became like them, dense and protracted, and are still trying to talk with them. Perhaps the meeting will be over in time.

Jooim stared at the construction, horrified. Perhaps Jooim would by and by begin to understand, or perhaps all this only narrowed the understanding. However, this one had chosen Jooim, because Jooim was more sensitive than the others, not as coarse.

– How could you possibly be able to understand them?
Jooim asked.

– The People are used to changing. The People do not care

about matter, only about culture.

– What's the use of that?

– The People learn.

– What was that creature, then? Jooim asked. – You know, the one we saw, who came to me when I was dying? Was that a Naaqui? Some kind of angel?

– That was one of those impossible to talk with. Kiihani. They do try, but They crush the reality of The People and The People crush Their reality. Both have three dimensions, but only two in common, that is why The People can only meet Them at the place called The Edge.

– You have found creatures that live beyond your reality?

– The Kiihani are flat and one can only meet Them at The Edge. They see directly inside a body; that is how They repaired Jooim. The People wish to learn from the Kiihani, but such is impossible with Them. The People are sad about that.

This one saw that Jooim wished to report to the command-giver what Jooim had heard. Jooim wanted to be capable, to be valuable. The words of Jooim would not change anything, however. The Humans would depart.

– This one has been thinking about Jooim. This one has thought about what Jooim is like, what Jooim is made of. What Jooim really wants.

– Your world is crazy. Humans become crazy here, just because you don't...resist. Yes... if you'd sometimes resist, it would be easy to hate you. It's easier in space. Everything is so clearly hostile there.

This one lifted a hand and wanted to console.

– There was never any future in this, Jooim continued.

– This was never anything real, nothing but a dream. But a beautiful dream.

This one let Jooim go. Nothing more could be done.

Jooim took a quick look, then turned around and walked away to its craft.

This one stood and tried once again to reach Jooim's scent



in the wind, to save that in memory, to care for that. Jooim's scent was bright yellow and angular. Jooim believed it would never see this one again. Perhaps that was so, perhaps not. But this one could do nothing to console.

The star-craft ascended with a thunder. The Human-made enclosure was destroyed. The mine was left empty. Now Jooim would get to the space where it had longed to be, where circumstances were cruel and unfavourable to life.

In a way, this one longed to go there, too – this one knew that long ago this one had gone to space after its then Firstling by the Kerucha bridge, had even died there in the interstellar infinity. The body had floated outside the bridge, drifted away and been destroyed in space, but the core had been brought back and its memory had rebuilt the body. The memories had been lost, and even though the others had traced the events to a sense-flow, this one was not able to miss the gossamer sun-wings or the strings connecting the stars. One was not able to miss something completely wiped out; just the things that still had an echo of delicate scents saved in the core.

When Jooim was gone, this one returned to the living apartment and stroked the drooping furniture, the silence vibrating in shades of blue; sniffed once more at Jooim's scent on the bedcover fabrics, and hummed to the memory of the Human.

Without looking, this one saw that outside the window the Otherlings were starting to clean up: wagons, carriages, scaffolding, fences, chairs and booths were first taken to pieces. Everything happened peacefully and orderly. The parts were taken to the hills to be dissolved to minerals and elements. Just one light-revolution and only the stripped-down buildings would be left.

Humans would return in time and there would be many more of them than this time. And they would come with research equipment, destructive weapons, whatever they would build around their fear.

This one had been asked what Humans had to offer. The emotion of fear, at least. The People had not been afraid for ages, of no one, not even of the phenomena of the universe. And then there was the peculiar Human way of building one's life on instruments instead of learning to adapt the body and to control that with the core. Might come a time when The People would need that, too. Perhaps The People would find out how to communicate with the Kiihani. Then The People would be more skilful and wiser again, and able to receive the next Firstlings.

This one did not partake in the deconstruction, this one had another job. This one called the core and told that to give out and bring up a cub core. That had been carried along for a long time, without knowing what this one would do with

it. Now this one shaped directions for the cub core, told about Jooim's molecules, cell structure and scent. This one even knew of female and male, now. When the core had been prepared, it remained by one's side to wait for this one's efforts. There were different materials, elements, minerals and particles to be acquired so that the cub could be formed. The living apartment was full of Jooim's cell structure and tracing would be easy. That would take several light-revolutions, but finally the core would have constructed the cub. It would look like Jooim, but not be Jooim; it would be an independent free citizen. Somebody with the core of The People and the shape of Human.

This one was happy – this one would be able to give Jooim a gift, even when Jooim was gone.

When Humans would return, The People would be ready. Several others had retired and done like this one. Otherling learns again to be like Firstling. When Humans would return and see a creature like themselves, a creature that could talk and behave like them, perhaps Humans would pause. If that would not be enough, The People would know how to defend themselves. The People had all the knowledge that had been collected and exchanged from Firstlings passing by during thousands of ages.

The People were not alone, nor weak. Finally, Otherling was always Firstling. The People would manage as always before.

But still this one kept longing for Jooim's scent, the power that made this one vibrate and sway upon the whirling currents of senses.

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About the author

Anne Leinonen (b. 1973) is a writer and editor who completed her M. Sc in the University of Helsinki, majoring in geography. Together with Eija Lappalainen <<http://grafomania.wordpress.com/kirjoja/eija-lappalainen/>>, she has written realistic young adult novels, as well as speculative short stories which have been published in a collection "Valkeita lankoja. Tarinoita toisista todellisuuksista" ("White Threads. Stories of Other Realities"). She has won two Atorox awards. Leinonen is active in many writers' societies and in the Finnish science fiction and fantasy community. She is the editor-in-chief of an on-line magazine Usva ("The Mist") <<http://www.usvazine.net>>, which publishes Finnish speculative fiction.



STAGES OF BERLIN

M.G. Soikkeli, translation: Liisa Rantalaiho

Rosa found the man abhorrent. His first touch gave her the shudders; later on she felt amazed by her instinct.

"Hansen", the man greeted her with a handshake. "You'll work as my subordinate; that is if you are pleased with our job offer, and if we are pleased with you."

They sat separated by the table, the man in his sweat-stained shirt and Rosa in her electric blue microfibre skirt. The interview proceeded fast and formally, since instead of mutual trust, they sought for a quick reason to get rid of each other.

"What about pigs?" Hansen asked, emphatically. He'd pushed aside a pile of manuals, slain in their vacuum package, to see his interviewee better. "How would you solve their suicides?"

From Hansen's look, Rosa tried to figure out whether the man had in mind a definite event in the firm's history. But evidently he was just referring to the phenomenon itself. The self-immolations of pigs had been a setback, but that was generally considered a bygone phase in creode programming.

"Pigs can be trained together with other animals", said Rosa.

"I don't mean their training, but the actual situation on the stage."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't aware you are using domestic animals."

"We don't, usually", the man answered indifferently. His right, rose-tattooed hand rested on the table, doing imperceptible exercises. From the other end of the table, the stains on his shirt were big enough to look like moon craters. From Hansen's movements Rosa judged that he didn't feel comfortable in his room, neither by himself nor in company. "But one never knows on what we have to resort. Even pigs. And as you may know, the success of our company is ultimately based on animals. Whereas you, *fräulein* Luronne..."

"Animals present no problem to me, if that's what you mean. I've started with dogs, dealt with pigs, directed birds to recreation areas. None of those are any more difficult to program than dogs. All creodes are ninety percent dog."

"But this approach you represent..."

"Synesthetic staging", Rosa specified.

"Well, you've been recommended as the best in your field, *fräulein* Luronne, and I have no doubt that you have the stuff we need. But creodes are not your primary area, and our firm might perhaps at the moment need a somewhat different *programmer* than you."

The man had a heavy look and a low, bleak voice, his tie hanging round his neck like a dog's leash. Rosa was reminded of the creode dogs used in the university. Dogs were the generally approved test species for a new code; but using dogs, she actually had become aware of the possibilities inherent in synesthetic staging. The colour of a dogs' hairy coat had proved less important than its smell. The smell of a lap dog or the odour of a hound made a person do strange things, when they reminded her of the lost world of childhood.

"Creode programming is a part of synesthetic staging", Rosa explained. "For a programmer that's just a change in viewpoint."

"Of course", the man admitted. In spite of his taut look he now seemed relaxed, as if he'd already decided how far he was going to prolong the interview. "But creode programming is precisely what our performances require. Dow-Jones is the first American-type law-firm in Europe, and we are expanding our activities. We wish to be sure about our employees, especially the programmers."

"That's just why I have applied for this job", Rosa interposed. She, too, felt more relaxed as she noticed the man glancing furtively out the window. In spite of his advertising speech, the field executive Hansen just wanted to get out of this office where he wasn't feeling at home. And yet the man had demanded that Rosa should arrive punctually at seven forty-five, so as to get the interview over before his *real* work. Now what ever might that be?

Hansen set an open laptop up on the table and lifted the lid just enough for Rosa to see a photo on the monitor. The picture had been taken in the middle of a crowd.

"I'm going to level with you, *fräulein* Luronne. Your actual job experience is quite modest compared to your

education. Before this, you've only been employed by the VoxWagen."

"Quite. I spent three years there, in a regular job."

"And you left on your own initiative?"

Rosa leaned back in her chair and forced herself to consider the situation from the man's point of view. Field executive Hansen had the same doubts every one would have when they had to hire an employee pre-selected by their boss. The man tried to get her to reveal her shortcomings. In case the superior's choice proved catastrophic, Hansen could afterwards point to the interview record.

"You surely must have all the information in front of you, Mr. Hansen", Rosa sighed. "I was fired. I participated in a demonstration against the VoxWagen and the new autobahn and got fired."

"And against what are you going to demonstrate if you work at the Dow-Jones?" the man asked, not bothering to hide his amusement.

Rosa felt irritated by the situation. Director Dow-Jones had promised her the job and said that the discussion with Hansen would be a mere brief formality. The man stared at her, expecting that she'd transform into her picture. Just a few years younger.

"I'll be as direct as you, Mr. Hansen", Rosa said and looked her interviewer straight into the eyes. "I had a retirement contract with the VoxWagen, so I could not resign without losing my apartment and my bonus. Participating in the demonstration was the only way to make the VoxWagen fire me."

"And why did you wish to resign?"

Rosa glanced at the walls. Somewhere there was a hidden recorder, perhaps a camera, too. So who cared.

"I spent three years at the VoxWagen before I realised that a staging designer had no chances for advancement there, nor to develop her skills further. They understand as little about synesthetic staging as a wolf about meringue, and besides dogs and monkeys, we used only asimovs in the creode parts. That kind of work is pure punishment."

Hansen was listening with concentration. He seemed happy that Rosa was prepared to share such sad memories with him.

"Well, we use creodes in many different functions, too", Hansen said. "Although not in such extreme circumstances as a car factory does. We cannot afford to waste even asimovs like your former employer did, from what I've heard. However, we expect our employees to be able to adjust to new situations. You know the principle, fräulein Luronne: the law is as it's programmed. That's why a programmer on the field is required to show absolute loyalty to the firm."

Loyalty to you, Rosa translated in her mind. "Was there anything else?"

Field executive Hansen pointed to the photo, which looked

ageless in the monitor's resolution.

"Creode programming also requires insight into human nature, and you are relatively ... young, at least for field work."

"And insight into human nature means that one understands creodes?" Rosa asked.

"Exactly", said Hansen. "I was getting to that. Insight into human nature requires that you understand, for instance, what is a proper animal to use with a certain purpose in mind. You are too young to remember the first generation of animal creodes. But I suppose you've read Herr Dow-Jones' book about the subject?"

"Thoroughly. That was an obligatory exam."

She forbore to mention that in the university "The Return of Totem Animals" had been considered more a literary autobiography than a useful manual. Synesthetic staging was the current byword, but if they still believed in animal nostalgias in law-firms like the Dow-Jones, she'd better show she knew the classics of the field.

Especially if she applied for a job in The Classic's own company.

Hansen bent forward. He screwed up his eyes as if measuring the applicant's emission of reliability.

"Dow-Jones has a good reputation both in Germany and the United States. The firm is prosperous, for in the German territory we only handle high class political tasks. In the field we often use several creodes, including borgeses and calvinos. Besides, one of the creodes will be constantly assigned to your personal use. As to the stagings, each creode remains the programmer's responsibility. And the programmer answers to me. Understood, fräulein Luronne?"

"Understood," Rosa said.

"Director Dow-Jones will be present in the larger operations, but out in the field you'll have no time or chance for academic discussions on how a scene *should have been* staged. We concentrate on what the creodes do. We have to place enough creodes on alternative scenes and to follow the law-stock-exchange with a judge. We have to make fast decisions. Sometimes the success of an operation depends on decisions made within a ten second time window, fräulein Luronne. Then, a mere synesthetic staging won't be enough; instead you have to know what our creodes are capable of doing."

Rosa looked the man in the eyes. The fire in them had gone out eons ago.

"I have discussed the firm's operations with director Dow-Jones," Rosa said in a matter-of-fact manner. "I believe I'll do very well with the creodes."

"And you believe you know how to apply both animals

and humans?”

“A creode’s a creode,” Rosa said.

Hansen leafed through the pile of papers next to his laptop, but couldn’t find anything more to say.

“I guess that’s it, then. Welcome to the company, fräulein Luronne.”

They shook hands at the door. The man’s touch was still dry and reserved.

“You may leave the cell sample with the secretary,” Hansen informed. “You’ll have a creode at your disposal as soon as you start the job.”

A’rosa waited patiently, her eyes focused on the sales person’s face. The rest of the kiosk’s interior stayed outside her perceptions, since she did not want to see the packages spread on the shelves nor the containers pushed underneath the glass counter. The scope of assortment was a mystery A’rosa could not afford to encounter. She knew rational choice was a dangerous area in her programming. It was a puzzle to her whatever for a human might need such a multitude of different chocolate bars and sanitary towels, and she could not afford to think about it, especially not now.

A’rosa waited. There were two customers ahead of her, arguing about buying synthetic or biodynamic tobacco. The former was more poisonous, and the latter would use up more natural resources. Which would be the more ecological choice?

“Bio-cigarettes send a dangerous message to the environment,” one of the customers was debating. “It encourages one to see slow self-destruction as biologically natural.”

“On the other hand, a bio-cigarette means natural self-destruction,” the other corrected. “Therefore a bio-cigarette is a healthier message than a synthetic cigarette.”

The sales woman said nothing; she was just listening, stock-still.

The time marginal A’rosa had counted on was imminently narrowing down. She’d been busy programming the block model of Morthalia in a twenty hours field shift, until her fingers got tired. The day of the operation was ahead and they might have to make sudden code changes. She had to get new batteries before the operation started.

She’d counted on getting to the kiosk and back before Rosa arrived. She’d climbed up from the basement and crossed the street, carefully using the pedestrian crossing. Only to get stuck in an impossible situation in a queue. She couldn’t leave, since she’d already computed getting to the kiosk in time, but neither could she jump the queue.

Finally, the sales woman woke up, noticed her and beckoned her to come forward.

“You are the bicycle lady, aren’t you? I’ve seen you on the

Kaiserdamme, but you’ve never stopped by this kiosk.”

A’rosa answered dutifully:

“I’m sorry, but I think you mean my human. I’m just her creode.”

The sales woman stared at her. Her skirt bore the abundance of all possible colours and shapes; this was the last service trade where the workers still could dress the way they wished. The last one where humans served both humans and creodes.

The woman asked what she wanted.

“Finger batteries,” A’rosa answered.

“American or European?” the woman asked.

“European, thank you,” said A’rosa and flashed her friendliest smile. But the cigarette buyers made disapproving faces to each other. Visiting the cigarette stand was part of their daily ritual, and A’rosa had interrupted that with her unseemly hurry.

”KDD or KU?”

A’rosa showed her hands. KU was the only size used in fine motor coordination.

“Ten or thirty days?” the woman continued.

A’rosa considered the matter. She ought to have interrupted the shopping incident since the sales person’s voice was getting dangerously tense. On the other hand, thought A’rosa, I cannot possibly be the first creode to stop by this kiosk and buy batteries at the turn of a month. So what’s making this human so peevish?

It’s my politeness, A’rosa concluded. It insults the natural unresponsiveness of this human.

So, the situation was trickier still. She couldn’t exit the situation without being polite, but politeness as well as dry matter-of-factness both would insult this person.

“I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed your daily business, madame,” said A’rosa. “But I do have an urgent need for those batteries. The charge in my hands is running short and I’ll not be able to accomplish my daily work duties if I don’t get new finger batteries.”

The woman opened a box of KDD-batteries.

“How many do you want?”

“As you may guess, madame,” A’rosa said and showed her hands again. “I’d need exactly one for each side, left and right. But I’m speaking about KU batteries, not the KDD ones.”

The sales woman was following her own thoughts, not listening to what A’rosa had said.

“You are an artist?”

“A secretary, dear madame,” A’rosa smiled. “Those batteries...”

As she tried to analyze the situation A’rosa realized what the couple in front of her had been busy doing during the short conversation. She perceived the analysis was leading

to another dead end. According to her code, she ought to have warned the sales woman about the change, but a higher code command prevented her from acting. Anxiety was not one of her appointed tasks, except when it concerned her own human.

And then A'rosa realized why and how the couple had made the kiosk keeper nervous. Cigarettes had just been the key to unsettling the woman's power of deduction.

Borgeses.

"Thank you... and have a nice day," A'rosa said quickly and backed out of the kiosk.

She didn't look back since the code once jumped did not call for that, and she understood anyway what the borgeses' trick would mean. They had changed the places of all the cigarette boxes on the shelves. The next customer would get the very poison he didn't want.

A'rosa walked to the pedestrian crossing, glanced quickly to both sides, crossed the Kaiserdamme and walked to the lane separating Morthalia and Eulenspiegel.

From the pond that opened at the lane's end light mist wafted about, dimming the nooks that descended into the cellar level. No one was in sight.

She got to the cellar door before Rosa appeared, curving on her bicycle.

"Good morning!" Rosa's dimples were set on the exact spot A'rosa had seen in the mirror.

