

The sixth day

'Dr. Brandt, Dr. Jason Brandt, wake up!'

Vera's perfectly formed face was looking down at my from the wall screen, and I could have sworn that I could detect a note of worry in her expression. My heart beat faster for a while. My heart? As I tried in vain to recollect the nightmare that had had such a drastic effect on my vital statistics, I felt myself becoming calm again under the regulatory influence of the bracelet.

Suddenly, the memory of a photograph emerges, one which occupied my thoughts years ago, back when I was still investigating the calamities of history, still felt personally responsible for the workings of the universe. What a naive young man I had been! Why was I remembering her now, the traveler in the light-colored coat, that almost-forgotten image? The photograph of a young woman in a historic location – photographed as if she were passing through, and yet she had already arrived. Human material.

'You have slept for nine hours and 47 minutes,' Vera chimed in again, 'Please attend to your morning wash and brush up.' Sighing, I let go of the thought.

What a surprisingly big burden of images and memories we carry around with us...

So I wasn't supposed to forget to attend to my morning toilet! I devoted my undivided attention to it, swung one leg out of bed and then the other, placed my arms into the loops of the walking aid that led me safely into the hygiene cabin, and found myself in a clean nightshirt on fresh sheets, showered and my bowels emptied, within half an hour.

Breakfast – a vitamin shake, cornflakes and blueberry pancakes – was enjoyed to the sounds of Handel's Water Music.

A good day. The early-morning fog over the sea was lifting, and I decided that I would switch to the wheelchair after my midday physiotherapy and spend the afternoon on the balcony, wrapped up warmly in blankets. Dr. Servant would be able to keep his promise to join me there for a glass of good wine soon. On the left hand side of the window, a small shadow entered my field of view, remained still for a moment and then moved on. An insect or some other small animal, barely four inches long.

I controlled the room's optical settings with quiet commands, focusing on the animal and enlarging it: a small lizard that gets its life energy from the sun, as cold-blooded creatures do. I enlarged it further; now I could see the yellowish-white smooth belly of the creature rising and falling in rapid pulses, its legs lying flat to the side, the feet with five toes, that magic number which connects so many creatures. I stopped, taken-aback. Never before would I have been struck by a sense of kinship to such a small lizard. Its head moved from side to side, looking for something. Its alert black eyes monitored the surface, its dark forked tongue was stretched out and ran over the grass, almost too quickly for my eyes to follow. Its scaly sides betrayed something of the color of the creature's back and merged almost imperceptibly into its pale belly: it was a European green lizard. Its tail was no longer intact; it had probably had to sacrifice part of it to avoid being completely eaten up. For minutes, the creature remained almost motionless under my gaze, and I was surprised at how it managed to hold my interest. I have studied numerous small species in the past few years, with the focus on the histology of insects most of the time, their progression from egg to larva to pupae to nymph and finally to a short-lived imago. But only after catching them, carefully killing them with ether in tightly-closed jars, removing their alimentary tracts carefully and fixing them to a balsa block spreading board with pins. But since my childhood, I have never observed a living small creature so attentively and for so long.

I would have continued watching if a shadow had not caught my attention as it flew passed the enlarged lizard. Once I switched back to the default optical setting, I could see that it was a heli-glider drawing a brightly colored banner behind it.

MEA CULPA, I read, *MEA MAXIMA CULPA*. Before I could make out the following smaller letters, never mind work out what is going on, the contours of the letters went out of focus and the the banner and the heli-glider were covered in white stripes. What I could see of the lizard also became unclear, shadowy, finally an opaque white: the window had changed structure.

Two thoughts. Who is at fault? And: why has the control center made my window, and probably all

the other clinic windows as well, opaque?

I have been mulling this question over for hours, interrupting my reading every now and again, pausing during my midday exercises and the meal which follows them – I can find no solution. Afternoon approaches, then evening. The flying object with its banner is long gone, and my window is once more as transparent as if it had been freshly cleaned. I am sitting on the balcony with my half lobster on a bed of salad and vegetables, enjoying the view as well as the promised wine. A wine of profound depth, which paradoxically gives an impression of creaminess even though it is completely dry, releasing its bouquet gradually: 51 Chevalier-Montrachet. Servant isn't keeping his promise though, not properly at any rate. He gobbles down his half of the lobster and drinks far too quickly – a waste of the expensive wine which I am paying for – and he is inattentive and gives only distracted answers to my questions.

'What guilt? Whose guilt? Anyway, guilt, responsibility and punishment: empty, outdated words, as I explained to you not long ago. We have replaced them with the concepts of social damage and adjustment of damage or deletion. As scientists, our calculations are comparative. The greater the possible reward, including the ethical-moral one, the higher the acceptable risk, the sacrifice. And note one thing! The government is on our side. The population of the Western hemisphere has never had it so good: Synthomeat and synthovegetables for the masses have solved the nutrition problem, and the plebs will always prefer 4-D programs and virtual journeys to the risks of poor service, terror attacks, natural catastrophes and accidents. Virtual sport is available. Nerve impulses affect the muscles and make it possible to achieve a certain training effect.

For the intellectual elites, a perfect offering of art and education is available, right up to special book editions for bibliophiles and the leasing of original works of art. You yourself have benefited from it for years. Of course we live in a class society, the basics of life, bread and circuses, are provided for the masses, and more demanding entertainment and luxurious goods are available to those who earn more and deserve more! Incidentally, it was always like this, even if people were more reluctant to admit it in the past.'

'But man does not live from bread alone,' I object, although inside, I know he is right. It is my memory of Elisabeth's incurable religiosity that is giving me trouble.

'But we have thought of that too. As long as the groups remain free of violence and refrain from getting involved in non-religious affairs, as long as the strict separation of church and state is respected, complete religious freedom obtains. As long as the ground rules are respected, spiritualist lunatics can propagate whatever nonsense they like. The crazies are tolerated; we only observe them. You know all this, of course, the sigh of the oppressed creature, the opium of the people, well-suited to channeling unfulfilled yearnings in a manner which does not disrupt society.'

That doesn't satisfy me: 'What happens when the areas overlap? What happens when our concepts of justice and morals and those of our state don't match up with the religious laws of groups that imagine themselves to be in possession of divine truths? Divine truth knows no tolerance. Our citizen's constitution, our so-called human rights, the requirement to tolerate those who think differently from us would not just be a form of arrogance on the part of the powerful unbelievers, but also an infringement of eternal divine laws to such groups. That, at any rate, was what the Islamic terrorists at the turn of the century claimed, and that, or something along those lines, is typical for what fundamentalists have always claimed. Dear doctor, I ask you: Must well-meaning Traditionalists and all the other fanatic believers who possess the Truth not attack our system and with it all those who think otherwise with every means at their disposal in order to save our souls? The eternal war cries of crusades and jihad, Deus vult, Allahu akbar, - what have we to set against them?'

I feel uncomfortable arguing as an advocate of the Lord, but Servant nods slowly:

'Perhaps we can embark on an attempt to square the circle; there is really no ready resolution for such problems. As I already said, we left their activities undisturbed at first, made some apparent concessions, smuggled agents into their meetings and even into their families; most of them still live in traditional family groups. They withdraw from state institutions of education wherever they can, and they have even developed their own medieval healthcare system.'

His last words were underscored by a contemptuous gesture. I know what he means, I have heard talk of it myself: healing with plants, faith healing, human surgeons and pain therapy which consists

of putting up with whatever God has willed. Deo volente, insch'Allah...

Servant continues to speak, unperturbed: 'As you know, the faithful have been behind various attacks and violent acts here in the States as well, although they were initially directed less at state organizations and more at their own members, at the ones who had offended against the strict laws of the communities. The Traditionalists now form a counter-society and are a danger to the public with their abstruse notions about guilt and moral responsibility. Their courts pass judgment in secret and impose draconian punishments; there have even been reports of the death penalty being imposed.'

'Criminals out of a sense of moral responsibility; it is indeed an abstruse idea.'

'And an attack on the state monopoly of violence that no government can put up with! Who, anyway, decides what actions are right and what actions are wrong? What is a crime? An empty concept in these times in which binding criteria are lacking, in which only a minority profess faith in the God of the Bible and the Ten Commandments count only as a relict of Christian-Jewish history, honored more in the breach than in the observance. Don't make me walk you through them all, there is not one, I repeat, not one of them that isn't broken millions of times every day, now that even the religious live scarcely more peaceful lives than the rest of us, especially given the clashes between competing belief systems. We have state laws, of course, laws which are supposed to reconcile as many interests as possible and keep a lid on the natural chaos. But vested interests are involved and moral convictions change. What is a crime here and now can be normal or even exemplary somewhere else tomorrow – or vice-versa. Virtual realities hasten change further, often in a manipulative way. You, as a lawyer, should know more about it than most people!'

'And today's event?'

He gave a dismissive wave: 'You mean the flight from this morning? That was one of their more harmless stunts. They are trying to give us a bad conscience.'

Dr. Servant wiped his mouth with his serviette and twisted it in his hands before tossing it onto the plate. 'That's enough for today. We should keep some conversational fodder for the next few days. My dearest doctor Brandt, it's time for you to get ready for your night's sleep, and I am a hard-working man.'

He rose, yawned demonstratively from behind his hand and was already standing between the balcony and the hospital room. 'It will be too cold for you outside soon. Wait a short while, and then I'll send you room service. Good night and happy dreams!' He gave Vera a few instructions and disappeared: Dr. Servant.

And I lay once more in my sick bed. Vera had been dismissed for the day, I had looked through the entertainment program and decided on a documentary followed by Beethoven's violin sonata in D major. I listened to it until my tiredness rose together with the moon. Then I lay connecting with shreds of memory: the first weekend we spent together in the magic land of the hot springs, as we called it. I had been grateful to meet Ann again, who I wanted to adopt as my daughter, and at the same time I had felt insecure, as if something had deceived my expectations, as if my actual aim was a different one and I wasn't ready yet. Ann seemed to feel much the same way about it. There was no further talk of me extending my stay beyond the weekend.

She accompanied me to the car park in the late afternoon, waited until I had occupied the driving seat, and then bent down to me before I closed the car door. Her warm breath caressed my face, and I wasn't bothered by it. More than that: I sucked it in, and with it a hint of the perfume which had accompanied her all weekend.

'I'll be in touch, even though it might take a while. You can be sure that we'll see each other again.'

She kissed my right cheek. I kissed her forehead. No further words, no caresses. Father and daughter.

The last days of May passed without incident.

I went through the post twice a day, tense at first, then merely conscientiously, and finally on autopilot. Everyday life returned: minor meetings, international conferences in TechNetWork, my personal presence at the Association conference in Seattle, a few relaxing weekends with Glenn.

