

The eighth day

What woke me? It certainly wasn't noise from the clinic; I have to strain to identify sounds from the more distant wings of the clinic. Judging by the dark layers of clouds, it cannot be long after sunrise.

My gaze wanders around the room and along the windows again: nothing, and I raise my eyes to the closet wall with integrated door: nothing, and I return to the empty projection screen, to which I had given only a superficial glance the first time around. That's it: it is flickering, as it always does just before the invisible control center opens up communications, and I believe I hear a faint hum, interrupted by incomprehensible babbling...

The flickering stops and a picture takes shape before my eyes: a room, to be precise a patient room here in the clinic - I recognise the uniformly laid out closet walls. As usual, there is a hospital bed with the head end to the wall, and a railing around the bed to prevent falls. A person is lying in recently soiled sheets, if this piteous being with the irregularly twitching eyes, drooling mouth and claw-like hands, manacled to the bed, could be called a person. I seem to perceive the stink of vomit, feces and urine from the repulsive sight of the strange creature and I feel nausea rising. The unmelodic humming and babbling, which seems to be what woke me, is flowing from his mouth, together with uncontrolled saliva. I want to turn away and give the command to close the screen, but the image does not disappear. Instead I hear a familiar voice:

"Look, old man, that is you!"

'Old man!' Nobody else calls me that but the bearded copy of my son! He is still being held in the clinic, then, and despite the technical supervision he must have succeeded in manipulating the system for his own purposes. Briefly I register the stirring of a paradoxical pride: Family intelligence. We are something to be reckoned with! And then I ask myself: What is he trying to tell me?

But I already know. Before I could prevent it, the horror has seized on an image from my college days and shown me the answer: a gifted, good-looking classmate, after a car accident reduced to a vegetative state by terrible brain injuries, whom they had brought back from stasis, but never back to normality. His face lost all human beauty, changed beyond recognition by the loss of vital brain functions, until he, like this creature in the clinic bed had sunk into a drooling bundle of misery with no control over his bodily functions. Behold the man?

I realise who it is lying there chained and cowering in his excrement: The first of my two clones, the one they messed up, and I hear Dr. Servant's voice.

Was it during one of our conversations a few weeks ago or even months? Back then something had gone wrong, an unforeseen incident: My second donor blown up by a bomb, literally pulverized. In breach of contract there was no further clone available. Circuitous explanations from the white coats: 'The first one unfortunately unsuitable as a donor. A metabolic disease caused by the transport virus, spread to the brain.'

No, the last words he didn't say, wishing to spare me the thought of my alter ego transformed into an idiot, material for their experiments, until the time came to dispose of him...

I have seen enough:

"Switch off! Please get this away!" And this time he complies with my request. The picture goes blank, and the wall looks just like before. But nothing is like before any more:

Tat twam asi. That too am I.

The paralysis stemming from this knowledge will not leave me the whole day. I eat much less than on the days before, chewing listlessly, leaving most behind. When Dr. Servant

wants to talk to me, I let him know I am tired and avoid eye contact: I will not look at his concerned face, give no answer or only sleepy murmurs to his questions, until he gives up.

"We shall need to talk properly, my dear Jason, if not today, then tomorrow or the next day, when ever you wish. You know, of course, I have time for you. For the time being, if I may offer a suggestion, why not let the lovely Vera entertain you." Before the screen goes blank, I notice through half-closed eyes how he is shaking his head.

My dear Jason! That's what I am to him: his dear Jason, valuable property, indispensable research material to which he has free access, just as he has to the body of my unfortunate clone. But why the worried face? Why the head-shaking? Perhaps I am being unfair to Servant: because of my arbitrary, incomplete knowledge or because this morning's almost intolerable imposition has clouded my mind. Normally I do not permit myself to be so easily disconcerted, and I ask myself, what has happened today to my good sense and clear judgement? Better not to trouble myself with that, not to think about it; at least not today! Perhaps tomorrow or some day soon. Servant is right: Vera would be the right distraction right now.

But Vera's travel plans simply irritate me this time, I break off her novel reading after a few pages, close my ears against the music selection and dismiss her, feigning tiredness again. Or I really am tired, too tired to come to a conclusion, too tired even for ruminating? What my mood would be without the lightening and balancing effect of the bracelet, I don't even want to imagine. At the moment it feels like I would gain more comfort from memory dreams, and after lunch I get myself in the mood once more, glide with deliberate unworriedness into a light half-sleep...

Ann is dancing. Barefoot, to the unfamiliar sounds of electronic music, repeating sequences of notes, and a thrilling, compelling rhythm, which seems to accelerate towards the mathematical beat, draws me along and surges in perpetual reiteration towards a conclusion. She has pushed the table aside in the grand salon and spread out the calendar rug from Mexico, a faithful representation of the Aztec calendar stone. She is wearing the light as a feather silk dress she wore to the opera in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Softly shimmering it drapes her body, glisteningly reflecting every movement and swinging in a dazzling disk of color as she spins faster and faster. She does not see me, or does not mind my silent presence. Her gaze is directed inwards and simultaneously fixed on something unknown in the distance, in a trance. Her naked feet twirl and stamp to the surging, ever-changing rhythm of the music. Ann dances on the insignia of time: the fifty-two year cycle and the fifth solar era. She dances on the daily renewed, lifegiving sun at the centre, on that which is inevitable, which is fate. She sways over the abyss of the five nameless, unlucky days, reaches the sun centre once again, and sinks there with outspread arms to the floor, her breathing barely quickened, her head bowed as in sacrifice over the magical round of the calendar signs. The music ends abruptly.

I have been silently watching her. Only now, as she raises her head and looks at me, do I speak to her, the old question: 'Who are you?' 'You must never ask me!', comes the sibylline reply...

Who was she? Certainly she was an intelligent person, capable of masking origin and identity so masterfully that even my detective agency could not trace her. I couldn't have done it better myself.