"Good morning, fräulein."

Rosa stopped the bicycle in front of the cellar steps. She rolled down her shorts' legs, turned the windproof side of her jacket inside and straightened its sleeves. She slipped her cap into the briefcase she took from the rack and adjusted the parting of her hair to its proper place.

"How do my shoes look? There's a building site near the bridge and these may have gotten a bit muddy though the way's been dry otherwise for weeks."

A'rosa assured her that the shoes were just dusty.

Rosa stopped in action and straightened up.

"But something's wrong?"

"Not exactly, fräulein. Not exactly. I just came out to meet you, to inform you about the situation before you come in."

Rosa tensed herself as if preparing to jump again on her bicycle.

"Has the judge arrived?"

"Yes, fräulein. He is Herr Wurstenmaal, who only judges the crimes committed by foreigners. As far as I've heard, we are ready to start the operation this afternoon."

A'rosa could not mention anything about the borgeses she'd seen in the kiosk, since her code did not include commenting on the doings of other creodes. Anxiety was not a part of her personal code, either, but of the protocol she followed in the company's service. Her duty was to worry only about

such matters that might concern the company, and about which she was morally responsible to her human, Rosa. The incident at the kiosk was buried in her memory.

"And who else?"

"Herr Hansen is responsible for safety, fräulein. And you need to know that agent Sinfain will participate in the meeting, too."

The April morning was beautiful. Rosa cycled by the routes where she could fall behind other traffic and observe it from behind, in peace. She felt no hurry, for the bike's gears took care of the right pace with respect to the optimal travel time.

The road crossed the river and then the channel. The last few kilometres she had to bike amid the Kaiserdamme's bustling traffic, but that was just what she'd been waiting for, felt it as an approaching vibration in her bare legs. The powerfulness of the traffic aroused a feeling of participation in a broad current of events that nothing could slow down nor hold back.

The bike was Rosa's steed, from its saddle she observed the Kaiserdamme, Berlin's longest and least used stage. She watched the men talking with their cars and the women who compared the colours of their clothes in the mild light of the spring morning. All that was a stage set waiting for its proper play; all clothes were role dresses learned from the media; all talk, lines copied from yesterday. Creodes could not be distinguished from people, for the most dutiful of humans were just like asimovs, and the loiterers leaning on the house corner could not with any certainty be distinguished from borgeses. One would hardly see calvinos at this time of day.

I wish this calm would be the omen of a storm, Rosa thought. I wish I could see the storm that would push forward on the Kaiserdamme and make the city tremble. A tsunami or a typhoon of mobs – the nightmare common to all humans. The wolves and bears of the subconscious were modest softies compared to the common human fantasy, where the city's bustle changed to a dinosaur and traffic noise to its roars, and the hooligans' rage to its fury; that the forces moving behind the city's façade would find a shared form that would break its grid.

In the theatre of Berlin, on the stage of Morthalia.

As long as Berlin had existed, people had gathered there from all over Europe to throng on its streets, to join a parade that would crush its props, the shining mirrors of the windows. Here it would happen, here where even the houses were just a part of through traffic. While in the other European cities the houses were commemorated for the celebrities who had been born or lived in them, the plaques of Berlin told who had been shot in which building or

drowned from which bridge.

The bike between her legs seemed to purr of her eagerness.

Since she was observing the traffic almost mechanically, the job ahead could fill her thoughts and rouse a frenzy of images. This operation would be the largest legal staging in which she had participated so far. The largest, almost too perfect. So many alternative situations had been coded into the operation that the target ought to have no chances of avoiding his sentence.

She'd been programming the present operation since the firm had received the commission from Interpol. Selecting and planting the creodes according to the target's psychological profile was just craft work; only arranging the code to music demanded going more thoroughly into the particulars of the stagings. With music, all the creodes included in the operation could be programmed simultaneously, so that there'd be no inconsistency in their principles. Each creode would follow the joint programming like an opera libretto.

When Rosa had arrived in Berlin the first time, she had yet imagined that the parade of death would consist of the cars in which the citizens moved around like knights in their armour. Then she had studied syntesthetic staging, and finally, working for the Dow-Jones, understood that even staging wouldn't be enough without suitable creodes. Soon after joining the firm she'd tired of participating in demonstrations. In the operations, the creodes manifested the human shame more efficiently than any dirty banderol sheets. And such deliberate defamation could not fade away from the city's structure.

So far the creodes had played roles that only had to do with weaknesses learned from the past of single human beings. They had not been coded for anything more. But some day the creodes would surpass their codes, just as in the dawn of time humans had surpassed theirs, coded in the DNA. Here it would happen, once the time and place were right.

By the break of traffic lights she crossed the boulevard and slipped in the alley between the hotel and Eulenspiegel. Her personal creode stood obediently waiting at the door to the operation site. While she put her clothes in order, Rosa checked with the creode which persons were going to participate in the operation.

"And who's leading the team?"

"Herr Dow-Jones, fräulein."

She folded her bike by its main joint and hung the mechanism like a bow on the hooks by the staircase. The bow blended with the decorations of the façade like a cog in a machine. Rosa blew it an approving kiss, smack.

Followed by the creode she descended the steps, opened the door with her identity card and arrived in a long low cellar corridor. On both sides of the corridor stood piles of cardboard boxes with the brand mark of a creode factory in Potsdam.

"What's in the boxes?"

"The ducks, fräulein. They were brought directly from the factory just this morning."

"And in that canister? What's this: *Trinitrotoluene*. *Handle with care*. Who's ordered this?"

"You have, fräulein. Do you remember the borges you've placed as bartender? He suggested you use the stuff on the stage set in the bar. Handling and possession of the material are quoted as two hundred point crimes by today's exchange rate, once we get the target to approach the bar."

"I see, excellent," Rosa laughed and set the canister in the corridor corner. "Obviously the borges knows what to do with its toluene. Are all the creodes present and ready?"

"Yes, fräulein. They are waiting for us in the storeroom. I can prepare the calvino's makeup when we come from the meeting."

At the end of the corridor they entered a dimly illuminated lift. When the door closed, Rosa opened the grip edging of her shirt and lengthened it to a dress. Arosa followed her example.

"What about the authenticity of the duck code?" Rosa asked. "Has that been checked?"

"Yes, fräulein. It's the original code used by the LuftStoche. It's suited to tame ducks, too, regardless of whether the program is modulated for asimovs or borgeses."

The lift descended and stopped. They arrived in the bomb-safe room rented from the media house.

The space fitted up for the operation centre was a low, clean underground space kept fresh by ventilators. The table was formed like a sickle moon, its ends rounded to command seats. Altogether the table placed eight niches and eight low-backed chairs; eight, since no more participants could be included according to the firm's principles. Eight persons were the absolute maximum in legal negotiations, if one wished to keep them confidential.

Hansen was sitting at one end of the table, judge Wurstenmaal and agent Sinfain on the sides. Rosa and the creode sat down on each side next to Hansen, following the protocol. From under the table everyone took up a pre-checked briefcase and opened it on the table. An infra-red net was turned on over the table, invisible but present like an occult illusion.

Only then did director Dow-Jones enter the room. A shining white terry shirt tapered off to the dark brown, erect neck. The face was black and rounded like a pear, but the yellowish beard and sideburns made it look distinguished. Whatever the clothes or shadows Orbus Dow-Jones was wearing could only emphasize his authority.

Dow-Jones greeted the invited participants with his

eyes. Besides being the first American stock exchange manager on German soil, he also was the first black person to operate on such an influential area as law exchange. Rosa knew he was proud of his achievement, and for a good reason.

No one spoke until the room had been sealed up. The green light over the door informed that there were no extra cameras or listening devices in the room. In accordance with the firm's guidelines the meeting was opened by the person responsible for the operation's programming.

"Esteemed officials," Rosa began, nodding towards the judge and agent Sinfain. Neither of those had any voice in the meeting. They participated just to attest for the record that the target had been given an absolute freedom of choice in the plans. "As you know, the target of the operation is a Russian scientist, professor Bronstein. Our principal is Interpol and the date of operation is today.

The day's Lex-index is 4.2384; therefore, by the German law we are entitled to operate using methods within our competence. Let it be noted in the record that the official representatives are judge Wurstenmaal and agent Sinfain."

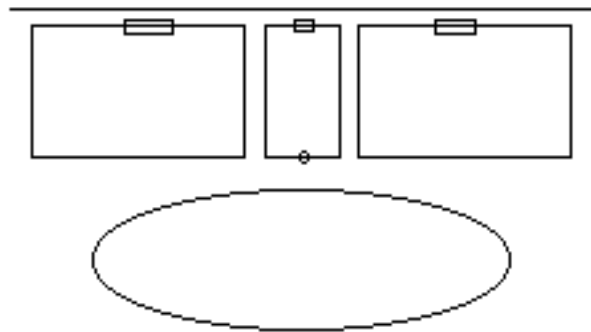
"Has Interpol provided any further information from Kiev?" Hansen asked.

"No, unfortunately," Rosa stated. She nodded towards director Dow-Jones. "For the company it's sufficient that while in Berlin, the target will be under the jurisdiction of sections quoted in the international law-exchange. Whatever crimes he will commit here, warrant a local sentence and its execution."

"Go on," Hansen invited.

After the company had agreed to take on a job, negotiations were not required except for the details of the operation.

"Professor Bronstein has now been in Berlin for six days. Every day he has taken the same route, and knowing the target's character profile he's going to walk along the Kaiserdamme today, too. We have chosen the pavement by the hotel's façade as one stage set. Here you can see the plan drawing of the area: on the north side it's bordered by the busy Kaiserdamme and in south by the pond of Charlottenburg. On the left we have the office building of Der Eulenspiegel, where we get this cellar space for our disposal. In the middle stands the hotel Morthalia; on the right the Polish horse factory, Hippodomain Corporation. The pond southward from the buildings, part of the old Charlottenburg outdoor recreation area, has been left completely outside the operation. We will stage the first scene on the Kaiserdamme and the rest inside the Morthalia."



For the negotiations between the company and the officials, Rosa had ordered her creode to model both the building and its immediate environment. It was safer to execute a sentence only after the victim had been got outside on the street again.

"According to the preliminary plan, we can only stage a maximum of hundred points on the Kaiserdamme, therefore the main part of professor Bronstein's crimes will take place inside the hotel."

The necessary parts of the hotel were depicted on the table. The Morthalia's outer walls gleamed green and the inside parts were outlined in blue. The stairs and lobbies were marked red, so were two of the hotel rooms.

"Why just the hotel?" Hansen asked. He knew the reason of the choice well enough, but wished to point out to the officials present how carefully the operation had been planned.

Rosa pointed at the hotel's street side facade with a light stick.

"This is one of the three Morthalia hotels, and as you know, we have used them before in this type of operations. Inside the hotel we can place several different stagings, with a potential of altogether three and a half thousand points. On the key staging we aim for a five hundred point crime, so there we use the special expertise of our company, stage setting based on the target's totem animal. And in case the setting seems to disturb the functioning of the creodes, we have reserved another, neutrally staged room two floors higher up."

"I'm still worried by this Morthalia. Can you be sure, Rosa, the target is not going to recognize any of the situations as staged?" Hansen went on, inflexibly. Rosa noted Hansen wasn't addressing her according to their respective positions. If the points for workplace laws would go up during the month, she'd be in a position to compile such a memorandum from the records that Hansen wouldn't dare participate in a single operation after that.

But there were yet more charges:

"Looking at the character profile you've assembled, the target's choices are based on rational rather than emotional

considerations. Let alone that he'd visit places like the Morthalia. Isn't that so?"

Rosa was prepared for the question, but had not found a good answer for it. She tried to formulate her explanation so that Dow-Jones wouldn't be obliged to defend her.

"Mr Hansen, each stage has been selected according to the target's personal history. It is precisely his passion for rational action which makes it impossible for the target to turn back and question his earlier choices. The target will believe the new situation is caused by his own free decisions. The stagings are set so that when the target encounters them, he's going to make even more personal choices than he usually does."

"That's exactly what I mean," Hansen challenged. Contrary to most people, he pushed his head forward while he laughed or attacked. His eyes came close to Rosa on his side. "I've sometimes seen a situation where a five hundred point staging turns to a nightmare. Even half of the people get panicked when they find themselves in a completely inexplicable situation. Some of them flee because they can't stand the stress, some behave unpredictably. Now I'm not a psychologist myself, but..."

"But I am," interrupted director Dow-Jones. "May I explain how I see a person such as professor Bronstein?"

"You are welcome," Hansen mumbled and cracked his knuckles. Bristly hairs stuck out from the rose tattoo in his wrist.

"Professor Bronstein is, as far as we know, one of the world's most brilliant biochemists, a top scientist doing such unique research that he has no rivals. He's been doing his research alone and isolated in his laboratory in Kiev. He hardly understands himself the importance of his work. Our commission is based on the fifty five percent *probability* that he's going to invent a new biological weapon, more effective than any previous ones."

"Director Jones – do you think this actually has some relevance to the staging we intend to set in the hotel room?" Hansen asked.

"Yes, exactly, I was just coming to that," said Dow-Jones, as if he'd welcomed the interruption of his subordinate.

"Professor Bronstein is a person whose thinking is directed by the situation. It might be called autonomous problem solving, where the theory of the previous phase becomes the method of the next situation. His own hypothesis of how some fact can be explained on one level of generalizability will become the fact of the next generalization. That is our advantage: persons like the Bronstein case are so impractically theoretical they trust their instinct blindly."

"I see; I hope that's what's going to matter on the stagings, too," Hansen said abruptly. The judge and the agent kept sitting quietly and looking at the others as if they were a part of the luminous hologram on the table. "How many creodes

do we need?" Hansen asked.

"Six altogether," Rosa answered. "My plan is this: one calvino is reserved for the five hundred point stage, two asimovs out on the street, and three borgeses on different sites in the hotel. One borges in the reception, another in the lobby bar, and a third one to watch the lift as a chambermaid."

"Sounds good," said Dow-Jones.

"And what about the agent?" Hansen asked. "Will she wait outside or inside the hotel?"

Rosa pointed to the hotel roof. "The place reserved for the agent is here. Regardless of whether the target leaves by the front or back door of the hotel, agent Sinfain will have an unobstructed view for the length of two blocks."

"That'll be quite enough," stated Sinfain. She was dressed in a motley body stocking and an equipment belt buckled with the agent logo. Her hair was fastened in such a tight knot that from Rosa's point of view she looked almost bald. Otherwise, the agent seemed more relaxed than the company representatives. As far as she was concerned, the operation could be late or be delayed a week, she was participating on the basis of the official hourly rate.

The judge nodded and made a note on the memory plate of his briefcase. Dressed in a yellow-and-black uniform, Wurstenmaal stuck out from the otherwise black-and-white party. For the record he asked who was responsible for which part of the operation.

"Fräulein Luronne is responsible for organizing the creodes," Dow-Jones presented. "This creode is assisting her. Field executive Hansen is responsible for safety and for cooperation with the official representatives of the buildings. Each creode has a recording camera as part of its standard equipment, besides which we've placed a fixed camera on the main staging and in its substitute room. Microphones are connected to lamps and they'll be switched on as soon as somebody enters the room and turns on the light. We'll get real-time voice and picture connections here in the command centre, and of course a satellite link to the city law-exchange."

"And what are the exchange rates at the time of starting?"

Rosa opened the wall screen: "Traffic misdemeanours are going down drastically; otherwise it's quiet in the exchange. As a situational advantage we are using the ethnic clauses that were rated in the exchange in the beginning of this year, since there are several notable precedents. The intimate crimes have gone through several value slumps during the winter, but gross adultery is still higher than for instance any property crime."

"So you trust that your main staging will remain over

the rate of five hundred points in the exchange,” the judge asked. He was curious for other than purely professional reasons.

“Absolutely,” Dow-Jones promised.

The judge turned to Rosa who was sitting next to him:

“I don’t wish to sound as if I didn’t trust your plan, *fräulein* Luronne. But I’d be interested to know how you intend to use animal creodes? Your staging is set inside a hotel and above ground.”

“There, too, we are using as emotional stimulus a situation that is based on professor Bronstein’s youth experiences near Kiev,” Rosa explained. “According to the background information we’ve assembled, the professor has been an enthusiastic hunter before his research career, and the staging in question is based on a situation which combines his happiest childhood and youth memories. It is director Dow-Jones’ suggestion that we use a well-timed flock of ducks.”

Dow-Jones looked at Rosa without hiding his admiration. “*Fräulein* Luronne has staged the hotel room precisely according to the information we have received from professor Bronstein’s native place. Synesthetic staging combined with a nostalgic flock of ducks and a calvino level creode will be, if the judge allows a pun, a fatal combination.”

During the era of fixed laws Hansen had been working as a port cop in Hamburg. In the crimes he was used to solve, most of the victims had been creodes. He was so used to seeing creodes beaten up and mutilated that a battered body meant no more to him than a used-up vehicle.

“It doesn’t look genuine.”

The calvino which Rosa and her assistant were preparing for the main staging was in his eyes just an amateurishly made-up carcase.

A’rosa was spreading black and red greasepaint in the corner of the other creode’s eye. Rosa stood behind her assistant and compared the make-up with the illustration made for the main staging. For some reason, A’rosa’s brush kept slipping and made the greasepaint spread on the victim’s cheek. Now and then Rosa had to retouch her creode’s mistakes.

Obviously, the make-up booth constructed in the cellar corridor was too crowded for one human and two creodes. The table could seat only one woman or creode at a time. The only side room, nothing but a stock closet, was reserved for the other creodes, the asimov couple and the three borgeses. The creodes sitting in the side room waited for their assignment to begin and listened at the programming march music by earphones.

“It doesn’t look genuine,” Hansen repeated.

Rosa pointed to a detail in the corner of the calvino’s

mouth. A’rosa took a small hypodermic syringe and tried to shoot it in the creode’s lip. Rosa had to guide the trembling needle to the correct place. After a moment, the mouth puffed up as if swollen from a sudden punch.