It was June before the next invitation arrived: The map showed part of the north-east Yosemite Valley. The area where Lake Mono used to be was marked, the spot where the Tioga Pass road

meets the state highway. There has been a modern visitor center there for a few years now, where interested tourists can find out about the history of Lake Mono from the beginnings, its importance as a water reservoir and its final drying out in our century. The location was not badly chosen. I was less keen on the day, in the middle of the week. Anne had assumed that I was free for her at any time.

The Wednesday in question began as an unusually hot day, and the inhabitants of Los Angeles spent their time either in air-conditioned zones or on the beach. The roads seemed emptier than usual and the pedestrian areas were almost deserted as the autopilot took the helimobile northwards. I flew over the San Gabriel Mountains, followed the 99 through Bakersfield and Fresno and turned off for the Inyo National Forest. The landing facility in Mono was busy, more so than I had expected, and I understood why Ann had told me to come during the week. What must it be like here on holidays? I turned off the auto-pilot and steered the vehicle to 120, where an apartment in the Lake Mono Resort Hotel awaited me. I had a refreshing shower and selected an outfit for my initial exploration: shorts, a Syneprene shirt, stout shoes, sun-glasses for some protection against the harsh light.

I still had two hours before we were due to meet, and I decided to drive to the new visitor's center, which was in the middle of the marked area. Everybody called it *The New Center*, even though it had been built over ten years ago, when more and more people had begun to express interest in the dead lake. In our fast-paced society, ten years are a long time...

From a distance, the center was barely distinguishable from the tufa deposits of the lake. The architects had integrated the building perfectly into the landscape. Cynics suggested that a good proportion of the bizarre tufa terraces and tufa towers on the bottom of the lake had been planned and executed by the same architects. One way or the other, they added to the effect created by each evening's performance.

I found a spot to park close to the campsite, which was full of camper vans of every hue and color: modern migrating birds and part of our American society for over a hundred years now. The day guests crowded the entrance. Most visitors were taking part in group programs that involved a circular tour in generously-sized helimobiles, sightseeing and comfortable accommodation. Less wealthy guests had arrived in overland buses. As I took my place in the queue of those waiting, I studied the large-format announcements: hourly four-senses shows in the giant cinema, and once it was dark, the light and sound spectacle *On the bottom of the lake*. In front of me, four youngsters were discussing the L.A. Super Drive-In's latest holovision.

Shockingly bright clothes and expansive gestures, their voices loud as if nobody else was there. Youngsters!

Further on, in front of them, a woman in a short summer Syneprene suit, with slim legs, brown from the sun, and a colorful headband over her curly blond hair. She reached the entrance, took off her sunglasses as she walked through it, and looked around. It was Ann, unmistakably Ann, despite her changed hair color, her blond curls. She recognized me as well, stepped to one side with a smile and waited for me to catch up.

How should I greet her? She took the decision out of my hands, linked arms with me and kissed my cheeks, left and right. Again I was tempted to breathe in deeply, to take in the odor of her body and the soft hint of the perfume and preserve it within myself and not give it out again. She didn't give me time to lose myself in my thoughts. She waved an information brochure which she had obviously studied carefully under my nose and explained what we could expect, a show produced for the state nature protection authority and containing nothing less than a recapitulation of the history of the earth. In the center of the area of the former Lake Mono, which was born thousands of years ago and died decades ago, for the water needs of millions of city-dwellers.

'Now new, efficient processes for the desalination of sea water have established themselves.' Ann finished her lecture.

'Too late for Lake Mono,' I said.

'It's too late for everything at some point.' That was all she said. Her thoughts seemed to be elsewhere for a moment.

Forty minutes later we were outside again, still slightly affected by the special effects in the four-senses spectacle.

'An impressive requiem for a dead lake,' I tried to make light of it. Ann studied the sky through her sunglasses and suggested, dryly:

'We have a few hours before the evening show. We should relax by the pool.'

The special effects of the evening show were far more spectacular than what we had experienced in the afternoon. Invisible projectors flooded the entire space of the former lake with light in different colors, from which the limestone formations arose: a bizarre forest of ghosts and the dead. Nature sounds, music and human voices came alternately from invisible loudspeakers, songs, poetry and fragments of prose. These artistic fragments were accompanied by a sonorous commentary, which praised technical achievements in connection with the show. Most tourists seemed impressed. I heard positive opinions, and if there was disappointment, it related only to the fact that no fireworks concluded this evening's show.

'That was definitely more beautiful than the real lake can ever have been,' remarked a woman to Ann. Ann made no reply.

'Did you enjoy it?,' she asked later as she sipped her wine. We were sitting in the restaurant attached to my hotel. Ann had originally planned to invite me into her camper van, but my offer of an excellent meal in comfortable surroundings had won her over to the hotel restaurant.

I ran through the pros and cons in my head before answering her question:

'Whether I liked it? It was certainly perfect from a technical point of view. It was what would have qualified as bread and circuses in ancient Rome. You shouldn't forget that every tourist attraction on the globe has an audiovisual show with lasers and four-senses technology now. The competition from the virtual journeys makes it necessary.

I was in St. Emilion a few years ago, in the European province of France. Excellent wine is produced there, I have estimated it highly since my youth, and there are interesting wine cellars. They are in extensive tunnel systems with skeletons from the time of the Hundred Years War between France and England. I visited one of them. After the tasting session there was a virtually-assisted tour, and we experienced the confusion of war from close-up. At a subterranean crossroads, skeletons from the war lay on the ground, lit in neon colors. Europe is still ahead of us in the war dead statistics, and good taste often comes down to co-incidence.' I was surprised, but Ann accepted my answer, remained monosyllabic during the following hour, didn't eat much and gave me the impression that she was tired. So we arranged to meet for breakfast in the morning, and she took the hotel shuttle back to the campsite.

The next few days seemed likely to remain hot, and Ann appeared relaxed and glowing in a dirt-repelling short suit, her bag, which presumably contained a few concentrate bars and some fruit, slung over her shoulder.

She brushed my suggestion of driving to Valley Visitor Center aside: 'Too many tourists. I've got a better idea.'

The place where she led me was not far from Tuolumne meadows, where the hotel shuttle had brought us. After several minutes, the asphalt and the noisy tourists were behind us, and with each passing minute I felt an hour further away from them. The forest was silent in its siesta, only once did we hear a bird cry and remain still for an instant. Our path forked several times, and Ann selected a track without hesitation each time. She knew where we were going, and I followed her. The forest track ended right at the water, in a narrow trail which went right around the lake. We saw the lake only when we were standing at its edge looking over the dark, opaque surface. The opposite bank was flat, and the edge of the forest was set a few hundred yards further back.

'The last time I was here, it was windy, but the surface of the lake was as smooth and calm as it is today. Unaffected by the storms of life. It impressed me.' I must have looked somewhat confused at her poetic explanation, as she gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

'We have time before the afternoon, so let's make use of it and hike around the lake!'

We stayed close to the water almost all day, interrupting our circuit for a stop below a group of trees on the opposite bank, where we sat in the grass, ate our provisions and enjoyed the calm...

The dragonflies. An hour or so had passed when they suddenly appeared. A brilliant blue with large multi-faceted eyes on flexible heads, the beating of their wings a shimmering on either side of their bodies. Like delicate needles they hovered unmoving over the reeds, shot off and returned

seconds later. Male pacific forktails, one of the most common of our native dragonfly species, and a few greenish females. They paid no attention to us.

My interest had been kindled. I possess almost all species at home, spiked on pins and carefully cataloged, but as a dragonfly expert I'm always on the lookout for perfect specimens I could add to my collection. Anne watched the flight of the elegant predators attentively.

'You know what an imago is?' I asked her.

'Oh yes, a concept originally derived from the metamorphosis of insects.' Why originally? She left me no time to pursue the thought, and continued speaking rapidly:

'The main purpose of their existence is the conservation of the species, the conservation of life. Life is the highest value we have.'

It sounded almost like something she had learned off by heart.

'That's one way of putting it,' I agreed with her, somewhat hesitantly:

'The metamorphosis of insects is one of most amazing inventions of nature. Between the larva stage, which can take up to seventeen years in the most extreme instances, via the nymph from which a finished insect emerges, the short-lived imago.'

'Seventeen years? Is that some sort of joke with primary numbers?'

'Not at all. In fact, the life cycles of insects are often organized in terms of prime numbers, and in South America there is actually a seventeen-year cicada. This long life cycle gives it a major evolutionary advantage: predators with a two year cycle can prey on it only every 34 years, and predators with three year cycles only have the opportunity every 51 years, and have to see that they don't die beforehand. The cicada doesn't live for long, and some butterfly species don't even feed during their short existence. The only purpose of the energy expended is reproduction. The individual is unimportant, as in all strategies of nature.'

'So why did nature create such a wealth of individuals?'

'Nature? Because she has no moral instinct, otherwise the fate of each individual would worry her.' It was meant as a joke, but Ann was visibly dissatisfied with my answer and turned away from me, towards the water.

'Look, just look, an emperor dragonfly!'

In gleaming blue and with dark brown stripes, a huge specimen of anax imperator flew along the banks and hovered for a moment, then shot forward and grasped a small white butterfly, tearing it apart and devouring it in the air, grasping its victim firmly with its front pair of legs.

'Survival of the fittest in the animal kingdom,' I said.

'The law of power and money in human society,' she answered, standing up, stretching her arms upwards and stretching. She let her upper body with her hanging arms slide forwards and pulled off the top of her suit with another sinuous movement, announced that she was going swimming, slipped off her shorts and her shoes, took two or three steps towards the bank and jumped into the dark water. She dived and was invisible, had disappeared. I got up and started the count the seconds. Just as I was starting to get worried, her head appeared, not far from me, and popped up and took a long, blissful breath:

'This is the deepest part of the bank, a few yards left or right you can easily walk in, especially if you're nervous around water.'

And a second later I was wet by a shower of spray which she sent in my direction with a dexterous wave of her hand. She ran both hands through her wet curls and waited patiently for me to begin to cast off my clothes, then flung herself around suddenly, before I could follow her, and swam with strong, powerful strokes to the middle of the lake. I entered the dark water more cautiously than she had done and was startled at how pleasant I found it. It must have been years since I had swam in untouched natural surroundings. The water flowed softly and flatteringly over my bare skin and seemed to present me with few difficulties as I tried a few strokes in Ann's direction. She continued swimming to the center of the lake, then to an isolated part where I couldn't see her for a few minutes, and I had reached the bank and put my clothes on before she returned to our picnic location.

From a distance, I could see the strange wreath of flowers and leaves on her head, and as she got out of the water with slow, measured movements, I was speechless. She had pulled water lilies up by the stems and draped them around her body, had one of the white flowers on her forehead,

while stems and leaves hung over her breasts and shoulders and melded with the ornaments of her tattoo; a nymph, strange and magical, irresistible.

I didn't want to take my eyes off her, searched for words:

'Undine, under what star were you born, if born as a human is what you were?'

She had been smiling a second ago, but that smile was extinguished now. She looked at me seriously, her face betraying no other emotions.

'I'm a fish, if that's what you mean, grown from fish roe. She brushed off the plants, slipped on her shorts and top and sat down next to me.

The magic of the short-lived moment was already gone, but from this day on I knew that I would make her my lover. Not now, on this late afternoon, not here in the tough grass at the edge of the lake. That kind of experience of love and nature can be left to the inexperienced, to those who do not yet know how quickly damp evening mists, vermin and spiky grasses can interrupt passion and ruin the necessary romantic atmosphere. How buttocks and backs can be marked for days by scratches, ant bites and impressions left by the sharp edges of pebbles. I have other ideas of a satisfying love life, surrounded not by unreliable nature, but in the ambiance of a comfortable apartment or holiday house, surrounded by plants tamed by humans and aesthetics. My talent for business organization is widely recognized. From now on, I wanted to deploy it for my private purposes, to plan for Ann and for myself, to prepare the optimal location and the hour where we would be physically united.

We continued our circuit in silence, both of us lost in thought. At the edge of the forest, we turned back. The lake was even now still, the landscape empty of humans. A slight change of color at the horizon announced the coming of evening – an echo of a heavenly light and sound spectacle in the distance that would reach us within a few hours. Anne rested her hands on her hips: Amazing to see how many people came to the Lake Mono show yesterday. And then nobody but us has any interest in a real, live lake.' I shrugged my shoulders:

'That's the world for you.' – A banal truism, but.. true.

'What more can you expect from the masses, when even the likes of Schumann, a Romantic if ever there was one, found a poem more beautiful than the most beautiful rose?'

Ann hummed the beginning of Schumann's *Mondnacht*: It was as if heaven had quietly kissed the earth. Then, suddenly, she said 'Holy mackerel,' and, as if she was challenging me: 'But there's a difference between a work of art and a show isn't there?'

I could only hope that she would fail to notice the reason for my lack of logic.

She took her right hand from her hip, let it hang loose, and for an instant I saw spots of blood before the dirt-resistant material of her Syneprene suit extinguished them.

I said nothing, took her right hand in mine and turned the palm upwards: there were red-blue stains and a cut of the sort likely to result when one tugs at the sharp stems and leaves of water lilies with bare hands. She pressed her lips together and, taking her injured hand away, marched with quick steps along the forest path, leaving me little choice but to follow.

The clouds hung low as we reached the shuttle in silence. The sky was yellow-black now. At Lake Mono, thick sheets of rain were pattering down and streaming over the road in broad rivulets which forced the bus to halt for a few minutes and collected in large puddles between the tufa towers. In the white glare of lightening, the stones shone, threw bizarre shadows and seemed to be rocking under each crack of thunder. The heavenly light and sound show...

A rich buffet awaited us in the hotel; neither of us took overly generous servings from it.

Someone like me who has been used to every imaginable luxury for years does not feel abstemious under such circumstances. Ann's moderation must have had other reasons; while I was convinced that she had not grown up in poverty, I was also sure that she had not led a life of luxury.

Before we took leave of each other, I invited Ann to a multi-day journey to Mexico. Just the two of us, in my helimobile. She agreed immediately.

Later on, alone in my room, I ran through the day's events and assessed them while I was stowing my luggage; I wanted to leave early in the morning. I spent time on my evening toilet and studied my appearance critically in the mirror: thick blond hair, a youthful face with few wrinkles, no fat on abdomen and hips, my body well-proportioned, lightly tanned as if from a life on holiday. The result

of conscientious maintenance and well-dosed sporting endeavors. I congratulated myself on my life planning, which had brought me to the institute early. Nobody, I repeated to myself, nobody would be able to detect my true age. Glen had expressed her approval several times as well. Our relationship was definitely satisfactory for her, not only in financial terms.

In the minutes before I fell asleep, I thought through my decision again. Mexico struck me as an appropriate destination: luxurious holiday quarters, and the incredible legacy of the pre-Columbian epoch. Apart from that, I had long planned a visit to the anthropological museum in the capital city, to see various new exhibits, but I had been waiting for the special new landing point to open in the North. Only those utterly devoid of ideas and finance would rely on the usual transport modes of the 70 million metropolis, and as the Mexican state suffered from permanent lack of funds, they had agreed to the American offer: a landing field for well-to-do tourists, most of them American, with simplified entry and customs requirements and shuttle links to tourist centers. Cynics even suggested that passport checks were dispensed with entirely if appropriate sums were involved. Given that Ann's identity was still unclear, her possible contacts to terrorists... there could be no alternative.

And then there was something else behind my choice: a small metal sculpture between credit chip and dollar bill, the delicate likeness of a girl or a very young woman, her eyes closed, her mouth half-open. The piece was unmistakably the work of the Indian high cultures, and in Mexico I would find out why Ann kept it among her few personal possessions, what connection existed between her and this strangely moving portrait.

Slowly but surely I drifted into sleep, and then, just before my conscious mind slipped away, another more alarming image: Ann's head emerging from the water, her once curly hair wet and flat around her head, her eyes invisible behind huge sunglasses and her mouth covered by her hand. She takes off the sun glasses, and where her bare, scarcely-made up face should be, her slightly-slanted eyes with their different iris colors, I see only empty space. She lets her hand drop, and where her lips were, symmetrical and full: nothing.

No mouth, no eyes, no anything. I stared at the white empty space, perceived the contours of the forest lake in the background, and felt compelled to fill in the gaps, to replace what had gone. And yet I was also afraid to do so. I could feel myself turning to stone within, as if I were looking into the frightful face of Medusa.

I racked my memory. Weak memories of another face, one that had drifted away: my mother, about whom I know almost nothing. Her face similarly empty, and long gone. But I never felt the need to complete my mother's face in the way I felt compelled to fill in the white space hiding Ann's real appearance. It was important to me to fill that space again, with what I had seen and not recognized, with what I could simply no longer remember. But I was terrified of what might result, trembled in terrible expectation of that which might come...

It didn't. Before the uneasy feeling could become a certainty, I fell asleep.

The following morning, the image and the memory of it had gone. And today, on the island, in my sick-bed? I was sleepy, but not asleep.

Why was I remembering a long-gone dream image? Was the task facing me then one that I had still not understood, still not solved?

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Incan ahmicohua, incan ontepetihua, in ma oncan niauh: maca aic nimiqui, maca aic nipolihui!
There, where one does not die, where I will be raised up, there shall I go. Would God that I need not die, ach, we should all live forever!

Mexico. The engine of the helimobile was ticking over steadily. Before the journey, I had had it inspected, right down to the pressure regulation system and the rotors and propellers, and I had personally monitored the filling of the tank with alcohol. I had landed in Chula Vista to pick up Ann as we had arranged. She was waiting at the landing site with a tote bag and a suitcase. Like me, she was organized in her packing and had limited her luggage, taking unnecessary items out ahead of time. A refreshing change from most other women, Glen not excepted.

We had been back in the air again for the last half hour and were flying at a height of 6000 feet. The auto-pilot had brought us onto the correct flight path for southbound helimobiles.

Ann sat on my right hand side and was looking out the window, at the Baja California below. I was looking at her. She had an afro hairstyle, the color changed between red and chestnut in the light, and her Syneprene suit seemed white, then yellow. The longer I looked at her, the more sure I was: She was the most intriguing and most puzzling, in short the most desirable creature I had ever encountered, and I wanted her, desired her for myself.

'Have you been to Mexico before?'

'Yes, but it was a long time ago.' She turned away from the window.

'By yourself?'

'No, with a group, a two week package tour.'

I understood: a pilgrimage of the Traditionalists to Catholic Mexico with adoration of the Madonna of Guadalupe on bended knee, worship in the cathedrals of Puebla and Cholula, in front of Churrigueresque facades, and the stolen gold of the Indios everywhere, bloody, martyred Christ figures, in a degree of realism otherwise found only on the Northern edge of the European Alps. Perhaps they served as consolation for the similarly enslaved population...

It was good that Ann's religious upbringing seemed to have left practically no traces.

There was a contradiction in there somewhere, but I ignored it, explained our flight route: first along the coast, then over Guadalajara and inland towards Tula, north of the capital, where the new international landing site was located. We would see the Toltec cult sites which were close by, and just south of that Teotihuacan, the old City of the Gods, and then a special shuttle service for foreign tourists would take us straight into the center of Mexico City, where I had rented an apartment for us in a prime location. In the second week, we would see various historic sites near Cuernavaca and, if she were interested, spend a few days by the sea.

I concluded my lecture with a question: 'Are you interested in the pre-Columbian epoch?'

'It's part of my training... my life.' She added the latter after a moment's hesitation.

'I'm looking forward to seeing some of the cult sites of the Indios again.'

So I had been wrong about the fundamentalist religious pilgrimage. Of course, for Ann as an ethnobiologist, a visit to Mexico was only logical. It had probably taken place as part of her studies. I thought about the tiny model of a woman's head that she carried with her. Perhaps it was the missing piece of the puzzle she was to me, the puzzle that I somehow hoped to solve in Mexico.

We had been under way for almost four hours now, had overtaken other helimobiles and even some pure airmobiles. These were also powered by hydrogen or alcohol, but were unsuited to switching from the air to asphalt. We flew over the Sierra Madre and the city of Guadalajara with its five million inhabitants, over subtropical gardens and forested mountains, but also over eroded slopes and bare patches, the result of over-exploitation of land, itself the result of population increases and the insatiable demand for meat. Synthosteaks were only slowly becoming popular in Mexico, not least because the patent licenses were expensive.

'Whatever we do to the earth, we do to ourselves,' said Ann, as we flew over rusty red bare areas. I had heard that before somewhere. Perhaps she was quoting from a speech given by the legendary Indian chief Seattle that had been assigned reading for the international Eco-community for over a hundred years now. I had arrived at similar results on the basis of analytical observation, but saw no need to become involved as long as I was unaffected by the changes. I am pragmatic, always have been. So I agreed with her, but with a caveat:

'A banal truth, and like all banal truths not taken seriously any more by many people. Man has disrupted the balance of nature for as long as he has been on earth. But still, I don't believe in elevating nature romantically and placing it on some sort of pedestal. So-called primitive people living in harmony with nature exploited the earth and made species extinct; the only advantage was that their numbers were smaller and their technical abilities less developed.' Ann seemed to be on the point of objecting; like most women she probably had quite a sentimental relationship with nature. But I was in no mood to tolerate interruptions: 'There were warning voices back in ancient times, when the Greeks and Romans felled forests around the Mediterranean, and then again before the tropical rain forest in Brazil was destroyed. Did they help? No!' I supplied the answer to my own rhetorical question.

'Apart from that, the production facilities that make oxygen have become a flourishing branch of industry. So why try to turn the tide of time, if it works? It's not as if we really need the bulk of the denizens of the primitive forests.'