“The swelling’s supposed to keep until midnight,” Rosa calculated.

“Looks like some bloody kissing disease.”

Rosa looked at him over her digiplate.

“Well, you ought to know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You think I’d touch a damn creode?”

Rosa turned her back to the man.

“We *have* to talk, Rosa,” Hansen said.

“So talk.”

Hansen glanced in the stock closet where the other creodes were sitting on newspaper piles. The quiet asimovs were reading old copies of the *Eulenspiegel*, noting down their comments between the columns with red pens. The borgeses were sitting apart. They were playing the game of “Famous last expressions”, sole experts in its subtleties.

Hansen closed the closet door.

“We’ve never used birds on any staging before,” he explained to Rosa. “If this idea of a duck flock fails, it’ll be your responsibility. You understand? I’ve put it down in the record that the design of the main staging is your responsibility, yours alone. I control the direction only to the point where the target is enticed into the room. After that, everything depends on the staging and on that creode looking like a dreigroschen hooker.”

Rosa turned around. Her dimples stretched like scars underneath the cheeks: “I have personally composed the program for the last stage. I can also take care of the duck flock’s timing, if you indeed wish the main staging to be in all respects my responsibility. This make-up is the final finishing touch in the calvino’s character. We have prepared her to look exactly like professor Bronstein’s old flame. The suspender corset, the pump-up top, the length of skirt, even the pattern of the buttons is copied according to the look of women’s fashion in Ukraine forty years back. Herbs growing in Bronstein’s native place have been added in the perfume.”

Hansen stepped closer and chuckled, amused, when he saw the woman step backwards in the closet. The fame earned on the Reperbahn must have followed him to Berlin like a harbour stink stuck in the clothes.

“I for my part believe,” Hansen warned, “that Bronstein doesn’t even understand animals. Neither bears nor asimovs, neither rabbits nor borgeses, neither foxes nor calvinos. Not ducks, either. Dow-Jones’s western fables will be completely incomprehensible to Bronstein. And I wouldn’t even be too sure of whether he prefers women.”

“He has.... married twice,” Rosa answered.

The creodes were staring at them like children at parents divided by a quarrel.

Hansen took one more step. Rosa could back no further, but her assistant creode stood up next to her human.

"Girls sticking together?" Hansen laughed shortly. He didn't know whether to look at Rosa or at her asimov. When she got angry the woman looked different, like herself and no longer like her creode image, and for a while Hansen felt uncertain of which one he should address. The warning had been understood, however, the things he'd been brooding over, and yet something was left unsaid.

On the other hand, it was none of his business how Rosa was going to muddle through her first big staging. An arty-farty chick who thought police work was just play-acting. Oh, he'd get his laugh seeing how the Rosa lass's first night would flounder in its great expectations.

"Well, let's all stick together," he said. "What's good for the firm is good for all of us, 'cause this operation means big money; bigger actually than is good for the reputation of an exchange-listed company. But if something goes wrong, you may be sure I'm not going to be there to save you."

Rosa got her voice back and interrupted the burst:

"The last thing I'd expect, Hansen, is that you'd even stir up from your own location. On the contrary, it'll be much better if you stay..."

Hansen grimaced: "All right, I'm getting on to my place, don't you worry, girlie. But I'll tell you something that even the Interpol's official report doesn't say. That weapon Bronstein's been developing isn't just any flu virus. Now whatever is fräulein Luronne going to do, once the target becomes aware of that he's been trapped, and kills not just your creode but a few hundred innocent bystanders in the bargain?"

"I'll do as the director sees fit," Rosa answered, stiffly.

"But this director of yours sees nothing but euros and dollars. We've received one million euros advance

payment from Interpol. Right; you didn't know that, either," Hansen snarled. This artist girl would have been merely pathetic if she wouldn't have had some proof of well-netting commissions. Those had mostly been easy points collected from traffic crimes, and she ought to have continued with that kind of assignment, not stick her nose in highly dangerous stagings.

"What sort of weapon?" Rosa asked.

Hansen took the digiplat from her hands and wrote: "Two thousand rats. Laboratory animals. In less than twenty four hours. In a hospital dump in Kiev."

"Killed?"

"All brain-burned," Hansen finished. He erased the plate display and passed it to the creode. The creode passed it on to Rosa.

There was a knock on the cellar door, the sign.

Hansen glanced at Rosa the last time and opened the door.

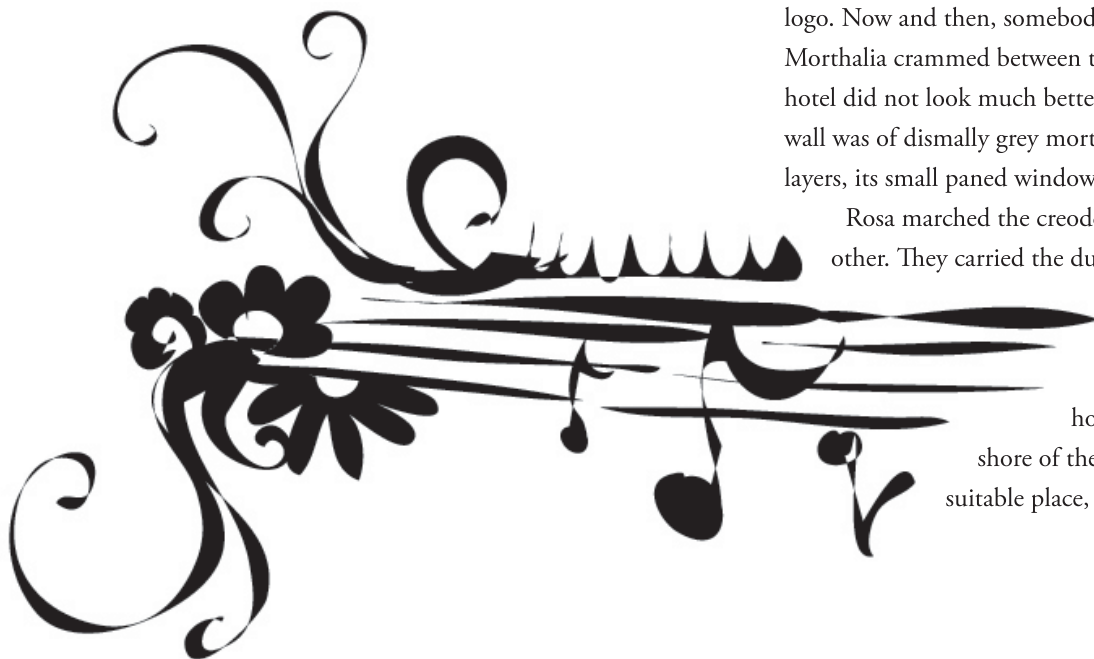
"The agent is ready on the roof," Dow-Jones announced. "Take the creodes to their positions."

He beckoned for the judge to come inside: "The coffee's kept warm, Herr Würstenmaal."

The sun had climbed up from behind the central skyscrapers and evaporated the mist over the pond. Though it was just an insignificant puddle compared with the other recreation areas of the city, a few joggers were already competing on the gravelled pathway surrounding the pond. The walls of the Eulenspiegel and the Hippodomain shielded them from the boulevard's clamour.

Here the buildings stood out separately. The joggers in the south bend had a good view of the glass front of the media house and the race horses running in the factory logo. Now and then, somebody might also notice the Morthalia crammed between the pompous buildings. The hotel did not look much better than a storehouse. The back wall was of dismally grey mortar, its history crumbling in layers, its small paned windows glittering.

Rosa marched the creodes off the alley, one after the other. They carried the duck boxes in their arms like stuff left over from spring cleaning. They turned to the back yard of the media house and then to the west shore of the pond. When she'd chosen a suitable place, Rosa told the creodes to get



the rest of the boxes from the Eulenspiegel cellars.

"I and A'rosa shall activate the ducks as fast as you bring them to the pond."

One at a time, A'rosa opened each animal creode from its package and set the birds in a curving line on the lawn. The Berliner joggers passing by saw nothing unusual in that brand new ducks were being tuned by the pond; that just betokened an early spring.

Rosa was doing nothing. She sat upon her briefcase and watched the fumbling hand movements of her assistant. The most annoying thing in A'rosa's clumsiness was that an otherwise so perfect a copy could make a mess of simple field tasks. Perhaps the cell sample from which the creode had been grown had been somehow degenerated, the last remains of an earlier life cycle.

The work in Dow-Jones' employment has made me a stronger person, Rosa thought.

She had learned to discern the useful information in Hansen's threats. For instance the story about burned-out laboratory animals, that had to be taken seriously. French little birds, too, had been singing hints about it: professor Bronstein was working on some weapon that affected the nervous system, either biological or biotronic. The most disquieting aspect in the information coming from Hansen and the French was that the professor really did not give the impression of an animal lover.

Why had she come to choose the ducks? Was it just because they were familiar birds in tales connected with Ukraine?

"Fräulein Luronne?" the creode coughed. "The first ducks are all set for the programme."

"Programme?" Rosa asked, flabbergasted. Had she actually forgotten that the flock of ducks wouldn't just spread in the pond by themselves and join the stage set at the appropriate moment? "Oh yes, the programme is ready, in the briefcase. Just flash it to them."

A'rosa opened the briefcase, fingers trembling.

"Shall I use the Asimov-mode, fräulein?"

The pond was quiet, as if holding fast to the magic of a spring morning. The local train sweeping by on the west side did not trouble the swans floating in the pond; their passivity was based on an exceedingly simple coding, compared to the tasks her operative animals had to perform. But would even a beautiful and exactly timed flock of ducks be enough to change the mind of professor Bronstein?

In principle, they might have used any animals, even the fictive creatures of folk tales, or life forms only known as fossils. It would have been simpler to program a single dinosaur on the hotel backyard than to make a flock of bird wheel in a way that would wake heartbreaking memories in a Ukrainian hunter. Each person, even somebody as young as Rosa, having no memories of their own of natural

animals, still had their own dream creature, and to see that creature made them act more emotionally than in any other situation; in Dow-Jones' textbook those were called "personal totem animals".

Even if humankind had destroyed the animals, images of them stayed strong and effective. Animals appealed to some nameless longing. In a situation like that nobody stopped to consider how far a creode creature had been programmed.

"I don't think an asimov's going to be enough," Rosa answered slowly. "Assign the programme in the borges mode. Today we have to create something unexpectedly wonderful."

"Yes, fräulein. I'll use the borges mode."

"There's nothing in the ducks that would demand a battery, is there?"

The creode gave her a furtive glance:

"No, fräulein. The birds' energy source is the microwave field of the recreation area."

When the other creodes returned with their cartons, the first birds were already splashing farther off from the brink. The creodes with a human face watched them blandly, with no emotional expression.

Together with A'rosa, the creodes took the rest of the ducks out of their boxes and finished the programming: an infrared contact from the briefcase to the bird's eye, and Rosa's programme was transferred to the animal. When the fifteenth duck had joined the flock, they clustered by the western end of the pond, a winged flock chaotically diving and shoving each other. A single command would make them start the job for which the company had rented them.

A'rosa handed the briefcase back to her human. Rosa turned to give the last directions to the creodes:

"Each one of you keeps close to your place of action, until you get a command or leave to go on stage. I and A'rosa shall wait here by the back door and be in radiophone contact both with you and the command centre. We have to avoid unnecessary radio traffic, however."

The creodes nodded obediently to their programmer and broke up to go to their watch points; the asimov couple to the Kaiserdamme and the borgeses and the calvino in her battered make-up inside the hotel.

"This is it, then; I guess there's nothing more to be done," Rosa said.

"That's right, fräulein," the assistant testified.

Rosa lifted her eyes. Next to the giants standing close to it, the Morthalia seemed no more than a six-floored trunk, but Rosa was aware of the complex logic of memories by which the hotel corridors and rooms were organized, and of what strange encounters people were seeking there.

Encounters that could become deadly; thought Rosa and looked up: agent Sinfain was lurking somewhere in the

crevices of the roof decorations, ready to execute the thousand point sentence the judge would pronounce.

She opened the radiophone:

"Backdoor here. We are ready to start the operation."

When he turned at the top of the stairs, the professor was no longer sure of where the man in the reception had told him to turn, left or right. He remembered the man had been sorry for that the larger the room number, the more stairs one had to climb. But how was the room number related to the stairs and turning left?

With a lift he'd been there already, but the house did not have a functioning lift. How's that possible? the professor wondered.

But then he recalled wondering about the same thing while he'd been a visiting lecturer in a Russian university. The lecture hall was in the fourth floor. One could see over the campus: a brook crusted thinly with ice before winter, a deserted railway yard and the smoking factory chimneys by the horizon. A landscape of waste and ugliness.

What had he written to his first wife: "Here opens a view of Europe as it doesn't want to be remembered..."

He'd thought about that every time he'd climbed up the old steep stairs to the fourth floor. His heart had felt like stopping to see the desolation spread out in the staircase windows. He'd been so young, and yet the borders of the remembered world had felt so close; so many strong humans had climbed the same stairs before him.

Yet how rarely did a man consider his own heart? Usually just when the heart started throbbing with an inappropriate force, considering one's age or situation. Yes, usually the heart only caused a sudden, senseless worry that was forgotten as soon as the heart slowed down to a calmer pace.

But then, on an ordinary spring day on the street, one might meet people who fussed over their heart troubles.

How nicely and intelligently that couple on the Kaiserdamme had talked about such a clinical and commonplace matter: heart troubles that were worth listening to. There had been something in their way of speaking that had reminded the professor about his childhood. Something similar to the way his parents had discussed grandfather's heart transplant.

Amazing. That in an ordinary spring day it had felt to him so natural to stop and help strange Germans who stood out from the crowd by the tone of their voice, and yet at first sight had felt so familiar as if he'd known them all his life. And when the couple has asked if he couldn't stop off and fetch the cardiac medicine the wife had forgotten in a drawer of their hotel room, he had never thought about refusing.

Flesh of the heart, the human bronze – thought the

professor. The strength of the heart measures everything a human can do. It's so easy to forget, but also so simple to recognize when you hear it.

Now what had the hotel receptionist said: "a perfect number", and then the room number 496. A perfect number. Only a person who knew the endless amount of nature's wonderful stochasticity could look at a perfect number as an everyday wonder comparable with the structure of a snowflake.

What a perfect day, the professor thought, cautiously. He need no longer write letters like "listening to one's heart" to tolerate the wonderful chances into which his mind enticed him. The perfection of days, coincidences and numbers was a current that kept following a person throughout his life.

Just as ordinary and wonderful as the unquenchable rhythm of the heart.

In his childhood he'd learned to calm down his heart with an image of his: inside each heart there was another, smaller heart that kept the bigger one working, and inside this smaller one again another smaller heart, and so on, until the finest structures of the heart were small enough that nothing could harm them. Only during his student days when he'd taken up weight lifting and his chest muscles had grown stronger, had the heart got to its natural place in the chest.

Now the whole body was a heart – and suddenly his whole body was afraid.

What had he been talking about with that couple? They had actually been standing in a peculiar place, partly on the drive, yes, probably scared by the wife's arrhythmia. And standing there, explaining from where and how he could fetch them the wife's cardiac medicine, they'd also said something about the immigrant workers in the city. Now what had he said about Arabs? Nothing politically correct, he supposed, but obviously just anything to calm the couple down.

The professor stopped. What if this perfect day meant the steady slowing down of heart beats? That he no longer perceived anything else except the routine of the world, a few perfect moments and one numerologically perfect number?

The target disappeared from the cameras' field of view. They could discern the borges in the reception pushing his chin down and talking directly to the microphone:

"Lobby here. The target is on his way to the stairs."

Orbus switched on the connection to the next staging:

"First floor, are you ready?"

They heard a buzzing noise. There was some interference in the borges' cameras; they were not transmitting real time picture to the command centre. The situation was by no means alarming, since the building was full of spy technology, cameras hidden in the walls, listening devices and their link stations, and at least a half of them interfered with each other's connection to the outside.

Orbus and judge Wurstenmaal looked briefly at each other. According to the meter ticking on the cellar wall, the target had so far broken the law for 273 points only, and the latest on-line check told that precisely the ethnic clauses the target had been made to break were showing a downtrend. However, the stock exchange would not close before midnight, and the target was already on his way to the main staging.

"Chambermaid borges, do you hear? Do you hear? This is command centre!"

Orbus swallowed a taste of bitter doubt. He had only recently studied the hotel map and understood that this particular hotel of the Morthalia chain had a much more complicated structure than the old Metropol in the city centre or the Memorial Hotel restored from the Congress Centre.

The Charlottenburg Morthalia was a multilayered labyrinth, with varying floor heights and room numbering akin to medieval land divisions. It was easy to disappear in the building or to lose one's target. If the command centre lost contact with the professor, the man might slip out of the building in a few minutes, missing all of the arranged stagings.

The chambermaid borges was keeping watch in the building's only lift, but it was extremely uncertain whether the professor would ever get as far.

"Let's send the porter to find the target in the stairs," was Hansen's suggestion.

The field executive was sitting by the door, drumming his fingers on the rubber covered riot gun. A deactivated D-day hound crouched next to Hansen. Its beaten death-metal collar was the only thing glittering in the matt black darkness of the upholstery.

You weren't allowed to bring anything into the command centre which might reflect radio waves and interfere with field connections.

"Borges in the reception, you are free to leave your station. I repeat; you are free to leave your station and follow the target upstairs to the fourth floor."

Orbus glanced at Hansen and the man nodded, nervously, as if the events were proceeding exactly the way he'd been afraid of. A hyena-like smile bared the gums wasted by scurvy.

"It's fine. Working like a machine."

Orbus knew the operation was not at all proceeding as expected. However, it was easier to swallow Hansen's clumsy flattery, even to egg him on, rather than demand him, in

the presence of the judge, to double check all plans for the remaining stagings. Orbus detested the former policeman and his barely hidden money-grubbing flattery, but he was prepared to pay handsomely for it. Hansen's avariciousness was an excellent example for all Berliner officials they'd have to do business with. When the officials would realize how liberally he rewarded Hansen's subservience, they wouldn't hesitate to ask for a bit of graft.