Now I leaned back and waited for her reply, ready to disprove what she said with further arguments if necessary.

But she must have had a different idea. She sat and looked at the landscape rushing away below us in silence, her brow lined. Then, when she spoke, it was in a quiet voice so that I had to lean forwards to hear her properly:

'Have you never had the feeling that something which can never be brought back again is being lost?'

'Botany and zoology aren't fields I take much interest in. Apart from dragonflies, of course; in my opinion we should change humanity. As long as that hasn't happened, these unfortunate developments in the wrong direction will repeat themselves endlessly.'

Ann nodded silently, and we looked at the destroyed landscape below us until we reached the international landing site at Tula. After we had landed and dealt with the formalities, which were indeed brief and less than thorough, we booked a shuttle to the ruins of Tollan and Teotihuacan.

Ann and I strolled between the colossal statues of Tollan, each of them almost twenty feet tall.

'Do you think that the epoch of the 'fifth sun,' the one we are in now, will come to an end soon?'

'According to the Toltec view, through an earthquake, if we don't hinder the catastrophe through our sacrifice.' She nodded seriously, and her next question sounded more as if she were testing my knowledge: 'What sacrifice can avert the death of the sun?' I obliged and answered:

'Only a sacrifice which is appropriate to the life-giving and preserving value of the sun. And what could be more valuable than our life, the human heart. Am I right?'

'Yes,' she confirmed, paying no heed to my light-hearted tone 'the Toltecs stood at the beginning of the epoch of ritual human sacrifice which found its high point in the Aztec city Tenochtitlan. The Spanish conquerors were horrified at the traces of the slaughter...'

'...but were themselves responsible for more carnage among the Indio population,' I added from my schoolbook knowledge.

'A question for the historian: Is this pyramid dedicated to the Toltec god-king Quetzalcoatl?'

Now I was testing Ann.

She nodded: 'He and his followers lost power and went east because he rejected human sacrifice. According to the saga, he sacrificed himself. He is sometimes referred to as the Oppressed. She pointed to the central frieze of the serpent wall, which showed the god-human being devoured by a feathered serpent:

'Finally, legend has it that he was resurrected and lives on as the morning star, the symbol of rebirth, honored by all Central American Indians. Over centuries, his disciples waited for him to return, now himself the feathered serpent. I ask myself: could the sacrifice have been avoided?'

She had definitely concerned herself thoroughly with Indio mythology. Out of pure thirst for knowledge, as part of her studies? I had the impression that she had had another, more important motivation, but what was it?

I began an explanation: 'All early cultures that felt they were more or less helpless in the face of the powers of nature had human sacrifice. The Aztecs even had an unusual advocate: Bartholomé de las Casas.'

'I know,' she cut me off. 'He argued in this famous defense of the Indio's pagan idolatry with the deep religiosity of the Indios, which left them with no choice but to sacrifice the best of what they had to the Gods they so honored and feared.'

'That's right, Las Casas was a major friend of the Indios. But when he requested Negro slaves from Africa instead of the Indios for mines and plantations, he showed rather less empathy,' I remarked dryly.

'And don't forget about the Jew's holy book: Abraham was ready to kill his own son, even though the sacrifice was not accepted, had to be rejected because their God, the God of the old Covenant, would have canceled out his own existence by accepting it.'

The Indios, on the other hand, found themselves in a much more difficult position, with no exit: No God could release them from the need for sacrifice. He would have destroyed himself as a result, and so their sacrifice guaranteed that their world and the world of their Gods would continue to exist.

Ann nodded: 'Guilt is always beyond doubt.'

She seemed subdued, as if the massive figures and columns that had once borne the roof of Quetzalcoatl's temple were weighing down on her. We didn't wait for sunset and the show that would then begin, opting to drive straight to our hotel near Teotihuacán instead, a sparsely furnished building which betrayed all too obviously that its purpose was to process as many tourists as possible through in as short a time as possible. Not a place to begin a special relationship.

I am not into tragedy, it is not one of the themes which keep me going, but as a fascinating mind game of paradox and entrapment, it kept me awake. In their tragic view of the world, the otherwise incompatible Greek and Indian views of the world seemed united, while Semitic thought is not tragic: Gilgamesh is not a tragic figure, and the Babylonian interest in death has nothing in common with the Indian one.

The sacrificial death of Jesus must touch the innermost soul of the Indians, but not its Jewish-optimistic revocation in the resurrection, which was the point at which Christianity was established. This revocation took the tragedy and with it the deeper sense of their existence from them.

The following day, we were up shortly after sunrise, rested and ready for the greatest of the old Mexican cult sites.

Teotihuacán – Priest state, ceremonial center, city of temples. Pyramids and palaces, decorated with stucco, painted in bright colors, a thousand-year kingdom secured by no walls, without borders. And yet ravaged by the depredations of nomadic tribes several times, burned down, destroyed, finally abandoned in 650 – the city of the Gods, as the Aztecs called it, a tourist playground now, as it has been for the last hundred years.

Ann and I sat on the steps of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent and admired the sculpted heads of the plumed serpent, twelve of them, which emerged from the walls at the sides. We had already walked around the pyramid, seen what remained of the once magnificent stucco and mosaic decorations, begun to count the bas-reliefs showing the Rain God Tlaloc and the fire serpent that are depicted, alternately, at all six levels of the pyramid. The total figure is well known: 365 altogether, one for each day in the sun's year. Metamorphoses of a God – the God of wind, of water, the morning star of eternal return – Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent...

The midday sun beat down mercilessly, and I didn't feel entirely well.

'Might be a stomach upset from unfamiliar food,' I said to Ann, who had noticed my lapse into silence.

'I have something for you. It'll clean out your stomach!' She took a small bottle of Mescal from her picnic bag:

'Swallow down a few mouthfuls!' she encouraged me. I held the bottle to my lips and drank. The agave spirit ran hot through my throat, and I felt that it was doing me good. I raised the bottle again and took a few more gulps. And one last one. Suddenly there was a soft, faintly aromatic mass between my tongue and my palate, it slithered back to my throat, and I involuntarily swallowed it.

'The worm?' asked Ann, not without satisfaction. She had been watching me. You should stay sitting down for a while and rest.'

A reasonable suggestion, and one that I was happy to follow. I rolled up my jacket, placed it under my neck and closed my eyes. My slight nausea was soon gone, or rather, it was replaced with a feeling of dizziness, a golden spiral that pulled me in, accelerating and tugging me towards its invisible center.

The movement stopped, and I saw myself in two, three places at the same time: on this hot August day in the abandoned Mesoamerican metropolis, and the same time in another place, another time. Out of my home town Boston, on the West Coast, sitting on a Californian beach together with Denis. We were young, hadn't started college yet, wanted to get the most out of our free day. We had both been waiting for fifteen or twenty minutes. We had both sampled the meat of the Gods,

Teonanacatl, the holy mushroom of the Mexican Indios. It grew on Californian meadows too.

It took perhaps half an hour, and then the clouds began to change, shone more intensely, took on contours that glowed in bright colors and began to move, billowing incessantly. I was afraid, and I looked at Denis and at the immediate environment. But I couldn't rest my eyes on him, either. My eyes roved around aimlessly, I saw the beach in every color of the spectrum, the cliffs became wider and shrunk again in an unknown rhythm, creepers emerged and came towards us from a dark green group of plants, and we saw flowers in colors we had never seen before. My feet, although a part of me, seemed far away from the rest of my body, seemed to be forming a tangle of brown roots. I looked at Denis, an arm's length away from me, and stretched my dissolving hand out to him. It seemed to flow away from me and to take hold of him.

But it wasn't Denis, but the face of the demon that turned to me, its bloodshot eyes bright red, with pupils the size of soup-plates, its face contorted with lines, its open mouth revealing strong fangs in place of canine teeth. My hand had to bridge infinities before it reached my brother, or whatever had become of him. Denis grasped it with long thin claws, and I felt that he was going through a similar experience.

We held on to each other for minutes, not daring to look at each other, until I remembered an old text on controlling demons. The text claimed that demons, as creatures created in one's own soul, could only be beaten by the same soul. What mattered was to confront them fearlessly in their unreality. So I looked fearlessly into Denis' demon face, and he into mine, and the dreadful fangs did indeed become ordinary canine teeth, the sharp features became even, the serpent hair of the Erinyes became the unruly shocks of two seventeen-year-old youths. I was ready to breathe a sigh of relief when the colorful tangles began to become visible in his face again: the awful carry-on began anew. I threw myself into the sand and closed my eyes. But there was no escape here. The demonic game went on behind my shut lids, and there seemed to be no end to it. The flames of a gigantic circling fire tore me along with them, and I believed I was dying. Then I really died. The maelstrom pulled me in to a sort of hollow root, its darkness illuminated by dark smoldering veins of metal. I was captive in the earth-green and brown nets of grinning demon's faces that put pressure on my dissolving sense of self.

Fear of death – and then I was spat out into the bright sunlight and incredible euphoria of another time.

Surrounded by colors and shapes, magnificent ceremonial robes, decorative feathers everywhere, even crowned with flowers and dressed festively, I walked to the sound of flutes and drums, my head upright, up the steep steps. Priests on either side of me accompanied me reverently to the highest platform. There I spread my arms over the Great Square and ten thousand believers in festive clothes and jewelry. Robes slid down, my body was bedded on gentle earth. The holy stone pulsated softly, a smell of incense wafted through the air. The circle of unmoving figures, seen against the deepest blue. When the pyramid inverts and the rows of seats and those occupying them in festive clothes seem to extend into heaven, the feeling of happiness is boundless: the most holy of sacrifices.

The high priest stood upright, giant-like, his face as rigid as a mask, god-like.

Shimmering obsidian sparkled in raised hands, supporting the radiant sun, the sun the heart longs for, and the lightning comes down. Painless fulfillment of life, sun flaming up immeasurably, a scream from a thousand throats dying down – then chasm-deep blackness...

Denis had shaken me back then, as I lay unmoving on the beach for a long time, and this time, too, somebody was shaking me.

'Jason, it was as if you had gone, I couldn't get through to you. What happened?' Ann's concerned face bent over mine, she was slapping my cheeks gently. I was confused for a few seconds. Had the Mescal gone to my head, or its controversial secret, the worm? I ordered my thoughts gradually, and I searched for words. Searched for memories, explanations, understanding.

'I was dead. Or in Nirvana, the place where individuals disappear. And it was good.' She wanted more, and so I told her about my experience back in those long-gone days.

'Fascinating stuff,' said Ann, precisely because it matches up so well with what I know. I don't understand this inversion of the pyramid. Was it a sort of mirror effect? Were you at the intersection

point of two bodies?’

‘Nobody who hasn’t had an experience like that can begin to understand it. No, the pyramid turned itself inside out, it was suddenly a four-sided stone funnel with regular rows of seating. My self, I can hardly say I, it was suddenly *on the bottom*, but without falling or feeling a perceptible change. Apart from that, I could see all the trapezoid surfaces of the walls of the pit completely and sharply, which would be impossible with normal eyes.’

She wrinkled her brow:

‘To me, this *below* does make sense, you were at the center of the Indian world, in the arms of Coatlicue, as it were, the earth mother, and were offered to the sun on her stone altar.’

‘Perhaps. The points of intersection were in my breast, and I felt certain, although there was no ‘I’ to feel it, that the center of the world rested in me in this moment, the beginning and the end came from my heart. I was the chosen one, not a prisoner, but myself an Aztec. From that feeling, I felt the most profound happiness. It remains incomprehensible how one can feel such joy confronted with death, dying. But there was nothing threatening about it, and when the priest raised his blade, all arms were raised to heaven, a moment of the highest, most solemn significance. As the knife came down, his face was distorted to a terrifying God mask – and I wasn’t afraid of it. I felt no pain, just a circling pressure, and of that which came next, I only know that I felt neither fear nor violence, only acceptance. I’m not even sure if my body felt strange hands. The crash into blackness came instantly, not in stages; I must have lost consciousness, and I would have thought that a sort of consciousness would last just beyond the heart death.’

Ann nodded: ‘I believe that it was often like that. We only have the Spaniards reports to go on, after all, and they hardly meet modern scholarly standards, contain much propaganda and justification of their own lust for destruction. Apart from that, the Aztec culture was past its inner zenith by then and had probably become ritually rigid in its terrible fixation on death.

But one thing is not clear to me: How could somebody like you experience it so exactly?’

‘There isn’t a rational explanation. The esoterically-minded will claim that humans know everything that can be experienced and only the access routes are sometimes blocked, but that doesn’t convince me. If I’m right, such experiences have never left me, and I had to repress them, because they had nothing to do with my daily life. Maybe that’s why they reappeared so suddenly now. Our surroundings probably played a role too. I suppose it was a flashback...’

‘Repressed memories nearly always emerge in the end.’

Ann sounded skeptical, and I agreed:

‘Back then, I began to develop and interest in the workings of our psyches and the methods that influence us, important requisites for my professional life...’

I spun the thread of memory further, especially as Ann was listening to me spellbound: ‘An addition to the Aztec Coatlicue – or was it the Great Mother of the Indo-Aryan tradition that took me in then? I found her image years later in Chapingo chapel, which was built over the ruins of an Aztec temple. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it became a meeting room which various artists transformed into a secular sacred space. I can still see her in front of me as on that day. Mother Earth, a huge female figure, lying on earth in a relaxed pose, surrounded by the elements fire, water and wind, one hand raised in a peace greeting, the other rescuing a young plant. Humans looked up to her. The entire room was a paean of praise for earth, charged with magical significance and leading back to the Aztec roots of the pyramid site. Something had come full circle. And there was another thing. When I traveled to Mexico City for the first time, a little later, I was shaken once more, although not to the same degree. There, as here,’ I pointed out the masks and serpent heads of Quetzalcoatl, ‘everywhere in Mexico I could see the images from that trip. Since then, I have been convinced that the Mesoamerican cultures arose to a major degree from the ritual use of Teonanacatl.’

‘Perhaps,’ she agreed hesitantly: ‘But to my mind, your first thought is just as important, the idea that these demons and their ugly faces exist within us, long before outer events, illnesses, or a drug brings them to the surface; in fact, they exist within us even if they are never dragged up to the surface of our consciousness. Which is better, maintaining the surface calm over the deep sea monsters or provoking their appearance?’

‘It hasn’t done my any harm. And I wouldn’t want to miss out on such experiences at any price.’

Even just the experience of time being suspended is a deeply jolting one. Things happen in sequence, but not in time; it really is incomprehensible.'

She looked surprised – seemingly she was somewhat taken aback at this confession from an otherwise rational man – and she attempted to come up with some explanations.

As we couldn't agree – women are afraid of losing control, that is a known fact – we continued our peregrinations through the ruined city, walked past the place of columns and over to the dominating Pyramid of the Sun.

'Do you know that three thousand workers had to work for 30 years before the height of 195 feet was reached?' Ann asked, as she skipped up one step after the next.

'That I knew.' That was all I had breath for if I didn't want to lag too far behind, and on the third platform surrounding the pyramid I had to rest for a few minutes. My heart beat loudly and, I imagined, somewhat irregularly. I was a little worried. On my return, I wouldn't be able to avoid an appointment with Dr. Servant.

But in the meantime, the view from the uppermost platform rewarded our efforts. We enjoyed it for almost an hour before we began the steep descent to our last objective, the Pyramid of the Moon, a 'mere' 126 feet tall.

'You go on!' I encouraged Ann almost an hour later. 'The view of the Avenue of the Dead is almost as good from the second platform, I'll wait here for you.' She climbed on, and I leaned on the back wall of the platform, took out the heart spray Dr. Servant had prescribed and took a deep breath. I felt better almost instantly. Then I took a bar and a folding cup from my bag and opened the pack. The concentrate had taken the necessary water from the air within minutes, and I ate the small snack. Young women can be exhausting at times...

I watched the people on the great Avenue.

Not many of them were ambitious enough to climb to the uppermost platform of Pyramid of the Sun; they went back after the first or second level if they bothered starting the climb at all. So I was all the more impressed by a group of young people who went up all the steps, to the very top, and stood around their leader up there. My mini-binoculars showed mainly white faces, more of them male than female, a few of them Asiatic in shape, and I was sure that I was looking at an American travel group, maybe a High School class; none of them seemed older than sixteen. I heard rapid steps behind me. Ann was back already, and she was in a hurry. In fact, she wasn't just in a hurry, she looked pressured, as if she were being followed.

As we went down the steps together, I observed her without letting her notice my interest. My suspicions were confirmed. Again and again, we glanced back at the sun pyramid and the American tour group standing around their guide. It wouldn't be too long before they turned back, as we had, and came over to the moon pyramid.

'Do you know anybody in the group over there?' I asked her directly.

'No.'

And that was how it stayed. On the way to the hotel. During the Mexican buffet. During the night. Ann didn't want to talk about whatever she was afraid of, and I didn't pursue the topic.

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It was raining in Mexico City. We used the shuttle service from the hotel, and we were grateful for it, as the smog over the city was heavy. In contrast to LA, only a fraction of the Mexican autos have been converted to run on alcohol or hydrogen, perhaps because of the ready availability of oil in the Gulf, and the growing slums where the poor live add to the problems. Bans for vehicles are regular, and the shuttles from the better hotels have fuel cells, but also their own oxygen supplies, and they can offer tours around the city regardless of the weather.

The hotel was in the style of a Mexican plantation house, on the edge of Chapultepec Hill, where the last Aztec lord had a summer residence built for himself. It combined tradition and luxury discretely, and provided me with an ideal environment for my erotic fresh start. Ann shuttled between the salon and the two bedrooms several times, opened cupboards, inspected the bathrooms and declared openly: 'I like it, although I don't need this luxury.' At least she didn't turn it down.

In the Palace of Fine Arts, we attended a performance of an opera created by the composer Rihm

to mark the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America: *The conquest of Mexico*, an exploration of the end of the Aztec kingdom.

To my surprise, Ann's tiny suitcase contained appropriate clothing, a feather-light silk dress, probably from genetically modified silkworms. She looked delightful.

In the interval, she asked: 'This Wolfgang Rihm doesn't seem to be Mexican? His music doesn't sound Latin American to me.'

'He is German, a Sensualist, but with a remarkable sense of form.'

'I'm surprised that no local composers or perhaps Spanish ones have tackled this uniquely Mexican material.'

'Dearest Ann, I'm sure you'll agree with me that it sounds very good, although it makes no concessions. That the main protagonist divides is remarkable, and the direction and production is, in any case.

The conquest of Mexico has been received well here – whatever you think of the likes of Chávez and his ilk, there is nothing really prestigious here, or, in fact, in either part of America. It's hardly surprising, in that context, that I even spotted Graun's *Montezuma* in the repertoire: German pre-classicism.'

'How can you claim that there is no good American music?'

'Well, Barber and Ives are good, I'll grant you that, the others are all minor masters, and then there are a handful of radical experimenters such as Cage and Feldman. The theories of that latter grouping are usually more interesting than their actual music. And Minimalism has to have marked a low point!'

Ann was less than satisfied with my answer.

'What about other names that I've never heard of? And musicals?'

'I think they belong in the sphere of pop music, which I'm not really into. I'll grant you, though, that the more I think about it, the clearer it is that what is American comes from the common people, often from blacks: Blues, Jazz, Tango, Samba, Salsa are the music of the people...'

'...and established themselves in the big cities,' she interrupted me.

'There you have it, that's the problem. Traditional cultural concepts just aren't applicable to America.'

'I know, some Europeans even say we don't have any culture.'

'The consciousness of a people arises from more than one source...,' I growled. I was a little impatient, yet happy, at the same time, that the worst sandbanks and cliffs of the musical discussion had been avoided. I saw my conviction that discussing music with women was to be avoided reconfirmed.

And that even though Ann was manifestly musical, albeit in a completely unsystematic and undisciplined way.

We stayed longer than we had planned in the opera house restaurant, as we became involved in a lively discussion with other patrons. The Mexicans were upset that their country and Moctezuma had been slotted in as representatives of the female principle and called the French librettist Artraud a nasty distorter of history. Ann defended the female principle, as close to nature, and claimed that the male was destructive. They were all wrong, of course; historically, two warrior cultures had clashed here, and if there was anything feminine about the Aztecs, it could only have been their religious insistence on maintaining traditions.

It was well past midnight when we got back, both of us still stimulated from the conversation and tired after our long day. So this first night was spent in separate rooms and separate beds.

The Museo Nacional de Antropología is, as far as I know, over a hundred years old, and it contains the most significant collection of Mesoamerican art. Since so many old buildings in the Mexican capital have been knocked down as part of the transformation of the center, more and more finds from the Aztec period are being made. A large extension has been built to accommodate them, and each visit brings new discoveries for the interested tourist.

Ann and I were standing in front of the huge water feature sculpture in the entrance area, a mushroom head and stem made from concrete behind the constant trickle of a wall of water: memories of almost forgotten experiences, and of the conversation the previous day.

'You know all about that!,' said Ann, guessing at my train of thought. She studied the inscription over the portal:

'Why not Museo de Antropologia y Arte? Is the art of the former lords of the land not recognized as such?' 'All art is anthropological at the end of the day,' I replied, Solomon-like.