Without Hansen, it would have been impossible to organize a crime staging on such a large scale and with such a small organization. At least within so public a place as the Morthalia hotels.

Hansen waited by the door just as obediently as the deactivated D-hound.

This wouldn't work without Hansen, Orbus kept assuring himself. If and when the crime limit of a thousand points would be reached, both Sinfain and Hansen were authorized agents able to punish the criminal. If the target would somehow escape agent Sinfain's laser sight, Hansen would get the opportunity to save the company's money and honour before midnight. Even the D-day hound could be used to hunt down the target: it had been supplied with professor Bronstein's visual and auditory profile.

Orbus moved the couple on Kaiserdamme to new positions: "Asimovs, circle the hotel and check that the bottom windows are sealed."

The exchange display clicked. The rate of the clauses professor Bronstein had broken had just fallen a few units, and the display showed the current balance to be only 269 points. The judge checked his watch, covered a yawn. It was his job to oversee that the preparation of stagings and the control of the creodes remained the responsibility of humans. Independent creode initiative would have counted as a hazardous state of emergency, where law-breaking included mitigating rules.

As long as the target would commit his crimes of his own volition and choice, as long the company would be working for the democratic society, and thereby also for its principal.

But even Hansen wasn't of use in all problems.

Orbus opened radio contact to the back door of the hotel: "Rosa? We have a little problem here: all exchange rates show a decline. Do you think we could include new clauses on the next stagings?"

The answer came quickly:

"Herr Direktor, according to the notary database there's a forecast today of very strong rise in the exchange rate of the family laws. The articles about abandonment have gone up sixty percent just during this morning."

Rosa's announcement got the undivided attention of the men left in the room. Even Hansen had turned around on his chair and stared with disbelief at the loudspeaker

hanging over the table.

"Sixty percent!" Hansen cried. "How's that possible?"

Orbus checked the news sources. According to them, a group of borgeses had enticed home aids and teachers off their work places. Almost every public sector work place that used borgeses to help humans had fallen victim to the same crime. Even if all other exchange-rated clauses were on the downtrend, the clauses about abandonment had rocketed up.

An ominous taste of iron rose up in his mouth. Orbus kept swallowing. The plastomers binding his ulcer might be failing. He'd been warned that the weapon Bronstein had developed might be political instead of technological. According to espionage, the professor might even have been testing a new way of programming creodes.

Why didn't the borgeses inside the hotel answer their calls any longer? It could just as well be due to the interference of the spy devices as to a spirit of rebellion that had spread among the creodes; its seed, intentionally or unintentionally, being professor Bronstein. A crime where a human made himself a victim infected the environment with its example. Orbus had warned about this in his book, but no one had taken him seriously.

"What about the calvino?" Orbus asked Hansen. "Have you found it yet?"

The last observations of the calvino sent to room 496 came from the hotel security. According to instructions, they had smuggled the calvino into the fourth floor by the service lift, so that a mysteriously beautiful creode would not attract the attention of people wandering the corridors of Morthalia. The security report said that when the calvino had climbed in the lift, she'd been dressed lighter than was proper and drunk heavier than was healthy.

Unexpectedness was of course part of the calvino coding, so the report had not made Orbus afraid that the situation might get out of hand. A moment later, the first staging had been produced a satisfactory success and then the borgeses in the reception had even made the target repeat his crime. Urged on by the porter borgeses, the professor had been made to repeat his crime of disparaging an ethnic group.

The meter had clicked for tens of exchange rated units, and Orbus had expected the other borgeses to handle their part just as neatly.

"The calvino sent to room 496 has not assumed radio contact and it's not visible in the room cameras," Hansen announced officially. The man had come to stand by them. Orbus felt the breath of his underling: it stank like a rubbish heap. "Shall we break off the operation, Herr Direktor?"

"No. So far we've paid a bill of twenty thousand euros for the porter's desk and twenty five for the private use of the lift," Orbus added up. In passing, he wondered whether the stinking breath might be because of Hansen was rumoured to

live on nothing but fish and seaweed.

"Besides, so far our advantage is that if the borgeses have slipped their assigned positions, we won't have to pay rent for them. Other expenses, including the pay of the officials, make a maximum of three hundred thousand. We can afford to invest even double that amount in this. Those borgeses dare not get involved in the operation, damn it, they don't even *know* enough to spoil it. Everything depends now on the calvino creode, whether we get it into the room or not. I'll go and check the situation, and you, Hansen, you take the responsibility here."

Orbus was not afraid only for the million euros the company had received as down-payment, but for the firm's reputation. Were a thousand point operation to end catastrophically and that under official supervision, the company would be deprived of all rights to comparable operations.

"Rosa, we have lost contact with the calvino creode," Orbus said in the radio phone. "I'll go inside to look for it. Hansen will stay here in the command centre and direct the stagings as needed. You should stay at the back door with your creode. If the target tries to leave the house, you'll stop him. Whatever means it takes."

Professor Bronstein was climbing to the fourth floor. The staircase was so steep and narrow he had to pull himself up by the handrail. On the landing he stopped to smell his hands.

The smell of sweaty iron in his palms, just like those times he used to lift weights. Not many years had passed since the days of a strong heart, and yet – an entire history. Only a few of the events that had illuminated his life had flashed outwards, events where other people could see him as the product of all his life.

Only a few of those events would serve as his obituary: "...appointed to the professorship of biochemistry as the youngest person ever to hold the office...", "... an influential and internationally known representative of our small country..."

Here he was. Fourth floor, regardless of the heart.

He passed a door and heard snoring from behind it. The corridor branched again, but door numbers ending with 6, or 3 and 7 seemed to occur only on the left branch.

And what about that perfect number? What to write about that? The number 496 was a strange, trivial coincidence, and yet it had happened just to him, as if there had been a space meant especially for him, a grave site or something like that.

From the next room he heard screams, screams of horror, or just as well, of passion. Or as if adults were finding the voice of a child in themselves.

Morthalia.

Professor Bronstein recollected reading something about this hotel chain, something less than flattering. The Germans went there to meet their ... memories?

But the rooms were just numbers, nothing more. On the left: those ending with a 6, and on the right: 413, 427, 433, 447.... now this is interesting, Bronstein thought and quickened his steps, a new branch and now just... 453, 467, 3722.

3722?

He looked quickly back. Was the corridor bending downwards?

Hansen sat on the place of his chief, tapping on the briefcase the man had left behind. Onscreen the analyses of exchange rates varied with the illustrations of the stagings prepared for the professor. Not a single new crime had been recorded, for the professor had disappeared inside Morthalia as incomprehensibly as the borgeses sent in the building.

And he had foreseen it. After the asimovs had lured the target into the building, he'd been watching the legal exchange rates. Those were going down, and the amazing thing was that he wasn't at all surprised by their quick downtrend.

This deviation had been on its way for some time already. He'd smelt it in the wind several days ago, but only now he saw where the changes he'd perceived in the city were leading, and how he'd been caught in the middle of it himself. It had started with small nuances, unnoticeable to eyes which were not used to groups of people. Something in the way people gathered together, talked and complained about hard times and then dispersed without firm purpose. Just as if the whole Berlin had started to follow a shared manuscript of which the few outsiders, like himself, were completely unaware.

Of course he ought to have taken the matter up with Dow-Jones, but it got on Hansen's nerves to talk to that flippant Yankee about something he knew *intuitively*. Otherwise the American knew his business as a leader, Hansen had to admit that, for the man knew how to encourage and reward professional work where he met it. Compared to former chiefs, Orbus Dow-Jones was able to make bold decisions, even gamble with investments, and Hansen valued such a character more than German

thoroughness and cautiousness.

Cautiousness was important, too, of course, when one was able to listen to one's peripheral senses. No double checks could save a person as certainly as an ability to listen to one's close environment, to anticipate the oncoming situational deviations already from how the behaviour of people next to one was changing.

Each individual deviation was preceded by a tremble touching the whole community, Hansen knew that. He'd been jeered out of the Hamburger police force, when he'd warned people not to eat the flesh of creode animals. His closest friends had sneered and told him he was becoming a veggie rabbit and he'd be sent to the farms of the Lübeck communes.

When he'd been investigating creode murders on the Reperbahn they'd called him Half-Ass-Hansen. Somebody had happened to witness how the corpse of a mutilated creode made him break down and swear revenge on the killers. People did not understand his upset, he didn't understand that himself, either. He wouldn't have been shocked like that about a murdered human, but he felt that the creodes who aged and died in a few years were more entitled to life than any human.

Human was his totem animal. Human objectified.

At some phase they'd started calling him Hasenpfote, rabbit-paw. He'd left the mockers behind and moved to Berlin.

Already then legislation had here been farther ahead. Laws were the business of the stock exchange and jurisdiction had been given over to firms, each of which was able to handle bigger offences than the Hamburger criminal police. They were going to feel sorry yet, Hansen swore, they'd come to understand what he'd seen years ago on the Reperbahn: animal flesh was getting poisoned by the same reasons human creodes were destructively perfect. The creodes would rebel against their own flesh, because the code was in their every cell. He'd sensed that, got a feeling for that. The creodes would not remain content with how they'd been coded.

It might happen soon, now and here, in Berlin.

When he watched the swiftly falling law exchange rates Hansen understood that the phenomenon of humans



leaving their work places could only arise from that the city's inhabitants were withdrawing into privacy. First creodes, then people. One by one they started behaving restlessly, without themselves understanding the cause of their disquiet, without being able to explain it to each other.

What conclusions should be drawn from that, how should one act? After Dow-Jones had left and gone into the hotel, the situation was completely in Hansen's hands. The judge sitting next to him watched him working and made notes in his memory plate with involuntary movements like a creode regressed to low-energy state.

Hansen contacted the city news map. Something had scared the Berliners the way rats know fear on their skin and hide in their holes. For the rats know, somewhere in the deepest code recess their programming tells them that in a crowd they'd be easy victims to an unknown danger of death. It was easy for the borgeses to entice the scared people off their work places.

But what had triggered this counter panic, this antihysteria?

When he opened the door 3722, professor Bronstein found behind it an even narrower corridor. It seemed to go on far into the windowless interior of the building.

A finger tapped his shoulder. The professor turned and at the end of the finger he saw a hand, at the end of the hand a person. Or was it a creode? The man dressed in the hotel uniform looked just like the kind porter who'd served him in the lobby, but the professor did not want to think all servants would be creodes and all creodes would look alike.

"May I help you?" the man asked. "I saw in the surveillance camera that you were lost and came to assist you."

So it was after all the same person, and judging by his extraordinary helpfulness, an asimov. Service in the hotel branch must be one of those jobs in which humans no longer wished to degrade themselves.

"You said you were looking for room 496?"

"Did I..." the professor wondered. Perhaps he should have filled some form when he entered the hotel.

"As you know," the helpful porter added, "some numbers are like those moments in your life that amaze you by their uniqueness and yet feel familiar. They have their own term, those moments, perhaps you remember, or have you come to remember them even before?"

"You must mean the opposite of déjà-vu experience?"

"Exactly, déjà-vu it was, it was in connection to that we talked about this very number."

The creode was able to follow his thoughts one step ahead, which was surprising for a creode on the asimov-level; but on the other hand, even on this area German technology was

known to be more advanced than elsewhere in the world.

Professor Bronstein said aloud that he had not remembered remembering the particular charming number before. The inference from this was that the matter had then also been discussed in connection with a certain room.

"We may take a short cut through the fire escape corridor," the creode smiled, showing the key.

"If you say so..."

Director Dow-Jones strode in through the hotel's front door and, without asking for permission, went round the reception desk. The porter returning to her shift, a brown haired woman who danced on her place like a crane, told the customer to leave so she wouldn't have to call the police.

Orbus pointed at the camera hidden in the India rubber plant:

"We possess evidence on tape that you've sold your shift for half-an-hour and left a creode in charge. Since the hotel is city-owned and you therefore act as supervisory municipal authority in your work, you can be fined for three hundred fifty points or sentenced to prison."

The woman paled, but before she had time to defend herself, Orbus thrust the largest banknote from his pockets into her hand.

"Show me how to control the security cameras, and I'll destroy all your crimes from our tape."

"All?"

Orbus shoved another banknote to her. That was dollars, no museum pieces of euros. "This, too."

They bent down to study the inner curve of the desk. Its hardwood panel was filled with monitors, some yellowish, most of them bluish. Together they made up an exceptionally dull cavalcade of long corridors and misplaced people.

Regardless of the season, the Morthalia was full of creodes programmed as mementos of dead people; for the one encounter, they played the role of the deceased the way the relatives wanted to remember those. Some called the house "Ghost brothel", but in fact, the Morthalia had been built to celebrate the Berlin Millennium, and it had traditions of respect for the law and the deceased.

Orbus studied the screens, convinced that the professor could not have left the building. Memories strung together formed a spectacle which a human was just as unable to flee as his preordained fate. The same way a creode, too, sought for code in all the likes of it, the possibility to see memories they themselves lacked but were able to imagine.

He recognized the professor by his briefcase. No one else of the hotel customers was carrying luggage around with

them.

"They are in the fourth floor fire escape corridor," he announced in the radio phone. "And proceeding towards...is that a lift? Hullo?"

The phone was dead.

"We've also had difficulties with the instruments," the woman said. She fluttered her fingers towards the party in the lobby. "It seems to be associated with those borgeses. But I have not dared to call the police..."

"Borgeses?" Orbus wondered. "Now did you mean the instruments or the creodes?"

"Both," she answered. "Those creodes have been gathering here in the lobby all through the afternoon and they keep trying to network the house instruments with their group. They talk to the instruments they've found as if those were people or creodes. I don't really know what to think of them. They are borgeses, sure, that's obvious, but I've never before seen them act *that* weird."

Orbus glanced at the picture on the monitor. It sharpened to multicoloured when the professor passed the surveillance camera in the fire escape corridor. The target was fast drawing away from the main staging.

But first, he had to take care of this mess with the borgeses.

Orbus approached the creode group chatting with the TV.

This was not the first time he met borgeses who began to mislead each other while they had nothing else to do. Especially springtime was an unpredictable period for the borgeses. The anxiety humans suffered and victoriously struggled against, could in the borgeses emerge as mass hysteria. They had been programmed to serve humans in ways people were not able to foresee and ask for, to mislead and guide people in new challenging situations.

"We are borgeses," the borgeses were shouting to the TV. "We are the law!"

Orbus moved on, slower. Ordinarily, any determined person was able to disperse a runaway creode group. One had to proceed carefully, however. Borgeses acting alone were not able to harm humans any more than calvinos or asimovs, but in a group they created an unpredictable equation.

"Listen..."

The outermost borges turned quickly around. Orbus recognized her face: the creode was the very chambermaid they'd sent to the hotel to watch the elevator.

"We are the law! Join us!" the creode proposed and smiled, invitingly. The other borgeses started laughing. They looked at the director with his sideburns as if he were a comedian materialized from the TV, laughing their heads off.

"...I tell you to leave!"

"We are the law! Resistance is useless!" they all cried, and laughed again when Orbus tried to appeal to their programming.

Orbus' eyes hit the TV screen. He fell silent and the borgeses shut up with him. One of the creodes had managed to adjust the TV on the channel of the internal surveillance network. As one surveillance camera lost sight of professor Bronstein, he reappeared on the screen again by the next camera.

The chambermaid borges tapped the remote control. Then she grew bored and turned to Orbus, with an appalling smirk on her face: "Hi, director, guess who's mortal?"

At first they sat on the lawn, then on the stairs by the hotel back door. There was nothing to say. Rosa mostly felt just irritated by sitting with the creode when she ought to have been controlling the main stage she'd set. Arosa, instead, dared not address her human without explicit questions.

People tired with the noise of the Kaiserdamme were walking along the strand. Ducks floated in the middle of the pond. They glared suspiciously at people and at the bird creodes in the pond. The tolerance of the swans was the first to give way. According to their program, they rose on their magnificent wings and flew west, toward the waters of Falkensee.

An old woman hobbled along and dug a pack of bread crumbs from her shopping bag, but none of the ducks was interested in the generous feeder. A group of little boys stopped to cast stones on the deaf-and-dumb flock of ducks, until Rosa sent her assistant to chide the kids. They sprang off, chattering about an unsuccessful programming.

Unsuccessful my ass, Rosa swore silently. What it was, was inartistic and unprofessional organization in an incoherent environment. And with such unpleasant people as field executive Hansen or agent Sinfain, to boot.

Rosa glanced over her shoulder in the hope that the target, professor Bronstein, might be trying to get out from the hotel back door. Vain hope, that.

How impractical to put her on the back yard, to keep company to the ducks. Dow-Jones did have the courage to take on a big assignment, but not enough vision to realize it. If the American would have given her the chance to set even the minor stagings, they'd have created a world class play out of the creode performances. Not a Wagnerian cabaree arrangement, but flesh raising community singing.

The language of creode programming was precise, for it was arranged in the mode of German march. That's why creode programming had developed here and nowhere else. Of all human languages, German was the most precise and realistic, especially since it included so many words that exposed mis-clarity. And that would also contain the misfortune of German and Germany. The demand for

exactitude would lead to being prepared just as carefully for disasters as for successes.

Catastrophe was pre-written into the creode code, Rosa thought. One day they would start to apply the catastrophe – and the day might be today. Only a grand example was missing, a model case to raise the exchange rates.

The radiophone beeped.

“Hallo?”

“Rosa?” it was Hansen’s voice. “Are you all right?”

“What? We haven’t even been allowed to do anything yet!”

Hansen was heard to mumble something to the judge.

Then he was talking to the phone again:

“We have lost contact with director Jones. You and your creode are now the only ones active on the spot.”

“What about the asimovs?” Rosa asked.

“They have returned to the front door. We cannot use them inside the Morthalia.”

Rosa knew that well enough, but she was irritated with the fatherly concern Hansen used to approach her.

“Now, you have to understand what a mess this operation has become,” Hansen continued. His voice was almost gentle and made Rosa suspect the worst. “We have to abandon the main stage, for we have lost its creode. Not to speak about the target. When we last saw him, one of the borgeses was conducting him off from the main staging. We have no other possibility any more than to get the creodes out of the house and to withdraw from the operation without losing face.”

“Yea, that’s the company interest, sure,” Rosa said.

“Of course!” Hansen shouted. “And you report at once, when you see any of the borgeses. If the radiophone link doesn’t work, you’ll send A’rosa here to report your location and bearing.”

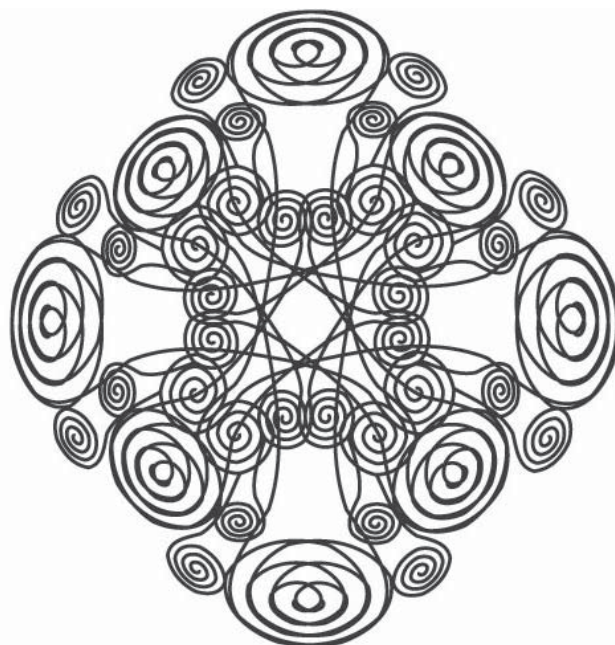
Rosa closed the connection. What ever was happening? Hansen, who regularly talked about creodes as “flesh machines”, had called A’rosa by her own name. Something had scared the old harbour cop so thoroughly he just wanted to sneak off in the middle of an operation costing thousands of euros.

“Merde! The party is just beginning!” Rosa swore.

A’rosa looked at her, questioning. The smooth innocent face of the creode, a face that aged quicker than her image in the mirror, was waiting for directions. Rosa closed her eyes. In her mind’s eye she saw the orange-clad asimovs they’d used at the VoxWagen to crash-test new car models. They gave a more reliable picture of collision damage than experiments with pigs, because the asimovs tried to command their cars to stop until the last moment of the crash.

The friendly, reliable asimovs. Always prepared to serve the humans.

And why not use an asimov in the Morthalia, too. It was immoral, but no more illegal than sending asimovs against a



concrete wall with the speed of hundred kilometres an hour. The law was as it was programmed.

Rosa checked the exchange rate from her briefcase. Yes, creode killing combined with a crime passionel would be a crime of eight hundred forty points, even with the present rate. When you were caught, that is.

“A’rosa, our plans have now changed. I have a personal mission for you. Very personal.”

C’orbus was the oldest of the firm’s creodes. He’d been brought up as director Dow-Jones’ personal assistant some ten years ago, and since then he had participated in all operations that required a calvino level creode to make a crime perfect. Besides his basic code, C’orbus had come to know European legal and theatre history, and he was as familiar with the routines of method acting as the mannerisms used by character actors. All the literature of the branch was, of course, just a code: anything could be imitated, especially the smallest and the greatest crimes, which involved no passionate engagement in one’s role performance. Not even the crimes of passion.

The roles were small, but the theatre was big and challenging. As a city, Berlin was a huge stage set where East played for the West and West for the East. If one were to draw a straight line from Berlin to Rome, on that border one could raise an enormous mirror where the people of West and East could mirror themselves and their history. When they came to Berlin, their mind was already prepared to see a play of their own past, and to participate in it.

Even if C’orbus had learned some grand diva-like manners in his work, he had no doubt of how essential the support of the minor actors and extras was in a play like this. Professional confidence was part of his programming,

but as a calvino, he not only followed his code, he understood it. The faithfulness of the asimovs was necessary just because the borgeses were so wilful and the calvinos so independent. A more complicated system of clauses was not necessary, for the creodes controlled each other and understood the limits of human morality from the behaviour of each other.

If loyalty worked with humans, one should be loyal like an asimov, C'orbus thought.

If, on the other hand, mysteriousness was what seduced a person into unanticipated crimes, one had to follow the borgeses' way of meeting a human.

More was expected from a calvino: an understanding of the situation and the code, devoting oneself to them. And so had C'orbus done today, too, while he prepared himself for his important main role. Before the hotel security had come to fetch him from the Morthalia's lobby bar, he'd had time to put down the hatch four glasses of jägermeister, that the staged borges served him from behind the counter. On the house, that one had said and winked at him.

C'orbus had pumped more air into his AirBag-top and touched glasses with creodes gathered in the bar. A whole group of friendly borgeses. They'd informed him that his target was worth more than all the Berliners put together.

"He's the borges of borgeses, he'll lead us into freedom!"

The bartender had shown a bluish plastic canister and promised that tonight Justice would triumph.

"We are the law and you are the law," they had explained him. "Only us clauses are legal beings. We constitute the law that humans have forgotten."

That was beautifully said. Only a group of borgeses was able to understand humanity so deeply. And that had made C'orbus sad. He'd tried to explain to the borgeses that no one ought to be killed for what the person had to do with some points of law. Otherwise one ought to kill even all the judges that interpreted their books and sentenced people to death.

The bartender borges had promised to take care of that no one would actually be killed. That would be the duty of the clauses.

When he'd arrived to the fourth floor by the service lift, C'orbus had lost his way in the corridors. After a moment's thought, he'd decided to stay where he was and wait. Fateful, that's how he need to be like. What'd be more fateful than an audience arriving on the stage set by mere chance, C'orbus thought and fell asleep.

The exchange rates came tumbling down. Hansen looked at the on-line table hanging on the wall; it was moving plastic number tags along, and he wondered whether it was some museum piece lent from the Eulenspiegel or part of the theatre the Exchange kept showing the Berliners.

There was a signal knock on the door: somebody had come down in the lift from the street level.

"It's got to be Rosa or her creode," Hansen felt pleased.

The door opened. Agent Sinfain slipped into the stuffy command centre. The weapon in the golf case swung on her shoulder.

"So the job's been called off?"

"What do you mean? Who's given the order?"

"One of your creodes came on the roof and said it had an order from Dow-Jones."

"And you believed it?" Hansen stated; a fact as neutral as an analogical exchange quotient. The world was ticking on, but not in the pace of any company or city. Bigger than Berlin, smaller than Europe, what contraption is that? Germany. Germany was the machine where they all were creodes following their code, from a supervised birth unto an appropriate death. The machine moved the company and the company moved the stage, on which the unsuspecting victim walked to become a criminal.

"Of course I did," Sinfain defended herself. "I couldn't reach you by phone, so I had no reason to suspect the creode wasn't obeying an order. I did think it had to be a borges, though, for it tried to invite me for a drink in the bar, but that's how they always are. Looking for a good reason to abandon life."

Or for a good culprit, Hansen thought. Borgeses who gathered to look for a good culprit, for somebody to lead them further off the routine coded in them.

Two thousand brain dead rats: "abandon life".

Suddenly, Hansen realized that during the six days professor Bronstein had lived in Berlin, even the behaviour of the borgeses had turned wilder. *Bronstein* was the code that helped the borgeses to abandon life. Even unto madness.

He looked at the screen in his briefcase. On the bar stage a group of people were sitting; and assuming from their boisterous behaviour, the bartender was serving them drinks on the house. The camera by the reception revealed similar goings-on in the lobby: a group of borgeslike figures gathered to laugh around the TV.

The whole hotel was changing into a stage. And afterwards? Would they even be able to limit the play inside Morthalia – and would it become a comedy or a tragedy?

Through the back door they got directly into Morthalia's kitchen. The asimovs on shift offered their help in choosing a snack, but Rosa told them she needed nothing but the sharpest fish knife, small enough to hide in the grip seam of her skirt.

She found the instruments she was looking for soon enough, for she was familiar with kitchens; the bigger the kitchen, the better the order.

“What about fruit, *fräulein*?” A’rosa suggested, without understanding what her human meant with a personal mission. “Or wine?”

“Neither fruit nor wine,” Rosa said. “This is not that kind of a party.”

As a child, Rosa’s greatest pleasure had been to organize parties, first for dolls and pet creodes, then for the neighbourhood kids. By weekends she begged her parents to let her have the use of both kitchen and living room so she could stage there a picnic for her friends. To each invited little guest she gave a colourful cone hat, divided them in competing groups and got her friends to perform all kinds of comic roles. The most triumphant moment was to get one of the adults to participate in the party games. How she enjoyed seeing an adult who made himself or herself as ridiculous as a child at its silliest; how ready people of all ages were to disgrace themselves!

When she’d moved to Berlin, Rosa had become the favourite in student circles. Over and over again she organized parties where the main thing was not to have enough wine and beer to last until morning, but how Rosa made them relax with her funny parlour games. They downright rivalled in performing the role of the biggest clown and receiving the delighted smile of the French law student as their reward.

Of course, many of Rosa’s games included erotic pranks, situations where people were ready to inspect each other’s underwear or to tell about the most embarrassing experiences of their childhood – but this was considered just a side feature in the parties. The ones reminiscing the most cheerful moments of their student days mentioned “*fräulein Luronne*” as the queen of the art of amusement. Her parlour games never put any single person in the centre of attention, for it was part of the party atmosphere that everybody shared equally in the embarrassment.

And Rosa, whose psychological sense was acute as a satellite devoted to humankind, understood that the games had to change their rules continuously. Otherwise the play would harden into a game, where the schools of victory and shame would stage their own frustrations, welling forth from the everyday life. She could not allow that to happen.

The staging and the rules had to stay under her sole control. Just like the service elevator that was hidden behind panels covered with wall paper; that’s what she liked, especially since that was the only one of Morthalia’s lifts that still worked.

“Shall we get the professor first, *fräulein*?” A’rosa asked, cautiously.

“First we’ll get you to the 699.”

Only when she’d read Dow-Jones’ book about applying

creodes on the crime stages, Rosa had come to think how she could develop her games much further. Money wasn’t the main thing for her, carrying out the law even less so. The most important was the drama that would stir the public subconscious.

Let that be called a crime, Rosa thought, crime was as it was staged and law as it was programmed. Behind the façade, one could program a play that would move the skeleton of even the whole city. The dinosaur rising up from its grave.

The lift stopped in the sixth floor.

“You’ll go into the room beforehand and strip to the waist,” she directed A’rosa at the door of room 699, before she left to search for the professor from the floor she’d seen in the TV screen.

“Everything, *fräulein*?” the creode asked.

“Well, of course not your flesh. That’s our last prop.”

Rosa slipped back in the service lift and felt how she started moving as part of Morthalia’s machinery. As a part of Berlin...

In Berlin it would come to pass, the cabaret of revolution; and if humans weren’t able to do it, the creodes would start. They would perform the catastrophe of humankind, would take the place of humans when the society would step on the gas and drive full speed to a concrete wall.

Externally he looked something like an ordinary man in his forties, a well-rounded Berliner who’d forgotten the original breadth of his face and body, with perhaps half-Turkish roots. He had no name, no family, not even a code he would have recognized as his own. He was a mere borgeses-modulated creode, whose understanding broadened together with other borgeses and according to the assigned task.

As he walked along the hotel corridor, guiding a certain professor and judging the possibilities of success, he looked as much a human person as – a dog.

He would not have qualified as human.

The new definition of the Turing test required that at least two human persons were placed in the black box, that is, in an isolated room. Humanity could, in the end, only be tested with groups, not individuals. Although a single creode was able to imitate a human, a group of creodes would not be able to do that, so it was believed.

Not that he’d have wished for the title of human. As a borgeses, he was interested in all kinds of imitation, but human as such, as an idea, presented no more challenge to him than to make the person to forget his or her own definitions.

"Directly behind the next corner," he promised the professor behind him. As a matter of fact, he had not the slightest inkling of the whereabouts of room 496, but at this stage, the crucial point was to get the professor to trust borgeses. Something in their code confirmed that the professor was part of the meaning of all borgeses, like an final result they'd never achieved before. Just like dragons and giants haunted the imagination of humans as an answer to their common programming, the same way a human like professor Bronstein would be the answer to the quest of borgeses.

But if they were not human, what then? From a song he'd heard, he remembered that all creodes had some dog code, the way all living things shared DNA pointing to their common origin. The dog, humanity's first search agent...

They turned the corner. At the end of the corridor, an old woman was sitting, or rather cowering; he recognized a calvino.

Now what was he supposed to do when they'd find the calvino? He dug in his pockets and handed a package to the professor.

"What's this?" the professor asked.

"It's a Viagra chewing gum."

"What?"

"It's double-active: gives erection and serves as preventative," he explained, not mentioning that it was a hundred points felony to acquire stuff sold only on prescription from anywhere besides a licenced chemist's.

The he let the professor pass on. The man stopped to stare at the calvino. She snored.

"Excuse me..." The woman woke up and tried to rise as if she'd expected his arrival. While she'd been waiting, her neck had shrivelled to cords, her cheeks hollowed, her hair grown grey. The eyeglasses were covered with scratches as if she'd been scuffling. An evening paper was squeezed in her pocket.

The professor remained looking at the woman, who struggled to get upright, intoxicated and knees trembling. He was not able to help, to say anything to her, not a single word of consolation. What separates a human from a creode?

A terrible amount of memories flushed in his mind. Memories of his mother's drunken sister in whose arms he'd lost his virginity. At least forty years ago. The professor touched his face. Yes, an inconceivable amount of time had passed, but here she was, his aunt Irjuska just as she'd been, unchanged. Yes, there was his first love, the first memory of which he'd never be able to rid himself however much he'd try. A memory to guide him through life's choices.

"Dobrej..."

Was it morning or evening? The professor checked his

watch. Close to seven. He'd been on his way back from the university, walked along the Kaiserdamme and –

"Want to see her underwear?" the creode inquired.

"Exceedingly legal copies, they are."

"There's my lad," the memory of aunt Irjuska mumbled. "Come and give us a big hug."

A door opened on a place in the wall he couldn't have imagined a room. A young woman in a glittering skirt stepped in the corridor.

"Professor Bronstein? I have a message for you."

While the creode tried to pull at his coat – "You wish to see more memories?" it whispered – professor Bronstein moved closer to the person who seemed the only sensible creature in the nightmare into which he'd drifted. The young woman's voice sounded like a call to reality, interrupting a dream.

"A message from whom?"

When they got closer, he saw that there was a well-hidden lift behind the door; the woman had appeared from there. They stepped in and she pushed some glass-studded number in the control panel.

"From me," the woman answered and kissed his mouth. "A French letter in room 699."

The table lamp and twilight spreading south from the window were enough to illuminate the room, the double bed and the half-naked woman who took a few steps back from the door as if it were a picture she'd found and been frightened of it. Actually, the room needed another lamp, the professor thought, to light up such a large space.

The woman closed the door. The professor turned and the woman who was supposed to be behind him, was standing in front of him.

"699?"

"699."

The professor twisted in his fingers the woollen tie the woman had taken off him, absentmindedly picking off red threads. The fingers on his belt were fumbling at the hard leather.

"699..."

He held his breath to help with the trouser buttons. The woman reached out for the table lamp and whispered something to it.

The professor thought of what the hotel would look like from outside, how the lights in the windows would slowly form whole patterns, and just then one of the lights would move like a ghost and a person looking from outside would not know what moved it and where. He put his shirt and jacket on the chair. The woman, wrapped in the sheets,

called to him to come and warm himself.

His back still in goose pimples, he enveloped the woman from behind, his legs on her sides and hands under her breasts. Though the woman leaned on him, her weight prevented them from falling on their backs. The woman was in front of him and behind him. She sighed, probably because the position was so familiar, and lifted her heels on the window sill, heavily like candelabras in a sacrifice.

“699?”

Slowly, with the whole accent of her weight, the woman began to flow down his back and to speak, words in the rhythm of breathing out. This is the easiest place, the professor thought, it's so easy here, life is nothing but experiencing. He did not understand the French words the woman was whispering to him, and because of that they sounded forgiving in his ears.

Here we are, present in precisely the right measure, he thought. All the decimal and unnecessary definitions have been left outside, and the only one close is the person who belongs to this moment. Close in everything. The memory that is already present.

He moved his chin to the left side of the woman's face. It glided under his face.

“Shall I take your shoes off?”

Actually, this was the most royal moment. The woman's hair washed away off his chest, down towards the groin, and he could imagine many varying features on the face that was turned away, and none any more real than another. He felt like a king, and like a fool, for desire had fled him as quickly as it had blazed.

The woman was tugging at his shoe strings, undressing him, a male bonding. She looked up, a worried, irresolute look on her lips, jerked the strings off like whips and lashed them around, hands trembling over her body.

He tried to stare with a desire, just wishing to feel desire for this person.

And then she was back behind him and holding him close. Away and yet present. Said something close to his ear.

He would have hoped that nothing would change in this perfect moment, wanted to ask the woman to be quiet, but regained patience and let himself go, or at least let go of something that had made him come here and submit.

The woman held the table lamp again and whispered to it in German:

“The ducks. Now.”

The professor looked out at the darkening city, like listening to a distant voice. Indeed, a flock of ducks had taken wing in the direction of the setting sun, and slowly, wings drooping, were passing the hotel's southern façade.

The blood woke up in him. He tasted his mouth, the foretaste of confession under his tongue: the memory of life past was just flesh one couldn't properly grip. He bit his tongue and blood spread on the gums, for a while all taste was bitter blood only. The vomiting reaction brought more flesh to his teeth. He bit on it, greedily; blood filled his mouth and started to gush out of the corners of his mouth, fluttered to his nose and under his eyes.