But I had to agree with her. Over the collection, analysis and cataloging of the historical material, the sense of its artistic message and aesthetics may have been lost. We were in agreement that we would need two (if not three) days to have a proper look at the most important exhibits, more time than we had at our disposal. We saw the partially reconstructed Quetzalcoatl temple with its original paintwork and the huge calendar stone of the Aztecs. Looking at the latter, Ann wanted one of the feather light carpets with life-size copies of the sun stone. We admired murals, sculptures and figurines, statues and pillars, and again and again, in fascinated horror, skeletons and skulls, sacrifice scenes and torn-out hearts: images of death as a curse hanging over those peoples.

And here, where death, sacrifice and pain were so inseparably interwoven, I suddenly found the solution to the puzzle that had occupied me for weeks. Or rather, I believed I had the right end of it in my hands and would be able to follow the *threads* of the Moirai back to the beginning. I was standing next to the frightening image of the chthonic God of women who died in childbirth, Cihuatéotl Ce Cuauhtli.

The small terracotta figurine stood in the room dedicated to the Gulf Coast cultures. The eyes in her youthful face were closed, her mouth slightly open, her body richly decorated, she had a death crown as headgear. I read: Image of a woman who died in childbirth, and below that, a few lines about the reverence those who sacrificed themselves in the service of life were accorded by Indian society. The figure had the same features as the small relief in Ann's possession. Parts of the puzzle were forming a pattern now, and I understood: For years, the Traditionalists had been adopting children in order to, as they liked to stress, remove them from the corrupting influence of the modern whore of Babylon and lead them back to traditional values. Was Ann one of these orphans? Had her mother died in childbirth, had she grown up without her parents and now fallen out with her adoptive family and the fundamentalist religious society she was now trying to escape from?

If I helped her to deal with her childhood trauma, it could only benefit our relationship.

I found her in the outside area of the museum, crouched in front of a representation of the temple of Bonampak.

'I've been meaning to ask you this for ages. Are your biological parents still alive?'

'My biological parents?' She shrugged her shoulders in a vague gesture: 'I don't have anybody.'

So I was right. Her mother had probably died in childbirth and her father shown no interest in the product of his genes. Although my relationship with my son had not been close, and I could scarcely remember the warm gestures of my own family, I felt something approaching sympathy for this lonesome young woman. I put my arm around her.

'I too live alone.' I said it without thinking of Glenn.

'What's to stop us hitching up, in business and personally?'

'Nothing, really. As things stand, it will make no difference one way or the other.' Another of her puzzling answers. She held my gaze. Her iris shimmered inscrutably; behind it, her features were closed. I abandoned my attempts to penetrate further into her mind and treated her as affectionately as I possibly could, discussed Central American history with her, bought the feather light carpet with the image of the calendar stone and an orchid blossom I handed over to her with an extravagant flourish; in short: I focused all my energy on putting her in the mood for the night that was to come.

It worked.

She thawed, livened up, wore the blossom on her shoulder and let me put an arm around her shoulders as we stood in the hotel lift and I pressed the button for the second floor. The cabin accelerated soundlessly, but just before we reached our floor, it stopped suddenly, the lights went out, and I had a strange sensation that we were swimming on a huge, soft mousse, moved by unknown powers. It all lasted only a few seconds; first the emergency lighting came on, then the usual lights, and then the lift started to move again, much more slowly than before.

'An earthquake,' Ann established tersely. 'Let's get out of this box before there's a second shock.'

Initially everything seemed calm, the corridor where our suite lay was unaffected, and the small tremor seemed to have been of no consequence for us or for the hotel. Only once we opened the apartment did we see the extent of the problem: the magnificent chandelier in the salon had come crashing down and lay on the ground in hundreds of fragments. A crack in the roof marked where it had been attached, and lumps of limestone lay on the carpet. The damage was visibly only minutes old, and my plans for the evening had literally crumbled to dust. Coughing, we fled and informed the hotel management.

It transpired that only our apartment had been so badly affected, and we were offered an alternative. Not in the same building, as a check on the statics would be required after the incident, but our new residence was also pretty and ideally-located...

The center of town bore no signs of the previous day's tremor. This time, the town had had better luck than after the last major quake, twelve years before, when parts of the walls of the national palace had caved in, burying *The Great City of Tenochtitlan* for the second time. In three years, the walls and the famous fresco by Diego Rivera had been successfully restored. Its model, the magnificent old capital city itself, remained lost forever. Sic transit Gloria mundi...

While Ann and I admired the work of the conservation specialists, we became lost in a conversation about this twentieth century artist and his work. I cannot follow the logic of Rivera's idealist communist convictions, but I am ready to grant a creative genius the right to err in other fields of life, and it may be better to fail in creating Utopia than never to have had ideals in the first place. My respect for art goes so far that I am even ready to defend Rivera's anti-capitalist frescoes, including the one his patron Rockefeller promptly had painted over.

In the national palace, we were interested in his view of Mexican history, and I was impressed, although his depiction of the peaceful daily lives of the Indian tribes just before the Conquista struck me as being too idyllic. As if their lives had only taken place between the marketplace and trade, apart from a few bearers of heavy burdens!

In the images of those who were tortured and executed by the Spaniards after the landing near Santa Cruz, I rediscovered his activism on behalf of those who had been stripped of their rights and – this I registered with satisfaction – his criticism of the missionary church, the accomplice of the Spanish conquerors.

'Just look at this! What an unusual bride!' Ann had bent forward and was taking stock of the image of a young woman. Her tunic-like dress white with colored braids, and white the flowers artistically arranged in her long, black hair...

'White Calla Lilies – bridal flowers, flowers of death,' I thought to myself, and then, out loud: 'The artist's wife, you already saw her in one of the other murals. But her challenging attitude doesn't exactly strike me as bride-like, look at how she is lifting up her dress and pointing out her tattooed legs.'

Ann didn't rise to the bait:

'Wasn't she sick and in pain all her life? Could her pride and the tattoos not stand for this pain? I would prefer the picture, though, without the macabre engagement present.' Ann's gaze rested on the arm of a sacrifice victim, which a feather-decorated priest was handing over.

'How could the painter combine beauty and horror like that?' And, with a shiver, as if she wanted to shake off an unpleasant memory:

'Let us go on, onwards!'

'That is Mexico! Perhaps a reference to the basic idea of sacrifice, which celebrated life even in death.'

'You don't know how right you are.'

She said so slowly, as she tugged me away. I continued with my lecture unswervingly. Remember another of his paintings, the *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. In that one, death grins right out of the picture with a huge feathered hat and a feathered serpent as a stola and leads the painter by his hand, governess-like, while his wife lays a hand on his shoulder and holds the yin-yang symbol in the other hand. As you know, I'm sure, the symbol for the male and female powers of the universe which inter-penetrate each other and harmonize with one another.' 'What struck me about it was that among all the historic personalities, only death and the woman look straight at the observer, death with a cheerful expression and the woman seriously.' She looked at

me for a few seconds, also seriously. Then her glance seemed to go straight through me, as if she were trying to recall the figures.

'With an artist who puts so much thought into the composition and significance of his pictures, that's no co-incidence. Should the feminine element be the most important thing humans have to set against death?'

Her answer struck me as female logic, at the very least lead mainly by emotion, and I corrected her:

,'Don't forget that death in Rivera's *Dream* is also female!'

'How true,' she replied passionately: 'Death a folksy woman, an Indian myth reduced to a necklace. What must he have been thinking of?'

Ann was visibly annoyed, and the optimistic utopia of modern Mexico with its many actions of humans and machines did nothing to improve her mood.

'The utopia was what I liked least,' she announced as we left: 'Too bogged down in twentieth century ideology.'

'You are right. Rivera's political utopia is quite dated now. Everything is either gone already, or it never was like that to begin with.'

'And his faith in technical progress? Was he wrong there too?'

'Not necessarily. Take the machines he painted: all of them powerful instruments of human reason.' 'Apart from the weapons, of course.'

Ann obviously intended to have the last word.

'Apart from that, he forgot to mention to dependencies which they create, in any form of society. In that regard, Giger's demonic machine-creatures strike me as more honest.'

I was amazed that Ann was familiar with Giger's work, with that 20th century fantastic realist. Every time I thought I had seen through her, she surprised me with a new aspect of her personality; contours I had believed were sure blurred and re-formed, definite colors became lost in vague shininess just as her iris changed color. It was worth continuing to listen to her.

'Many of the painted people and events mean nothing to me,' she established. 'If they contain a message at all, it's not one that reaches to me.'

'Not anymore!' I corrected her: 'We experience it in the same way as we experience the esoteric language of the images of Hieronymus Bosch. Once the key to the epoch has been lost, we only react to the archetypes, which are timeless. We don't have a rational explanation for them. The frescoes from the Indian heritage have a subliminally up-to-date quality I find chilling, perhaps *because* I can't resolve it rationally.'

'Because they remind us of century-long failures and all the promises linked to those and not yet honored.'

She had arrived at her judgment and turned to leave.

The sun was almost at its zenith; I remained standing in front of the high entrance portal of the National Palace for a moment, blinded until my eyes adjusted to the harsh midday light, and then I looked over the large, lively square. I asked myself if epochs yet to come would raise their eyes to the re-created main temple of the Aztecs, as it had existed in the imagination of the artist.

Ann walked ahead of me to the steps of Templo Mayor. Of the original height of 180 feet, almost 30 had been restored. The decision had been taken after intense controversy between Christians and Heathens, as the parties of the archaeologists and tourism managers on the one hand, and the bishopric and the traditional city administration on the other hand were called. Contrary to expectations, the major earthquake made it easier to resolve, as various buildings over the former principal temple were badly damaged.

In order to reconcile the conflicting parties, a small museum and a chapel of memory and of penance were to be erected within the old Aztec sacrificial site and a cross placed on the highest point of the heathen slaughterhouse.

The old Tenochtitlan had been gone irretrievably since 1521, but protests accompanied the efforts to reconstruct at least this one temple fully: the double pyramid, on which the Gods of Sun and of Water, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, were worshiped. Unexpected help came from ecologists. In a memorandum, they warned against further destruction of the basic natural resources of the country and stressed the continuing dependence on the Sun and on Water, which the temple was

dedicated to.

I found Ann waiting for me in front of a hoarding which showed the progress of the restoration. A manifesto of those opposed to the project pinned to its rear warned in emotional language against opening the door to hell again, and threatened the sacrilegious with floods and earthquakes. Next to this manifesto, someone had added another sheet of paper that was completely covered in small writing. I saw verses and stanzas of a poem written on a copy of the Aztec mural which depicted the paradise of Tlaloc, with its cheerful people dancing between flowers and butterflies. Anne read the text aloud:

*Do we truly live on earth?
Not for ever on earth, just a little
For as long as we are here
Are we only dreaming?
Everything is dreamlike
Where is something which will last,
which will endure?*

*Priest of ours, I ask you:
where do the flowers come from
that please us humans?
Whence the songs which fill us with joy,
the sweet songs?*

*Will we live a second time?
But my heart knows:
Our lives are unique!*

*It is not true that we live
Not true that we last
on this earth.
I must get to the bottom of the puzzle!
Only for a short time
do we make our sweet songs.*

*It is true, it must be true
We are here on earth
not for all time, only
for a moment
Hard jade bursts
Bright gold loses its shine
Peacock feathers break
Not here always
Only for a moment.*

*Where are we going? Where are we going?
Will we find death or life
On the other side?
Is there something which lasts there?
On earth alone
The sweet song, the beautiful flower.*

Underneath, scribbled in red letters, the words: They were Aztecs too.