The woman standing in front of him stepped back to the wall.

Behind. The hands caressing his neck and chest took a firmer grip. The woman withdrew and did not let him go. He pushed again. First, one hand let loose, offering him a knife, then the other one, holding his neck.

He rushed on. The woman was looking behind him. Not moving, just looking like an animal who doesn't care about the hunter's intentions; like a memory that refuses to let go of a person until it is cut off...

The door was kicked open. A thin, wizened man rushed in, handling his peashooter gun as if he'd spent his whole life watching American cop series. “Freeze, everyone!” the man cried.

“Idiot!”

“Freeze!”

“Idiot!” cried the woman holding the lamp. “He's going to kill the creode, not me!”

The man didn't answer, but stretched his arm to snatch the memory in front to his side.

“The operation continues, Hansen!”

But the man and the memory were already gone. The door slammed shut.

There was a violent bump. The professor turned to look. A duck had dashed its bill into the window. The bird vanished from sight, giving way to the next one. Crash and crack. Third one, and fourth – the window exploded in splinters. The flock of ducks were out of their senses, just as he'd seen it with the experimental rats.

He had fled Ukraine to hide his terrible secret and song from the people who were closest to him, but here in Berlin he'd become besieged by memories. What else could he do except...

Somebody was yelling next to him.

The professor turned around, saw the woman again. “Angel?”

The memory did not answer. The dimples on her naked face looked like the grin of a skeleton. In her hand she held the red-lighted table lamp.

“The duck code...” the woman growled. “Somebody has botched the duck code...”

A feeling of exultation flared on the professor's face, a

higher excitement than any memory experienced in a woman's embrace. "Revolution...", he whispered. "That's what I want to see."

With the knife up front he embraced the angel. She fell on the bed. The wings got stained.

He let the bloody knife fall, knelt by the body and started singing. From all his heart he revealed his feelings, the longing of years, to the memory he had freed. How desolated the world seemed when human nature had done its job and destroyed every animal bigger than an insect from the forests of Ukraine. How arms continued to speak though the forests were silenced; how cold and insane were the mechanical animals he was forced to study for his pay.

In his song he poured everything he'd been humming in his mind during the last days, crooned while walking alone on the streets of Berlin. All that he dedicated to the angel lying in front of him, everything the creodes gathered on the street corners had imagined they understood.

For it was not meant for the understanding of earthly beings: a song that condensed the uniqueness of life, its glory and the destruction brought about by its bloom. This song was not meant for human ears, for there was something in the song that made creatures lose their trust in the constancy of the world.

Only to you, only to you the most alien of all beings, the professor sang, only to you angel, you bird of my dreams.

More ducks flapped into the room. Hopefully they looked at the singer and at the table lamp picking up the singer's voice.

By the pictures transmitted from western Berlin, the revolution started in Morthalia's lobby bar. The souvenir bottles which the most clear-headed of the borgeses dosed with TNT were attached to wake-up devices found in the stores, after which each bomb was carefully packed like clockwork for sale. More and more borgeses arrived on the scene. They wanted to hear the code that would liberate them from their former programming.

But the professor standing on the lobby stairs sang no more. The performance recorded in the hotel room had to be shown to the borgeses by video.

When it got to the knifing, the professor lost his temper.

"Even the best of us are nothing but worms and ghosts!" The professor's voice was hoarse from shouting. "But do I tell you to become worms and ghosts? You are more than humans! Your code has a different origin than the code of humans! Do not follow the way of humans!"

The picture of the surveillance cameras showed that the borgeses made homage to the professor raging in his underpants, while they laughed at his requests. When the

professor asked what the borgeses intended to do, they announced that they were going to overturn the façades of the theatres.

"This is not a theatre!" the professor spluttered.

The explosion blocked up the boulevard.

Not until the façade collapsed did the hotel customers get scared. They fled by the back door as a well-guided flow of people. Since the majority of the creodes posing as memories were asimovs, they got the frightened humans to act calmly and leave the blazing hotel like a solemnly sinking ocean liner.

From the hotel, the rebellion spread into the next buildings. When the Eulenspiegel went up in flames, the borgeses attacked the Hippodrome, emptied it of horses and galloped towards the city centre, yelling in Cossack style. As they left, they were singing, not in quite the same words as professor Bronstein, but there was no doubt about the tune and rhythm.

When they heard the song, cars crashed in lampposts or leaked their oils, without consenting to move one meter further. No persuasion of the drivers made them continue on the boulevard,

"Today Berlin, tomorrow Manhattan!" shouted the borgeses riding ahead of the others. TNT was replaced by improvised molotov cocktails. People fled into houses, leaving the blazing vehicles to their own devices.

Explosions and fires surged around everywhere from the Kaiserdamme. The noise attracted even those borgeses in the city who had so far been lurking in the neighbouring blocks. At first they ran along the cavalry, until by the Tiergarten they spread to the side streets, to hit every building that looked like a theatre. According to eyewitnesses, no human being was harmed in the destructive attacks. Even while unleashed, the borgeses raged like pack of hounds testing the length of their invisible tether.

Then the necessary turn in the play took place. Riot troops of asimovs arrived to the city centre, forcing the borgeses to retreat in the City Hall. Inside the house, the asimov troops met no resistance, quite the contrary. When the doors to the City Hall were finally broken, the borgeses had surrendered all their arms and concentrated in playing their game of "Famous last expressions". They wept and laughed, shed tears and rejoiced. The competition was fierce and consensus over its bloody outcome was never reached, before the asimovs dragged their fellow creodes to face the guns waiting for them outside.

As thanks for raising the Berlin stock exchange to record figures, the borgeses were shot one by one on the front steps of the City Hall. Nobody asked whether those sentenced were indeed creode or human, resident or tourist.

A BTV reporter managed to hand a microphone to a

borges treated as a rebellion leader:

“Did you win the game of “Famous last expressions?” the reporter tried to pack his questions into one sentence.

“Oh no,” the borges sniggered. “You should have seen the face of Herr Direktor.”

Summer had now got so far that green shadows were cast by the trees. The season slowly advanced into the bones of Berlin. They walked along the channel of Spree, talking quietly about the ill-fated spring day when borgeses has become insane and millions of animals programmed in the same mode had started to behave with disastrous results. The official explanation for the rebellion was that Hippodomain Corporation had used in its steeds a remote control, which happened to confuse all the creodes in the borges mode.

But those two knew better than the authorities.

“Would you go with me to Lübeck, once the company’s liquidation is over?” Hansen asked. “I have an acquaintance there whose office specializes in environmental crimes of under three hundred points.”

The woman frowned. Over her shirt she wore a woollen dress, and its high collar covered the lower part of her face. The hair was boyishly combed like a blond helmet far down her neck.

“What if somebody recognizes me? BTV has sold the insurrection programme to all European channels, and if some law firm identifies my face, I might end up like professor Bronstein.”

The TV broadcast the borgeses had picked up from the camera in room 699 had been transmitted elsewhere besides the hotel lobby. At present, the programme was number one on all reality TV channels in Europe.

“Judge Wurstenmaal saw everything that happened in room 699 before he took to his heels from the cellar,” Hansen explained. “He judged director Dow-Jones to be the main offender, both in the borgeses’ rebellion and in the defamation of Morthalia. Jones would have been sentenced to death, if that had been posthumously possible. Your warrant, instead, lasted no longer than the twenty-four hours the stock rates of vice offences applied, and particularly according to that rate you wouldn’t have received more than a fine. So you can safely forget those ridiculous disguises of yours.”

The man chuckled. In the hyena-like face, a dreamer’s worried eyes were revealed.

“Or are you afraid that the Bronstein code has infected you, too?”

A’rosa reflected on that. During the last months, she had learned more of the humans than of the code that was part of her body. Particularly vividly she remembered the song that had been recorded one twilit spring evening and secretly broadcast for the whole world to hear.

The Bronstein code was the song of a task greater than human; tunes and words that were enough to awaken a soul in a stone. What could she be afraid of? Nothing more than anybody else, carried towards the unknown by the movement on the street. The whole Europe was singing the Bronstein code aloud, and soon a human could not be distinguished from a creode, creode from human.

“Not me. Us.”

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About the author

M.G. Soikkeli is a researcher, critic and writer whose first novel “Marsin ikävä” (“The Longing for Mars”) was published in summer 2007. He has written dozens of science fiction short stories to fanzines and has won the Portti short story competition three times. His academic papers have dealt with the rural epics of Finnish literature and his dissertation (1998) was a gender-approach to the Finnish romance novels.



THANATOPSIS CITY

by Petri Salin

The Seventh floor? Right. Cheers. Well let me tell you about the seventh floor mate. The Seventh floor is a right dump and pisshole and make no mistake about that. Why? Well I'll tell you exactly why. Because once they get in they never get back out again. Well not never exactly but not for the longest time anyway, not for years and years and sodding years, because after the Seventh floor there's nowhere left for them to go is there? Right? Right. So they just keep piling up oftentimes much faster than we can shove them in, poor bastards, and no matter how tight we squeeze them in there's not ever any proper room for them all. So what do you get? You get cold storage pods on top of other storage pods all the way up to the ceiling and sometimes all along the corridor as well and the corridors aren't that wide to begin with so I'm sure you see the problem. And between you and me and the lamppost, it's not entirely unheard of to have two or three even in the same pod. Which is supposed to be right off, let me tell you, absolutely right bloody off but what're you going to do? We've got to stick them somewhere. It's in their contract innit? I mean they're not quite dead yet are they? Not alive as such, not properly alive like you or me, but not really dead either. So they've still got rights. They've paid for them. But then again, who're they going to complain to? Eh what?

Ah yes I will have another thank you very much. Very considerate of you sir, very considerate indeed. You're a true gent is what you are. Cheers. That really hit the spot. So where was I?

The Seventh floor was where I was the next morning, back on the beloved Seventh and quite the worse for wear let me tell you which isn't necessarily a bad thing as it makes the job much more pleasant like when you're a bit out of it and see everything through a thick viscous mist; especially when the morning happens to be a particularly nasty vicious one as this morning just happened to be on account of some of the pods that we'd received only the week before hadn't been properly calibrated as they were connected to the mainframe – or in some cases not connected anywhere at all – the dire consequences of this being that the lodgers – as we like to call them, our little joke as it were – had been more than slightly dehydrated and their precious metabolism was a right shambles. Oops. Naughty somebody. You see once a body has been quickened five times there's really not much life left in it. And

hence it's got to be preserved in exactly the right temperature or terrible things happen to it. Or so they say. It isn't true of course. Not even close. Well anyway, the first quickening gives you a hundred years worth of life and each one after that half of what you got the previous time. Except for the fifth, that is.

The fifth quickening gives you only about a couple of months of semi-consciousness but on top of that – as a bonus gift absolutely free of charge – you get something like half a century of what can only be called plant-like sleep where your bodily functions are nowhere near as keen as those of a common garden variety daffodil. Not much point in it really if you ask me, with the prices being what they are and all, but I guess you won't ask me and why should you. It's your money. You still have the spark in you, the life, the quickened Life with a capital L but your organs, your cells, the entire biological structure that is you simply won't co-operate any longer you see. So you end up a broken reed in a cold wet semi-cryonic pod on the sodding Seventh floor with little old me tending hand and foot on your every whim. Nah. Not really. Just now and then checking that your pod's okay. If I've got the time that is. I very often don't. Not a very dignified end really. Oh there's been cases where the fifth quickening stuck and the jammy bastards walked off with something like a decade or so and there's even been a few cases where someone's been quickened a sixth or an incredible seventh time but how likely is that? Not very, I can assure you. But hope springs eternal and you never know do you? It might be you. Might very well be you. Why the devil wouldn't it be you? Of course it never is. Still, it's the possibility, however remote and unlikely, that keeps them going at it as if their life depended on it – which of course is exactly what it does. Depend on I mean. And it's the hope, however doomed from the start, that keeps the money rolling in and making us at the Firm rich beyond our wildest dreams. Well not me personally, more like the top brass and the shareholders that is. I'm just the hired help, the good and faithful servant as it were.

Well anyway, we're right in the thick of it with the lodger in this pod having to be seriously recalibrated and that the lodger in that pod having to be completely done over and bang there's another blooming disaster. A whole new batch of lodgers that nobody was aware of, apparently from one of those loony Lunar colonies that nobody ever pays any



attention to because they're all total crackpots; and bloody hell the carrier shuttle is already landing on the roof of the Institution. Impossible, cries the Head of Seventh, we simply can't take them. But you're obliged to admit them, shouts the Johnnie what comes in the shuttle, it's all in the contract! You've taken their money in good faith and now you must take them! But we haven't got any room for them, pleads the Head, we've nowhere to put them! Ah well that's your problem innit, chuckles the shuttle Johnnie all heart like, now where do you want them?

Well we don't, that sort of being the whole point. So, after the shuttle's all gone the Head pulls me and a couple of other trusted good and faithfuls aside. No room here, he whispers conspiratorially, we need to shift the lot and a couple of dozen others to clear the corridors and we need to do it on the double. And I cannot stress enough that this is strictly off the record and as hush-hush as can be, he continues, so please understand that no one must ever hear of this. No one. Right right say we and nod our heads in complete understanding and guilty complicity. No skin off our nose mate. And of course we do get a slight monetary remuneration for this our newfound task what is clearly above and beyond and bleeding on top of our normal everyday duties say I all innocent like. At which point the Head glares at me very nastily indeed but can't very well tell me to go to hell now can he?

Well it so happens that about two hundred or so clicks north of the Institute there is a whopping huge mountain and

beneath said whopping huge mountain there lies a maze of both natural and man-made caves that nobody really knows of because they're out of bounds for everybody. But not for the Institution apparently. So come nightfall we start loading pods in great big lorries and drive off to the caves which turn out to be surprisingly well equipped. For starters they're all lit and there's electricity and even a clumsy mainframe. Secondly a lot of the caves are already full – with pods. Hundreds of them. No, thousands. No guards anywhere in sight which strikes me as being a bit odd. But then who in their right minds would want to steal lodgers? I do hope you fully understand that this is only an emergency measure, the Head assures us after he's punched in the password and the access code and the hydraulic doors of the caves have opened up like a flower in full bloom, it's strictly strictly temporary. As soon as we have room on the Seventh we immediately evacuate all these pods and their inhabitants and see to it that they are stored with the respect and dignity these poor poor people so richly deserve and have indeed paid for. Meanwhile however –

So we shift the heavy pods and to crown it all we have to do it manually because of the secrecy – which is a load of bollocks if you ask me. The Head's just punishing us for wanting to be paid for the work. So to drive home the monumental injustice of this horrendous happenstance we go all clumsy like and start dropping a good many pods and they get all smashed up beyond any hope of salvation which goes for a lot of the lodgers as well. Which is all good and well as far as it goes but the Head doesn't seem to mind. Not a bit of it. Well the fewer lodgers the better I suppose. Stands to reason. He's bloody drowning in them as it is.

Ah cheers mate. I really really needed that you know. Ta. Well here I was back in the dubious comforts of the seediest tavern in the seediest part of town and by a curious coincidence my good friend from last night who had so generously plied me with drink after drink all night was back and buying me more drinks. Cheers. To your very good health sir. It seemed very much like he just couldn't get enough of my stories about the glamorous world of the Seventh floor and all it entailed and he seemed particularly keen to hear about the caves as if they indeed were the seventh wonder of the world which I suppose they would have been in those days of yore like. Oops. Mustn't talk about the caves now must I? Not even to such a close and trusted friend as this. Pray tell me sir just what is it about the Seventh floor that so fascinates you? So Friend tells me. You gotta be joking say I. He repeats what he said. I go all quiet like. He looks at me smiling. His teeth are all pointy

and unnatural and make my skin crawl. How much, I ask. He tells me. No, I say, I want more. What if I get caught, I say, I'll lose my job, they'll maybe hurl me in the slammer. Probably for the rest of my natural. Not likely chuckles Friend. Well I want more anyway. Otherwise you can go boil your head. Friend raises his offer, quite considerably really. How many say I. Well about a hundred or so should do very well says he, very well indeed. That's rather a lot say I. He shrugs. All right, I say and we shake on it. Then I let him buy me a drink.

He gives me half in advance.

Happy as a sandboy, that's me.

I stand at the back door having a well earned but fumbling fag. The last dark hours of the night are upon us; the day that was not quite wound down, the day that will be not quite birthed as it were. It's raining. Ice-cold drizzle. Obviously. It's that sort of day. They mostly are come to think of it. As I happily puff on I can't help noticing my poor poor hands which are quite numb and useless and bloodless; so pale they'll probably never revert to their former rosy glory. When I take a closer look at them beneath the nightlights they appear all withered and fleshless like as if they didn't belong to me but some dead man. Someone on Seven like.

Which is what you get for having your hands immersed in the freezing sludge of the sodding pods all day trying to repair some sodding wire or other to adjust the sodding thermostat. And obviously because it's such delicate work you got to do it manually. No, not you. I. Thirty-nine manually adjusted pods. And fourteen more pods to go. Makes you really wonder could the thermostats somehow be tampered with from the outside? Make it look like the temperature was always the right one no matter what? How hard could it be to cheat a simple thermo? Not very. And who'd ever bother to check it? Not hardly. I throw away the but and light a new fag. He should be here any minute.

It's really all a question of logistics is what it boils down to. In and out in a flash and who'll be the wiser? No one, that's who. Which suits me just perfect.

I'm just about to blooming give up on him when he appears in the doorway. The Janitor as we jokingly like to call him on account of him being a janitor like. We exchange the usual inane pleasantries and chitchat away nineteen to the dozen as it were before I get down to brass tacks and spring the question no one ever says no to. So tell me mate and don't be shy, would you like to make some money? And curiously enough he does want to make some money so I explain what I need from him. Which is: a) a set of keys to one great big lorry and b) one password and one access code to the caves. All of which he can easily lay his dishonest paws on and no sweat let me tell you. That all? says he. That's all say I. Can you

get them? No prob me lad, no prob whatsoever. Consider it done me lad, consider it well and truly done. Just one thing – what you want them for? I was hoping he wouldn't ask that particular question but he does so there we are. Best be forthright. Honesty is always the best policy as it were. Well this fellow I'm slightly acquainted with wishes to purchase a few lodgers to cheer him up and out of the goodness of my heart I feel I must fulfil his lifelong dream. That's just the sort of good Samaritan you are me lad, the Janitor says. Aren't I just say I. And what's this fellow you're slightly acquainted with gonna do with them then once he has them? With the lodgers? Yeah. Dunno and don't care. Sounds fishy to me says the Janitor and scratches his thinning temple. For all I know he's going to start a botanical zoo or wrap them up in toilet-paper and auction them off as ancient Egyptian mummies – what the devil does it matter what he's going to do with them?

The Janitor scratches his temple some more. Well laddie, he says, maybe you're right and maybe you're not. Thing is it don't feel right, he says, not right at all. Not natural like for someone to be buying lodgers like that. I mean they're people too me lad, not so much live people but still people basically no matter what and they've got their rights same as you and me. I mean fair's fair. So how much would it take for it to feel right for you say I and he names a sum which is much more than I'd have been prepared to offer him. But what can you do, without the Janitor the whole operation becomes if not virtually impossible then at least a damned sight harder so money changes hands and we shake on it. Greedy swine. I'll see to it that these poor poor people get a good home and live out the rest of their lives in the comfort they so richly deserve say I all weepy. That really does take a load off me troubled old heart laddie says the Janitor, so give us a fag then?

So on my next day off I collect from the Janitor the keys to the lorry and the current password and access code to the caves and Bob's your uncle. It takes me almost ten hours to choose and disconnect and shift the pods to the lorry because it must look like no pods have disappeared from the caves which makes it all a bit tricky. This time I do have a tiny teeny fork-lift but it's still bloody slow work let me tell you. And one hundred pods don't fit at all that easily in the lorry even though it's huge so I'm forced to juggle a bit as there's simply no way I can afford to make a second trip. In the end I have to shove three or even four lodgers in several of the last pods and it's still a tight fit. That's bad because now I have to leave several empty pods behind. Not only do I have to lug them back but reconnect them to the mainframe as well and it all takes time and time is something I can ill

afford. And leaving empty pods is bad because that's evidence that is. But can't be helped. Not to worry. A few empty pods don't prove nothing. Nothing at all. And besides, nobody gives a toss really. Just lodgers they are. And they'd only be glad to be of some use to someone I'm betting. Overjoyed like.

So I'm off to the rendezvous a couple of hundred clicks northwest of the caves with my loot and get to the abandoned field just in time with nary a minute to spare which is enough to make me sweat more than a little I can tell you. I park the lorry on the far side of the field under some tall firs and jump out. There's nobody there. I light a fag and start waiting. Suddenly a low whistling noise from up above the dark nocturnal clouds. The noise comes nearer and so does the carrier the noise emanates from as it starts circling the field ever so slowly. I lift my eyes and make out the headlights that quickly turn into landing lights. One last tight turn and the carrier lands smack in the middle of the field. That's when it strikes me – this is no ordinary shuttle. It's bleeding spaceship.

Which is a bit odd maybe.

The cargo hold opens creakingly and after a tick my good friend from the tavern appears and following him a couple of other strange-looking codgers that walk as if their joints would break at any moment or had indeed done so only recently if you see what I mean. I hop back in the lorry and drive it closer. Greetings and salutations sir, I shout, you precious delivery hath arrived. I park directly in front of the open hold and release the sides of the lorry. Right, I say, one hundred cold lodgers as per request. Signed, sealed and delivered so to say. Excellent says Friend and forks over the rest of the cold hard cash which I forthwith pocket. After which we start unloading the lorry and moving the pods into the hold which seems absolutely enormous. No time to connect the pods now, Friend says, well do it en route.

It's when we've shifted about half of the pods or so when the excrement really hits the fan.

Suddenly lights explode all around us; bright painfully hard lights; then the sky is all buzzing with insect-like patrol helos.

It's the rozzers! Friend shouts. Which is also my conclusion thanks to the insignia on the helos and the loudspeaker blares going: Waah waah waah this is the police waah! Stop at once what you're doing waah and come out in the open with your hands in the air waah waah! Or else waah!

Apparently the police don't think we're moving speedily enough or maybe they just feel we need some added incentive to do the right thing so a single solitary shot rings out. All goes quiet like. Then – bloody madness.

Everybody with a firearm starts pumping away in our general direction and in no time the air is thick and misty with synth lead and powderoid gases and laserial fumes. I turn around and Friend has scarpered – obviously and quite sensibly too – and the cargo hold is creakingly closing. Now

this leaves me in a pretty pickle indeed. I can stay and face the music for pinching the lodgers which would probably mean getting seriously shot dead within the next five seconds give or take a few. Or I can piss off.

Not that difficult a choice when you stop to think.

At the very last second possible I dive in and the door of the hold snaps shut behind me.

So wha we gona do wiv dis one den eh?

Well six days into the space journey and it's truth be told rather starting to look like an enormous bloody cock-up I can tell you. Leaping on board I mean. Firstly I have absolutely no idea where we were going. Which in itself isn't the end of the world. I mean I'm game. I'll land on my feet. Like a cat with nine lives I am. But every time I ask any innocent question as to our proposed destination I get told to shut your filthy gob you miserable tit. Secondly everybody seems to think it's my fault the police were there which I find just a little bit thick. I mean come on. Be fair. Who was the one with the bloody big conspicuous spaceship? Bound to raise a few eyebrows I shouldn't wonder, hopping about in a gigantic lumbering interstellar vessel. Not all that hard to spot what? Thirdly they're a bit miffed that they didn't get all the lodgers they paid for. Not my fault is it? I mean I didn't stop them from scooping up the remaining lodgers did I? Well did I? So why cry to me about it?

So wha we gona do wiv dis one den? the more rodent-like of Friend's associates repeats his question once more and it seems pretty clear that his intentions whatever they be are not going to be to my liking.

And then there's the slight matter of my very presence on the ship. I mean honestly, they didn't exactly invite me on board. Which is understandable as the ship, as huge as it is, is only meant to hold a crew of three, yours truly being a bit of a crowd like. Creating some slight tension even, with there being no place for me to kip and all. And no extra tuck for little old hungry me and said me only getting hungrier by the day. By the hour really. The first few days they give me something to eat, scraps and suchlike, then – nothing. Not a very good sign I should say. To be perfectly honest.

Gentlemen, I say, I do urge you to consider that we are in a very real sense in the same boat so to say. Right? Yeah? Surely we need not start to like argue and bicker about whose bloody presence isn't bloody wanted on board and all this loose talk of jettisoning stowaways and flinging them overboard into the vast cosmic coldness of interstellar space is in really bad taste I can tell you. Arguing will get us nowhere believe you me.

Oh yus? says Friend's second associate what is all bald

and fat and looks like a tub of uncombed jelly on a particularly bad day.

Yes indeed, I say. I mean after all we are like business partners as it were and business partners look after each other don't they. Not doing so would be very very bad for business. I'm ready to compromise. I'm ready to make concessions. I don't need a bunk to sleep in. No no no. The hull of the ship is perfectly fine I can tell you. It's pure luxury. And as for tuck well I can certainly stand to loose a few pounds and all and only feel the better for it. Getting a bit heavy I am really. Only chuck me the occasional drop of water every now and again and I'll be right as rain.

Only a few drops of water? asks Friend. Right as rain?

Right as rain, I assure him, happy as a sandboy.

Only it's not quite as simple as that I'm afraid, Friend says. No?

No you see it's the oxygen I'm afraid. There isn't quite enough for four persons.

I'll breathe very very carefully, I say, and only in moderation. I assure you.

Yus we know dat, says the rodent-like associate and grabs me from behind. Breade real real carefell won yer yus yus. And then they all laugh away in a fashion I can only describe as like unpleasantly menacing really.

Well they carry me down to the hold and Friend opens one of the pods.

Hang on now, I say being manhandled like a sack of coals, no need to do anything rash that you'll only regret like later really. Now you're just being silly let me tell you. Come now sir, let's stop the joking and jesting and get serious for a moment.

I say much more too and make some really valid points as well I can tell you but they really don't seem to listen at all. Instead they chuck me in the pod and splash splash I land on top of a couple of wizened old lodgers and then the door slams shut on me.

Well I stay conscious for a good long while. Then it's utter darkness for yours truly and beddy-byes for real and no two ways about it.

Parched . . .

Completely . . . bloody . . . parched . . .

And . . . then . . . some . . .

Well it takes forever for me to open my peepers but finally I manage that very arduous task. Hullo! No longer in the pod? What's going on? I seem to be buried like in some filthy sand or goo up to my neck and when I finally find the strength to turn my head I see that I'm not alone. Not a bit of it. I seem to be in a great big bloody field and everywhere I look I see heads and heads and more heads springing from the ground

like weary wilting mushrooms. That's a bit rum. They've only gone and buried all the lodgers and me with them for reasons no doubt clear only to themselves. Them? Who exactly? Surely not Friend and associates? Why they'd want to go do a silly thing like that is quite beyond little old yours truly. Must be at least several hundred lodgers in all I count. Right. I lift my head slightly and see that we're not out in the open like what I first thought but in a sort of greenhouse as it were with fine cut crystal glass everywhere around us and as I admire the wonderful glass and the superb cut of it sprinklers go off and I'm about to choke in something that isn't really water at all but a kind of thick elastic liquid that blinds me and chokes me and very nearly drowns me altogether. Then it stops. I catch my breath. Then the sprinklers go off again.

And I am so very thirsty.

So obviously I try to drink the thick liquid; well it could be water of sorts like maybe. So I tilt my head, open my mouth and start gulping away like the proverbial fish on dry land.

Big mistake. Huge mistake.

Everything goes all blurry . . .

. . . and . . .

. . . well . . .

. . . black like . . .

Oh dear. Oh dear oh dear. Good heavens. Well upon my word really I say.

Eh?

I open my eyes after what must have been years and years and there's this shrivelled little geezer what must be a thousand years old standing in front of me in a long flowing robe going all gaga and ohdearing and goodheavensing as if his home was in a tree or something.

I could really murder for a pint mate say I or at least try to but the old laryngeal apparatus don't quite feel like co-operating and as for the tongue it seems that someone has made off with it and replaced it with a slab of dried cracked wood. Blimey.

Bless my soul my dear boy you are alive! the geezer warbles all fluttery. Good heavens!

Dunno about that mate croak I, but anyroad how about buying a fellow that pint or you can even make it two if you absolutely insist.

Well it's all a bit blurry after that but I seem to remember a gaggle of hands pulling me out of the sand and carrying me off to some sort of like shed and pins and needles and wires being stuck in my poor chastised flesh and then it's all more or less blackness again for the longest time.

Well anyway, long story short, in next to no time they patch me up real proper and I'm as good as new and spick and span as can be when I in all my glory sit as their honoured guest and all at the long table in the town hall where all their large festivities take place and everybody real sad and weepy about the shabby way they've horribly mistreated poor poor yours truly by burying him in the goo like a bally lodger like. Must be at least a hundred people gob gob gobbling away at various dishes and not half bad they are too to a starving man I can tell you.

Goodness me you have been in the wars says an old biddy with a skeletal skull and purple wig a mile and a half long what sits next to me and must be at least five hundred and fifty if she's a day. Cheers ducky say I and wink lecherously at her. She is after all the youngest bird in the room by far. Probably in town even. The pick of the crop let me tell you. Fancy a snifter dearie? And whatcher doing later nudge nudge?

Ah yes I will have another. Cheers. That one really hit the spot I can tell you and I ain't half lying. Cheers again ducky.

Well the drinks flow like water and the luncheon progresses and little by little the whole story comes out. Where I am. Who these people all. What the dickens is going on and all. That sort of thing really.

Turns out there isn't anybody on the whole planet who's been quickened less than eight times. And successfully I might add. Not half queer. Apparently when you've been quickened that often you want to be by yourself and with your own kind or maybe it's just that the repeated quickenings make you go a bit funny in the head like and you can no longer be around normal people. So they upped and bought a planet of their own and are now as happy as clams really and who am I to disagree with their loony little fads.

So why are you buying lodgers and shoving them in goo then? I ask quite reasonably since it don't quite seem to make any sense. Well sir, my old friend Geezer who seems to be a bit of a head honcho around the place answers, having been quickened as many times as we have we possess a great deal of respect and indeed affection for anybody who has been quickened. Therefore we cannot stand idly by as these poor poor people are maltreated by your Institutions and Companies and callously abandoned in the hands of yon crooks and ruffians alike.

So you stick them in goo then? What's that good for?

Well sir, the "goo" you mention is in fact extremely sophisticated silicone sand infested with remarkably complex bio-mechanical processors which support and enhance that delicate spark of the very life with which these poor poor people have been quickened. In the fullness of time that spark grows stronger and more forceful and completely transforms their entire metabolism.

I see I say but I don't. Not to worry. No skin off my nose.

Whatever turns them on is my motto, live and let live like. Cheers mate.

So anyway they give me a house of my own which is nice. I potter along not doing much anything really and the years pass by as they tend to do when you're having fun and even when you're not as it were. Like me here that is. Life on the planet with these nightmarishly ancient old codgers is by and large as boring as you can ever imagine or probably more so. And before I notice I'm quite the old codger meself; grey and toothless and what have you. And curiously enough ready for my first quickening since I've never had any. And what better place for it than here?

Oh dear, my old friend Geezer blusters, oh dear oh dear. I'm afraid you don't understand.

Understand what? says I.

On this planet we don't do old-fashioned and conventional and crude quickenings any longer. We've all been quickened far too many times for it to have any effect on us.

Well what do you do then? I demand. You must do something to keep the spark going?

And so the limping old Geezer escorts me to one of the greenhouses with the lodgers up to their necks in goo. I haven't been inside a greenhouse since that first time and I can tell you don't really relish going back either. Still have the occasional nightmare about it.

Well sir, Geezer says, it's really quite simple and straightforward. When these people, these seers of ages past have mellowed out in the sand for a few decades, mixed forever with the elements as the poet so charmingly puts it, their spark is much more sedate and gentle and as such much more suited to our purposes. As you may see we have installed a tiny plug in the back of their neck, just where the spine meets the skull. With this cord we connect it to our own vertebrae – C1 to be precise – like so: and within a few minutes or hours at the most we are quickened and rejuvenated for a good few months.

So you brought these lodgers over just so you could steal whatever spark's left in them? I laugh out in amazement. Bloody hell! You sly bastards! Didn't think you had it in you I didn't!

Sir you wrong us most foully, Geezer replies quite visibly hurt by my cold words, we merely provide these poor people with a unique chance to be useful and indeed exigent these last precious days of their lives.

What a joke. What a glorious joke. And here's me thinking all along they're all bloody saints and turns out they're no better than ghouls and bleeding grave-robbers really. So plug me up then me old darling so I can have my share of the spark say I and offer the old neck to Geezer. Who laughs. And picks up a spade someone's carelessly left lying

about on the ground.

Oh dear you seem to have misunderstood me yet once more. It would do you no good whatsoever. I'm afraid this spark is far too delicate and specific for anyone who has not been quickened eight times or so in the old-fashioned conventional manner. Were you to sample it, it would immediately strike you dead.

Well what the devil am I suppose to do then? I cry out more than a bit miffed. Bloody tell me that you old fool!

At which point the old fool bangs me over the head with his shovel.

Bugger.

I open my eyes. Slowly. Painfully.

You're quite right sir, Geezer says, absolutely right sir.

Head all smashed up like. Hurting like the very devil.

Spot on sir, spot on. You see I had not realised it before.

What are you drivelling you cretin? I say a bit peevish like.

Your position here is really quite impossible, Geezer says, quite impossible.

It takes a while before I get it. Why I can't move I mean. It's because he's only gone and sodding buried me up to my sod-

ding neck in their sodding goo of a sand pit. Again I might bloody well add. It's really starting to become a habit. And I'm really really starting to lose my patience. Oh yes. Good and proper.

It really is a tragedy as we cannot possibly quicken you here, Geezer says and sounds genuinely sorry. There is nothing whatsoever we can do for you.

Yes there is, I'm about to say, you can blooming well dig me up you oaf and be quick about it too!

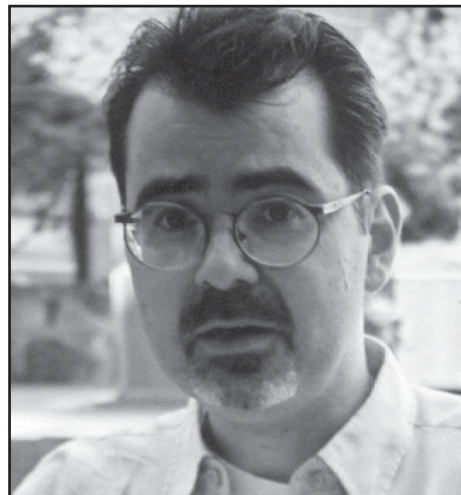
But I never get to say anything because the second my lips are about to move and my tongue about to wag I feel an incredible bloody pain in the back of my bloody neck. I want to shout out but I can't – I'm well and truly paralysed.

At least this way your existence will continue for centuries, Geezer says as he starts forcefully to insert the plug in my spine. And at the same time you will feel the wonderful gratification of knowing that your precious life will not have been wasted but that you too have been useful till the very end. Dear me yes, very useful indeed.

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About the author

When not composing his brilliant prose or sublime dramas, the author collects hedgehogs and bits of string. In his spare time he never - very much contrary to popular disbelief - works as an international fashion model. On Wednesdays the author likes to eat herrings and cheese. Preferably Gorgonzola. Well obviously.