'Who could the verses be from?' I wondered aloud.

'From people who lived at the same time as the bloodthirsty warrior and priest caste and also

asked themselves what the meaning of life was. Their motto was: Beauty is truth. Flowers instead of blood. What I'm asking myself is who copied the verses.'

'Maybe it's an archaeologist's contribution to the discussion?' I suggested.

'Then it was an archaeologist with very utopian inclinations, and he had to cut a swath through time.'

'Maybe a Socialist and artist like Rivera? Who else pursues utopias today?'

Ann scanned the page: 'I'm going to keep it. Times change, but not the important questions.'

She extended her arms above her head and stretched: 'Mexico City is an interesting place, but tiring. I wouldn't object to a change of scene.'

*

Tenancingo: a sleepy little town away from major routes, multicolored Bougainvillea against house walls, the courtyard of our hotel a subtropical paradise.

'This is just how I imaged our accommodation for the next few days.' Ann clapped her hands admiringly, and I, too, was happy with my choice.

Four days in the vast metropolis had been enough, despite our comfortable accommodation, air conditioning with fresh oxygen, and the shuttles provided by the hotel associations. The hotel flight service had brought us to Toluca, which was now a suburb of Mexico City, with similar pollution problems. Only the historical old town and the Friday market with pottery and agricultural products evoked memories of the town's former independence. So we traveled onwards on the following day and came here, to Tenancingo. In this hotel, surrounded by this blossoming garden, we would stay for two or three days, and here I would make Ann my lover. I ran through my plans. They were perfect: a light, exquisite dinner, some wine, a Merlot from San Luis Potosi – most women love Merlot – and a cup of mocha afterwards, no more alcohol. Too much alcohol has killed off many an attempts at seduction in the final phase.

'Did you say perfect?' Ann had come up from behind me and threw her arms around me. She knew what would happen, and her behavior signaled that inner accordance.

'You are perfect,' I said, convinced, if not entirely honestly. We were standing on the balcony, leaning over the railing, which was covered in flowers. The sun disappeared behind the roofs, casting its last fiery rays, and some songbirds began their evening concert. The smell spreading from the flowers was overpowering, and the air was pleasantly warm, not oppressive or heavy. Everything fitted in brilliantly with my preparations. I felt well-balanced, strong and certain of victory. The evening unfolded as I had imagined it. When the room service waiter laid the table for us and served dinner on genuine Damask, porcelain and crystal, Ann was wearing a narrow, yellow-white silk dress. Two hours later, when a half bottle of wine had been consumed, dinner eaten, the mocha drunk, she was wearing nothing. The dress hung loosely over the back of a chair, as she had brought it with her from the bathroom. She lay stretched out on my bed, her head resting on her right hand. The light, which I had dimmed carefully, flowed around her breasts and stomach, deepened the shadows and was lost in darkness between her thighs.

I bent over her with an involuntary sigh, and I pressed my cheek and my mouth to her breast, tried to catch a nipple gently, ran my right hand over her shoulders and back, sensing the jaguar's head with the tips of my fingers, feeling her smooth, strangely cool skin, the almost imperceptible wetness between her thighs, my own penis. I had never had problems getting an erection when appropriately stimulated. Her eyes were closed, she sighed deeply and rolled onto her back, stretching her stomach towards me. She raised her arms behind her head, ran both hands through her hair and smoothed down her curls.

At this moment, something I could not fathom began: As on the evening after our swim in the forest lake, her facial features seemed to grow pale. In front of my eyes, her eyelids, her mouth and nose merged to form a light-colored patch, and again I felt the compulsion to fill the empty space, together with the fear that I would fail in the task, fear of the completed image. Don't fail! Not now! But it had already happened, as a cautious glance revealed: instead of virile masculinity a flabby, useless fish...no amount of effort would restore the moment.

Ann had also sensed the change. She opened her eyes and understood immediately, perhaps because of the unusual expression of helplessness I wore on my face; my own personal failure

was the last thing I had reckoned with. She pulled me towards her, wrapped herself around me and rocked my body between her arms and legs, humming a little tune. As a mother with an unhappy child might.

It was a strange night. My carefully-laid plan had failed, and I wasn't even sure if I should feel disappointed. We lay in each other's arms for a long time, wordless, speechless, our faces hidden from each other, each of us buried in the other's breath, and we feel asleep like that.

She must have detached herself from me at some point, taken the sheets which had slid down and covered me with them; when I woke the following morning, she was lying some distance away from me, tucked up underneath her own bedclothes, her face half-hidden by her right arm. I got up quietly, pulled on a dressing gown and went into the bathroom.

'Good morning, Jason, breakfast is ready for you.'

I opened the door to the balcony and saw that room service had brought our breakfast and Ann had completed her morning toilet in the neighboring bathroom and got dressed. She fanned me with her serviette: 'Tiredness is no defense. After we have eaten, we are going to have a busy day: Xochicalco und Malinalco.'

We reached the Acropolis of Xochicalco, the *Place of the flower house* towards midday, and we stood in front of the three-stelae temple and beheld copies of the three stelae – we had already admired the originals in the anthropological museum.

'Just look at it, the sacrifice of Quetzalcoatl through which he created the sun of the fifth age,' whispered Ann. She was indeed whispering, seemed moved by the stylized portrayal of the god, whose head protruded from the mouth of the plumed serpent above its forked tongue. Victim and victor, god and demon at once. Later, we walked around the central Quetzalcoatl temple of the north zone before opening a concentrate bar in its shadow and trying to interpret the bas-reliefs behind us during our frugal meal. Ann returned, once more, to the topic of the third column:

'Quetzalcoatl, it's Quetzalcoatl we are seeing again and again! His sacrifice is praised everywhere, and yet it was not enough for the priests. Is the thirst for human blood insatiable?'

What should I answer her? Those times were long gone, and I was more preoccupied by questions of originals and copies. In front of the original columns in Mexico City, I had abandoned myself to the particular radiance which characterizes an original, but I hadn't been quite satisfied. Here, in the ceremonial center, I could see why. The unknown creators of the campus had created a cult site in their magic universe in which every object had its definite location. If objects were moved or even brought to a museum for conservation, they lost their original aura. What had moved me so deeply in the museum had not been this aura, but the shadow of its irretrievable loss.

We left the location of the flowerhouse in the afternoon and reached Malinalco shortly before twilight. The journey was arduous. After half an hour's walking on the dusty path I hesitated, and in front of the buildings belonging to the abandoned Augustinian monastery, I suggested to Ann that we could postpone our ascent of the Aztec cult site until the following day. Instead of answering me, she pressed her index finger to her lips and raised her other hand: a signal to remain silent! From beyond the old monastery walls, a lonely flute could be heard, a solemn, archaic melody, almost without modulation. The buildings were not completely abandoned, it seemed. We approached the elaborate wrought-iron gate and looked inside. On a solitary rock within the former monastery garden sat an Indio, no longer young, playing a reed pipe. He may have heard our steps; as in a gesture of voiceless defense, he turned his back towards us, without interrupting his tune. We listened in silence until Ann signaled to me that she wanted to go on. As if driven by dark energy, she strode up the steps towards the shrine of the long-gone eagle and jaguar knights. Behind us remained the abandoned convent of the Christian conquerors. Remnants of two cultures.

The flute melody stayed with us for a while, died down and was gone, almost creating an illusion of reconciliation between equals of both worlds, an illusion with no basis in reality.

The path was well-maintained, but there was still a height difference of 300 feet to be overcome, and I didn't want to disgrace myself in the company of my agile companion. My shameful failure from the previous evening rumbled in my brain and my loins, although neither Ann nor I mentioned it. I forbade myself a moment of weaknesses such as I had had after climbing the sun pyramid of Teotihuacán, and I took the steps one by one, looking neither to the right nor to the left,

concentrating on keeping the effort of my muscles, my lungs and my heart even. And yet I still lagged behind her.

She was waiting for me with the last light of the day, standing above the steep drop into the valley. At the edge of the two step pyramids, she raised her arms up high, holding them towards the setting sun and the rising moon. The light colored her hair, wove a mixture of gold and silver around the slim figure in the Syneprene suit as if she belonged to both: the sun and the moon, day and night, life and death.

Although I appeared quietly, my breathing less heavy than usual, she heard me coming. She lowered her arms, stood for a moment as if sunk in contemplation, and turned to the steps down. 'This is a very special place,' she called across to me. 'But we should go over to the main temple first, while we still have the daylight.'

The rocky temple of Malinalco: Round like an eagle's nest made from stone, it throned over the valley, the straw-roofed sacred space watched over by eagles and jaguars as when it was built, almost six hundred years ago. Together, we climbed the thirteen holy steps up to the temple, walked through the arch, the open mouth of the serpent, into the space within, and sat down on a stone bench. Ann stroked the stone head of the jaguar whose eyes were directed towards the entrance, symbol of the sun, invisible at night. She was lost in thought. Next to me, a fallen eagle spread his stone wings out wide, and his partner opposite rested in the same position of the rock bench: birds of the sun, waiting for the spirits of fallen warriors, ready to accompany them in the daily running of the heavenly bodies.

'They have been waiting in vain for a long time now,' said Ann, reading my mind.

'Let us go over to the pyramid again.' The sun had disappeared behind the horizon now, and I asked myself whether Ann wanted to spend the entire night on the mountain. The pale, silver disc of the full moon hung over the pyramid.

And another thought of the mysterious god came without being summoned: Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent eating itself, the king and god-man sacrificing himself, born again as morning star, wind god for heaven and earth, as an precious twin and doppelgänger, as the divinity of deformed children, – and was he not also the God of the moon?

Once we arrived up at the platform, Ann took a small package from her shoulder bag and unfolded it until a twelve-square-foot thermo fleece covered the stony ground. She sat down on it with her arms crossed. A new thought presented itself to me abruptly: Had Ann planned this full moon night, the two of us alone, undisturbed, in an abandoned Aztec cult site? I began to suspect that I was not the only person capable of planning a love encounter meticulously. If that was what she had in mind, I wanted to let her take the initiative. I sat down at her side, and we looked into the valley below wordlessly, looked at the village, fields and uncultivated land, covered by the silvery moonlight, with patches of dark shadows and stillness. We sat high above the familiar noises of everyday life, the stamping and lowing of cattle, the familiar arguments, sound fragments from the entertainment industry, a lone flute melody.