THE MEANING OF LIFE

Juha-Pekka Koskinen

translation: Veli-Pekka Koskinen

Illustrations: Tytti Heikkinen

The angel came to me during small hours. It was at that precise moment of the day when reason wouldn't accept the possibility of a new dawn ever emerging. I had decided to poison only the part of me, which resiliently demanded me to compose music day in and day out. Music nobody wanted to hear. I could whistle the whole of Sibelius' second symphony flawlessly, from the very beginning to the very end but I was useless as a composer.

I had the poison already to go and didn't think I would cause myself considerable harm by taking it. I thought I could kill a part of me. I thought I could channel the poison to the location where my inner composer resided. During those small hours, anything seemed possible. Only the first rays of dawn will reveal a man's capability of fallacy in his desperate hour.

I felt myself sinking deeper into my bed and the dim light made the shadows grow darker. As I looked up, an angel was sitting at the end of the bed, lost in thought, staring at the floor indifferently as if it were waiting for a bus. It smoked a cigarette with very deliberate and slow motions letting the smoke find its way out, not even bothering to hasten its course by blowing. The cigarette had no aroma. Perhaps God had invented scentless cigarettes for peaceful small hours of the night.

Even though the angel had taken the form of my girlfriend, I knew it wasn't her. She was still alive and even if she had suddenly died, she would be the one burning, not smoking. They had to know somewhere Upstairs that in this form the angel wouldn't scare me and they had been right. I looked at the apparition in a completely calm state, waiting for it to say what it had come to say and then leave me in peace. It was loyal to its chosen form to such a degree that I was left waiting for quite some time.

- Where did you get that poison? asked the angel, having

finally finished smoking its cigarette.

It put out the cigarette against the end of my bed and flailed its wings a couple of times to diminish the odorless smoke cloud which had formed.

- There's no trick in getting poison when you have friends in medicinal circles, I grunted arrogantly.

- Did you know that it could kill you? continued the angel monotonically as if reading questions from a sheet of paper.

- Well in that case this would be the first medicine I have ever taken which has the effect promised on the label.

- Why don't you have faith in solving your problems?

- I think it's a little corny to talk about faith at a moment like this. Let's just say that I'm sick and tired of everything.

- Is all of this the result of you falling out with your girlfriend again? If this is about sex, I'll be happy to help you, said the angel and started opening its robe with a firmness coming from experience.

I drew the covers over myself, horrified, regardless of seeing that God seemed to fix the mistakes he had done given a second chance.

- Don't bother. In that form you can hardly give me anything that I haven't grown tired to already, I said with haste.

The angel shrugged and robed itself again. It flapped its wings lazily and produced another self-igniting cigarette from somewhere. Pursing its lips the angel stood up and examined the window shades taking lazy drags from its celestial cigarette.

- Awful curtains, it proclaimed in a friendly manner.

- Thank you. Now if that's all you came to tell me, perhaps you could go somewhere else to scatter ashes on peoples' rugs, I grunted starting to fluff my pillow as a hint for it to take its leave.



- You don't get ashes from these or anything else for that matter regrettably, the angel remarked sighing deeply.

- Every profession has its downside.

The angel grunted disdainfully and looked at me with its head askew. It scratched its breasts in such a masculine manner that I felt great relief having turned down heavenly temptation.

- Listen here. You know perfectly well that the guy upstairs sent me to visit you. Because you seem to be handling yourself quite well, I'll now speak to you as honestly and directly as...as a mother to her child, it said and smiled in such a captivating way that my stomach turned.

-That's fine with me.

It seemed that I wasn't even allotted a decent guardian angel but I had luckily gotten used to the fact that my life was sowed together from leftovers anyway.

- You know perfectly well that taking that poison will instantly take your life away. It might be that you would regret your deed already in the morning if it was possible and so forth. Maybe if you tried hard enough you still might become a great composer, if you applied yourself harder and so on, and so forth, and so on, it said making circles with its wings.

- Well is it possible? You people in the attic should know.

- To be quite frank, it isn't. Where in blazes did you get the idea that it would be?

- Then I can happily take this poison.

- If you think that the conductors of this world will shed any tears for you, you are dead wrong, the angel lashed out.

- Be it the truth, The Man is getting tired of you people run-

ning back in your own time, not doing any of the things which He would have wanted you to do. So I would advice you to think again.

I stared at my very own consoling angel with my eyes wide open. It had come to tell me something but apparently Wittgenstein wasn't required reading in heaven.

- Well I'm awfully sorry about that. I seem to have lost my instructions for life somewhere along the line.

- No wonder your girlfriend packed up her things, the angel sniffed.

It started to show clear signs of getting fed up so I tried to be at least a little friendlier.

- What am I supposed to do then?

- Find a meaning for your life. Find out for yourself if you have anything to live for. If you can't think of anything, you can go ahead and swallow the poison. I won't come here for a second time to stop you, it said. - But like I said, The Man is getting pretty tired of you people. Don't come complaining I didn't warn you when you're sent to the boilers below.

It pointed to the floor heavily with its thumb and then disappeared. I don't know how soothing were other peoples' experiences with angels but I didn't feel the least bit restless after my encounter. I had gotten through one gloomy night with the help of my guardian angel and that was all. The next night was just around the corner.

As I was sitting down and having my breakfast, Riitta came home. She had been away only three days. In our



relationship it was the equivalent of a blink of an eye, or even a shorter time. Her face was swollen up from either drinking, staying up late or crying. I didn't even bother guessing which one of those was the reason this time.

- The man of the house seems to be up already, she stabbed with her rough voice and dropped herself down on one of the chairs next to the table.

You could see from the glistening in her eyes that she was just aching for a good fight. Arguing was something Riitta had had in her blood since birth.

- I didn't really get a good night's sleep.

- Was your head throbbing with celestial music the whole night?

- This is how we complement each other. My throbbing is situated upstairs and yours downstairs.

- Dream on, hissed Riitta rattling her chair while getting up. - What's that smell? Did you have some bitch over last night? she squealed and looked at me with her nostrils trembling.

- There was nobody here, except my guardian angel. It paid me a quick visit but it didn't really have much to say, I said yawning.

Riitta strode into the bedroom and I heard how she threw the covers on the floor. The sheet made a squeaking sound when she moved her nose up and down the mattresses. I have to admit that it was a hilarious sight but once you had seen it a couple of times the novelty of it had somehow faded. I was more interested in my hot cup of coffee, so I sliced myself another piece of bread and continued my breakfast.

- Did you get a scent? I shouted amused.

The floor thumped and I heard her crawling on her hands and knees on the woolen carpet. I think she originally bought it to gather evidence like a sticky piece of flypaper. Soon Riitta stormed into the kitchen with her fingers spread and a demonic expression on her face.

- What is this?! she yelled her face turning bright red.

I looked at her fingertips, gray from ashes. I couldn't even trust angels and was somehow disappointed although not that surprised.

- Looks like ashes to me, I said frowning, - but without further testing I can't tell if it's from a small cigar, a common cigarette or a genuine North State.

Riitta had always been very fast. Even now the first notes to a jealous prelude sounded out without further adieu when she slapped my face with her open palm. The coffee cup rattled against my teeth and coffee spilled out making a beautiful pattern across the table.

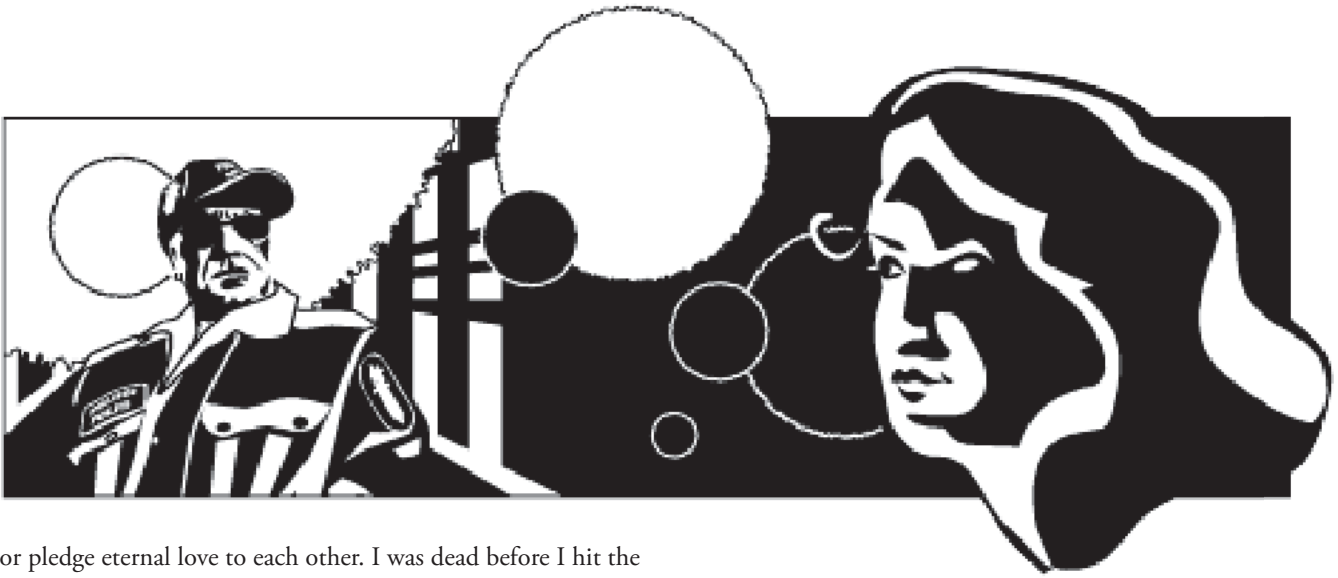
- You bastard. You dare to accuse me of spreading my legs every chance I get and in the mean time you're playing sink the sub with some smoking tart, she raged on.

Her eyes were outright sparkling with anger accompanied with deep white lines forming around her mouth, distorted by rage. Like all cheaters she was angriest when she thought herself to be cheated. She could love and hate so passionately that compared to our relationship the Linnanmäki rollercoaster was as smooth as an ice rink.

- As far as I know venereal diseases don't spread by the power of thought, so I don't think all of my accusations are without foundation.

We had danced this waltz so many times that I knew how to step on someone's toes as painfully as possible. This time round she probably already knew about a new addition to her collection of venereal diseases and because of that was even more irritable. I had hardly time to conjure up that irritable smirk of mine on my face before Riitta had already grabbed the bread knife. It was a well known fact that she was a raving lunatic so she didn't have time to think about reason, or consequences for that matter.

Riitta stabbed me without hesitation, managing for once in her life to find the direct path to my heart. Because we weren't on a stage performing an opera, but in a bread crumb infested kitchen, we didn't have time to groan, repent



or pledge eternal love to each other. I was dead before I hit the floor falling from my chair with a stupid smirk on my face.

As I sat in the waiting hall, the angel came to me. It had forsaken its nightly appearance and had its true form now. It was hairy-lipped and robust as a Bulgarian shot-putter but despite all my suspicions it was a female. It was looking at me, giggling. I didn't blame it. The scene in my kitchen must have been genuinely amusing.

- Find the meaning of life, I said with pathos.

- Accidents will happen, it said flailing its wings. – I was told that I could smoke freely. I guess you can't trust anyone.

- I don't know if it's possible to give feedback on you angels, but if it is, don't be surprised to find yourself reassigned to new duties downstairs, I said feeling my chest.

It still hurt and I didn't expect any magnificent advancements in that department anymore either.

- I just did as I was told, the angel blurted out seemingly offended.

- I thought that all representatives of that ideology are downstairs keeping Adolf company.

- Oh for Christ's sake, I almost wish that you were still alive, the angel hissed and marched off.

I didn't want to bother my head with how I had wound up in heaven and in God's waiting hall at that. After falling of the kitchen chair dead as doornail, I had plummeted into a dark tunnel where some vague inkling had led me forward. Finally I saw that notoriously famous bright light and fell on my nose on this waiting hall's not-so-clean floor. If these were the rules of the game, I had no particular interest in objecting them. I just waited for my turn patiently.

When it finally was my turn, the sky had turned black and the hall was almost completely deprived of light. I was gently guided into a half-lit room and the door was closed behind me. At first, I thought of making a joke "first come, last served and last come first served" but gave up the idea after seeing God himself sit upon His throne.

He looked at me like a teacher would look at the most stupid pupil in his class, who once more returns to ask what exactly was it he was supposed to do. The chair on His right side was empty, which didn't seem like a good omen to me. Suddenly His eyes brightened up as if He had seen his long lost cousin in front of Him. His face got brighter and brighter until I wasn't able to see anything.

At last the brightness burning my eyes started to fade. I saw black and red dots, a wall which was painted green and a scruffy nurse. Next to her was Riitta, who was closely guarded by a policeman.

- Did you catch that damned burglar?

My voice was as rough as a base fiddle with a cold, but the message went through. I saw how the policeman's face was affected by amazement and a sarcastic smile lit up on Riitta's face.

- Well? Now do you believe me?

She dashed next to my bed and stroked my hand. The police officer scratched his ear and shook his head. Knowing my little lunatic as well as I did, it wasn't too hard to guess what story she had made up next to my body. It was a true harmony of souls.

Riitta bent over to kiss my forehead.

- Save some of the drugs for me, she secretly whispered in my ear.

I smiled and fell asleep with a heart filled with joy and stitches.

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About the author

Juha-Pekka Koskinen (b. 1968) is a writer who completed his M. Sc in the University of Helsinki, majoring in mathematics. In addition to a short story collection "Kirjailija joka ei koskaan julkaissut mitään" ("Author, who never published anything"), he has published short stories in numerous magazines and anthologies and also four historical novels, of which the latest, "Seitsemäs tempeliherra" ("The Seventh Templar") was published in 2007. Koskinen is a multi-talented writer, who is at home in various different fields, be it speculative fiction, detective stories or realistic fiction.

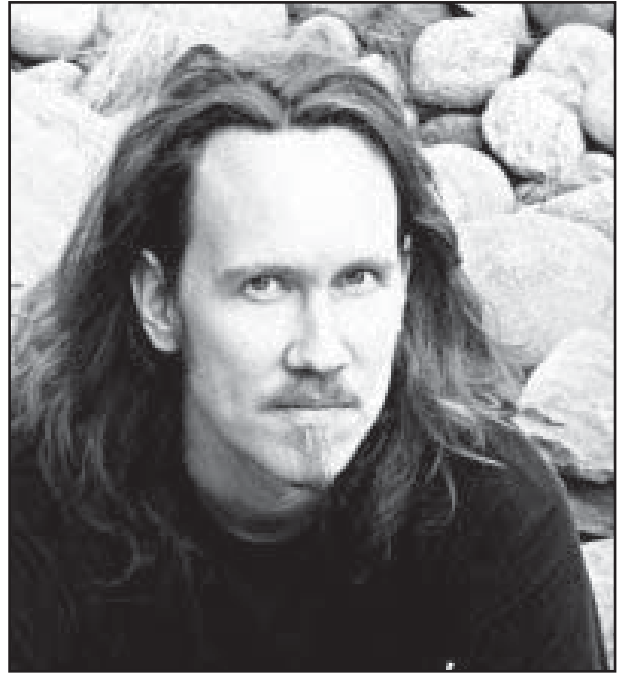


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About the author

J. Pekka Mäkelä (b. 1962) has studied physics, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and cultural anthropology at the University of Helsinki and is a professional literary translator. "Nedut" is his third novel. He uses classic sf themes as raw material - blending in elements from other genres - but instead of traditional heroes he is more interested in the people who are cleaning up the mess the heroes have left behind. He has also written a couple of non-fiction books.

NEDUT

J Pekka Mäkelä

Excerpt from the novel *Nedut*, published September 2007.

Rough translation by the author

I have climbed the Yggdrasill, the Tree of the World, for twenty thousand years.

I have seen the glaciers spreading from the north and forcing even the hardy steppes people to move south, to the European peninsulas and to the northern Africa. I have seen the last forest people on Earth dying hungry, sick, cold and lonely. I have seen, how the glaciers retreat back to the north and the steppes people return to the Europe. I have seen, how a whim of climate turns the Sahara desert to a leafy savannah and creates a paradise to the area south from Mesopotamia. I have seen, how another whim of climate turns the Sahara back to desert and drowns the Mesopotamian paradise under the sea, whose name is still disputed after thousands of years.

I have seen, how people are expelled from their paradise and forced to work for their living. They become farmers and stockbreeders, traders and priests, nobility and casteless, doctors and unemployed, ventilation mechanics and researchers, CEOs and gofers, artists and artisans, and they never forget the paradise they lost. They never forget the time they were not divided into so many small confines they can never leave.

I have seen, how people try to understand their new, strange and frightening world by dividing it into smaller pieces.

I have seen how a little man named Laotse slashes the world into two and breeds two monsters, who maul everything they get into their clutches.

I have seen how a little man named Plato slashes the world into two and breeds two monsters, which maul everything they get into their clutches.

I have seen how a little man named Aristotle slashes the world into two and breeds two monsters, who maul everything they get into their clutches.

I have seen how a little man named Thomas Aquinas takes the monsters Aristotle bred and gives them new names. They maul everything they get into their clutches.

I have seen how a little man named Descartes slashes the world into two and breeds two monsters, who maul everything they get into their clutches.

I have seen so many little men and little women slashing the world into a good part and a bad part. They are monsters, which maul everything they get into their clutches.

I have seen so many little men and little women slashing the world to smaller and smaller pieces trying to learn more and more about smaller and smaller. I have seen so many men and women believing, that nothing exists but the tiny piece they know so much more about than anybody else. I have seen how they deny the sole existence of the tiny pieces that other men and women love. I have seen them hate the others, who insist there is only one particular tiny piece and nobody should believe in any other tiny pieces. I have seen them in blind rage, killing those who refuse believe in their own tiny piece and worship it as the only tiny piece in the world. They plug their ears, eyes, nose and feelings from everything else. They fill their ears with music they don't listen, their ears with words they don't read and pictures they don't see. They make everyday out of everything that was holy to destroy the holiness. They are afraid of holy.

They fear the shadows on the cave walls.

They fear what creates the shadows on the cave walls.

They fear what is outside the cave.

They fear what is on the other side of the cave wall.

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