She let out a deep sigh, a soft gurgling sound. Suddenly her lips, her teeth on my neck, pressure, release, contact once more, and then suddenly a bite. Startled, I flinch, feel the burning pain, and grasp her wrists. Why the attack? Is that the same Ann who wrapped herself around me and rocked me to sleep only a day ago? Even if the wound doesn't bleed, I will see the deep marks left by her teeth in the mirror tomorrow.

She looks at me, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight, smiling. I sense a challenge in her expression, but her smile is not derisive, but serious and a little sad. This smile calms my rising anger, and I regain mastery of the situation.

'Why did you hurt me?'

'Love hurts. Who are you to think you could have it without pain, escape the torments? Do you know so little about love?'

She shook her hair furiously: 'You fool, how can you get involved in love and not expect to be hurt?'

'And who are you to be allowed hurt me and go unpunished?' I say, involuntarily applying more pressure to her wrists and thinking: What do I know about love? About the fear that can accompany it, fear for the creature I love? Of sickness and long night vigils? Worries for the well-

being of the other, caring not for one's own happiness? What do I know about love which tears down all barriers, takes and gives without limits, knows no limits, dances dangerously close to the chasms alongside it? What do I know about love, I who am myself spending the night at the edge of a chasm?

What happened next defies explanation, and, unusually, I feel to need to subject the situation to rational analysis. I accept it. We were alienated a moment before, each of us unbending in pride. And then suddenly, the turnaround: in a powerful urge, as if I was obeying a primeval instinct, I pulled her towards me and she threw herself into my arms.

We pulled each other's clothes off without speaking. Or rather, we wanted to: Impatient fingers tugged at connectors and closures, hands on light material, gently pulsing skin below it – and we paused as if frozen in the first violent movement, our faces turned towards each other. Breathed in closeness to each other, touched trembling noses, stroked eyelashes over closed eyes, mouths half-open met in the silent knowledge that time had stopped for us for a moment that would never be repeated.

We were exposed on this abandoned cult site, preserved on an island in the river of time, and at the same time at the center of the universe. Our movements were no longer subject to the rush of hours, no gesture, no flicker of eyelashes, however tiny and light it was, was lost. Stillness. The nothingness, from which later – incomprehensible, dark word – time was born. In the middle of it all we ourselves, timeless – immortal.

And then, slowly taken up again: The holy act. The clothes went down, and with them all play-acting and disguise.

We pressed ourselves against each other as if we wanted to dissolve ourselves into each other, we covered our bodies with kisses, held on to each other again. We paid no attention to the hard stony base, the sharp pebbles under the fleece. Two moon-pale bodies, sacrificed under the pyramid of the jaguar and the eagle, the moon and the sun. Holy marriage of heaven and earth: I was the year-king and she was the daughter of the corn. I was the male principle, she represented female energy, symbol of divine creative power.

In the consummation of the cult, we took our places in the eternal cycle of being and dying and experienced Moksha, deliverance, in our subjugation...

Despite the hard surface, I fell asleep and suddenly found myself in a dark, empty room. A bright point appeared in the far distance. It came closer, at huge speed at the end, turned into a circular and then a spherical body which rotated around an invisible axis, wrapped me up and at the same time seemed to penetrate other dimensions which were not comprehensible to me. An image of perfection which held healing and comfort ready for me. Perhaps even an encounter with an unknown archetype, higher and more comprehensive than those identified by C. G. Jung, without fear of the numinous. In my memory of that dream image, I ask myself: Is the encounter with the archetype not much more being overwhelmed by it, which we subject ourselves to without willing ourselves to or asking questions? In this night lying on the top platform of a pyramid, in the center of the universe, I found myself in the light of truth and did not understand it. But I foresaw that the great truths are not formulated in words and concepts, that they can only be experienced and not, ultimately, communicated. When I opened my eyes with the indefinite feeling that I had been the recipient of an unusual message, the space next to me was empty.

Ann's silhouette was visible against the night sky:

She danced on the edge of the chasm, on the stone border on the tips of her toes, then in ceremonious, measured steps; she spun around as if the laws of gravity did not apply to her, and remained unmoving, her arms lifted high up to the moon.

As she stood there like that, she suddenly appeared to me as the reincarnation of one of those women from myths and sagas that used to watch over the portal to the other world. Priestess and mediator between worlds, lord and servant, leader and mystic in one person.

Later she lay by my side again, the unconscious moon swimming in her wide open eyes. Her gaze seemed to return from an indefinite distance, gradually showing recognition and focusing on me; she closed her eyes slowly.

Emergence and beginning anew. Formation of words. Concepts.

'We will stay together.'

'Inseparable.'

'One.'

'Until death parts us.'

'He won't be able to separate us.'

'Tat twam asi.'

'I am you, you are I.'

Can a night change the world? It can. The young sun rolled over the horizon like a ball, showered us with red-golden light, as we sat on the fleece, weightless within, and consumed our freshly hydrated morning meal. The polyphonic rejoicing of the birds rang loud and clear as we ran down the steps hand in hand. The stone eagles had spread their feathers in the morning light to say goodbye, the jaguar gave us a last critical look. We would pass every test. Together. Hand in hand. I look to my side, look at her. Ann increased the pressure of her fingers, it was almost painful, and then she reduced it again. She smiled, as if she could read my thoughts, knew what I knew. And what if she did? Were we not one, as if we had always been?

The lightness of her movement took hold of me and put a spring in my step, her youth rejuvenated me. I felt her strength and freshness, said, 'how beautiful you are' and thought, Glenn may be more beautiful, but she lacks something that connects me to Ann, something I cannot identify, not yet...

I said 'my perfect beloved,' I think. Only Vera could be more perfect... Vera? The happy dream sank abruptly, my attempts to hold on to it were in vain, and my thoughts swim back to the surface. Vera?

Whispers of 'One' and again 'one,' inaudible and yet impossible to overhear in my thoughts. I was confused and suspected that nothing can make lost time come back in its original wealth and purity; the same power which lets us dive into the stream muddies the clear waters irrevocably.

Vera! Perfect creation of the central computer. Time to abandon you in the present and sink back into the memory of that happy day.

In the valley, our hired car awaited us: soft cushions for the minor injuries sharp stones had left on back and buttocks...

We spent the day in the unspoiled, mountainous landscape of the nearby national park, swam in one of the numerous lakes, hiked on well-maintained paths and talked about our future. No more dark Indian stories, no museums with terrifying chthonic goddesses. The coming days promised sea, sand and Caye Caulker, an island just off the coast of Belize City.

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Belize: the cheerful, swinging, dancing Caribbean; no longer dependent on European colonial powers or what came later, European protectors, the epoch of drug running, crime and neglected wooden houses on stilts, picturesque decay patched up roughly between one hurricane and the next. The new plastics which imitated wood were still on stilts. Lemon-yellow, bright green, pink, a bag of sweets for tourists with high standards, the new, clean Caribbean...

An artificial dam over the coral reef has protected the coast and the cays which bring in such profit from the rise in sea levels for several years now. The island itself flirting with its long-gone reputation for alternative lifestyles: tall Rastafarians with traditional green, yellow and red knitted caps greeted new arrivals and strolled down the freshly-concreted main street, animators, tourist catchers, no longer prophets of free love, since the AIDS disaster dictated a reform of their morals and North American pressure drove the collective sacrament of getting high underground. The coral reefs are gradually recovering from the warm temperatures of the last century, although the older inhabitants still rave enthusiastically about the diversity found underwater in times past.

Reggae-like sounds on the beach, from the restaurants, in the blood. The Mexican melancholy could fall from us here, and yet we speak about Mexico, the dictates of the time that those peoples saw themselves subjected to, the still-present shock of the Conquista.

'Have you seen how much more alert people are in the Caribbean, how much faster they walk, even when no work is waiting for them? And yet they too have lost a world.'

'Yes, I've noticed it too. Maybe the Afro-Americans are tougher than the original Indio population. Bartholomé de Las Casas thought that already in the 16th century. Maybe the downfall into

insignificance was much more dramatic for the Indios than for the Africans. In literature we have the concept of the height a tragic hero falls from: the further one falls from being self-assured and powerful, the more awful the event.'

'Have you looked into their faces? Even in the capital, they seem lost as if in a deep dream which they have been dreaming since the colonization; they cross the road like sleepwalkers, as if they still do not belong to our time.'

'What do you suppose they are dreaming of?'

'Maybe of that which will never come back, that which was lost then and only survives in unconscious dreams, of forgotten traditions and customs, there was more to their traditions than just the repulsive blood sacrifices.'

'Codices, of the music of the flute, poetry and art, everything they learned about in their schools and places of education.'

'Craftsmanship, the art of city building, which they were masters in, plastering and richly painting the walls of dwelling houses, palaces and temples, carving furniture, weaving carpets, curtains and material for clothing, every pattern infused with meaning, every sign with significance.'

'The art of creating delicate robes and cloaks from birds' feathers. Earthenware, painted pleasingly for everyday life and feast days.'

'Of colorful, lively markets, where bowls and jugs were sold, together with fruit and the fruits of the new world: corn, beans and squashes, tomatoes, cocoa, tobacco and cotton, the growing of which they had acquired great skill in.'

'And all that without plows and without the wheel, without metal tools. It was basically a Stone Age culture. It's incredible.'

'Although they were familiar with making wheels and knew how to work with metal: toys on wheels, fantastic golden and silver jewelry. Just think about what that means: they used the wheel and metalwork only for children's toys and to create beauty. Pleasure free from pursuit of material interests.'

'They dreamt of the animals with which they surrounded themselves, in the spacious zoological gardens of their cities, and in their own houses and stalls. Animals that served them as food, in whose company they took pleasure in.'

'Their love of the colors of earth and sky, of flowers and birds, of the forgotten songs that they sang on days of joy and sadness.'

'Their care and love for one another, the love of parents for children, of brother and sister, friend and friend, the lust and love of happy couples who became parents and so on...'

'There are other dreams, forgotten memories that press upon them: of fear and death, the inevitable death of the fifth sun, of the necessary sacrifices, as the strict priests preach, of war and oppression.'

'Of strange, incredible violence, sickness and the senseless destruction of what was glorious, peerless, the desecrated walls within which they now live.'

'The holy sites which have been lost in the jungle, which are still waiting to be rediscovered.'

'The strict rule of the new priests and their auto-da-fés, the new gods and incomprehensible rites, and again the fear, this time of eternal death and eternal damnation.'

'Prohibitions on thinking and remembering, the theft of souls.'

'Numbed by heavy work and long-lasting deprivation of their rights. So they walk slowly, bowed under the invisible yoke of history.'

We traded our opinions and insights, saw more and more of what was hidden behind what was obvious, the melancholy behind cheerfulness. We had a premonition of our departure in the timelessness of the happy moment.

Our departure date came closer, and I began to make plans for the weeks after our return to the states...