# THREE NOVELS

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*-Darkness -*

*-The Lion´s Disease -*

*-Dear Armamente-*

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All characters and events in these three books are entirely fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely accidental.

# Darkness

"We make an idol of truth itself; for truth apart from charity is not God, but his image and idol, which we must love nor worship; and still less must we love or worship its opposite, namely, falsehood.

I can easily love total darkness, but if God keeps me in a state of semi-darkness, such partial darkness displeases me, and because I do not see therein the advantage of total darkness, it is unpleasant to me. This is a fault and a sign that I make for myself an idol of darkness, apart from the order of God. Now only His order must be worshipped."

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Jewishness, von Neumann and darkness

I am Ruben. *Ruben Rosenstein*. Way back in History, my kin were Orthodox Jews. Now, nobody in my family cares anything at all about religion or ethnicity. We are modern people, caring for life as it is and ought to be. Some people think that if I am not orthodox in my Jewish beliefs, I may just as well stop calling myself a Jew. I tell them that I never call myself a Jew but that my name tells people I am a Jew. Then they say that I might as well consider dropping the "Rosenstein" name and just calling myself “Rose” or “Lavender” or something else less Semitic. I want to get on with my life. Why should I change my name? There is no good reason to do so. I am not calling myself a Jew. I am just born in a family other people think are Jews.

Many famous Jews – by the way - have relatively early in their life converted to Christianity or something to publicly distance themselves from the suspicion that they would have anything to do with the mysteries of the Torah. That Christianity also contains a lot of mystery is not quite so controversial. Of course, many Jews have wanted to avoid antisemitism and prejudices against Jews. It has, through centuries,

been much more practical not to belong to the Semitic Community if you tried to rise to the top of society in the Western World. Thus, Sigmund Freud left the Jewish faith. So did many a scientist, like Albert Einstein and Oppenheimer, I think, as well as his co-worker on the Manhattan Project, von Neumann. I am a fan of von Neumann, so I know. It has been said about John von Neumann that there has never been such an intelligent man ever walking on Earth as he. He was a living, walking encyclopedia, and he participated substantially in the development of computer science, which in turn could ensure that there would never be another von Neumann. Nobody can have an encyclopedic knowledge in the time of artificial intelligence. He said, and we will indulge a bit into this later, that "there is no use being precise, if you don´t know what you are talking about."
Probably, he said many wiser things, too, but we will still grossly consider this small epigram, and the secularized "universal genius" J. von Neumann will play a certain part in the story you are about to read.

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My apartment on the fifth floor at a *student's* accommodation center in Tampa, Florida, was minuscule ( 25 m2 , but had recently been refurbished. Tampa is the town where I was born and always have been living. In Greater Tampa, there live about four million people. It is a flat town, and it is packed with houses and cars. There are roads and parking lots almost everywhere. You will probably never see as many cars as in Tampa.
In the harbor, thousands of tourists mingle on ferries and electric boats every season, and the weather is superb from July to November. There is a small zoo with lion cubs and orangutans or an Adventure Park almost every hundred yards. We have thousands of places where they are selling hamburgers, advertising their existence along the five file roads. The entire city area is tourist-oriented, and people are friendly and helpful. Twice yearly, at least, a typhoon also comes along. I like calling them typhoons. My dwelling in South Tampa would this summer be a host for my thoughts about darkness. Why darkness? Well these are the facts:

Since I was a small boy, I have found it hard to fall asleep at night if my room was not entirely dark. I had to be subjected to point-black circumstances in order to be able to sleep. Of course, that was very rare to the condition as my family lived in the middle of a city and did not have the money to buy but very cheap, very ordinary blinds for the windows. However, when I got a little older and eventually started to

live independently, one might think that I might have outgrown this desire for darkness at night. But that has not at all been the case. Entirely on the contrary, it is as if my need for darkness at night only has magnified. And now, I suffer every night if I cannot get complete darkness. And my thought rarely leaves this subject, and I am generally miserable.

Darkness is, as you may know yourself, not entirely an outward thing.[1] Darkness at night could just as well depend on one's eyes and nervous system. Perhaps you, as I have done, notice that there is some light beneath our eyelids or hidden in the design of nerves that should transport light signals to the brain. For example, it is a classic that you can produce light sensations in your eyes by pressing gently on the eye bulbs. Thus, darkness at night is not a simple matter if anyone thought so, and I must admit that the problem has gone completely over my head. I barely meet someone before asking them for advice regarding darkness at night.

Some people tell me that there have been wonderfully effective blinds invented that I should try to get hold of. Others suggest I should have a room without windows sleep in the basement, hall, or bath. But then I tell them I have an unwanted inner light source that does not disappear. Then, they always stare at me as if I had lost my mind.
I use to stare back, though.
Do you know any word in English that is more beautiful than “though”?

My problem is very seldom taken seriously by people I know, and the nature of it has spilled over in a not unsubstantial way on my character. When I tell people I want darkness at night, it is as if I am a heretic, a sinner. I very often have to emphasize that I am not searching for SPIRITUAL DARKNESS, but physical. I think I am an enlightened soul, and I have always sought rational knowledge in every possible way in all matters at hand. Mysticism is not for me; it has never been and shall not come to be. I just find myself exceptionally susceptible to light when I am supposed to sleep.
Many friends and acquaintances don't believe me when I tell them all this. Regarding this matter, most people think I am mocking them, that I am ironic, and/or that I am just playing a game. Others suggest I am the victim of a DELUSION or a TRAUMA.

[1] Of course darkness is nothing in itself. I know.

Very rarely do I meet someone who takes my problem seriously. And that – as you know – is a huge problem per se.

People don't realize that I have insomnia. I simply cannot fall asleep! And sleep is – as you also know – the foundation upon which we all live our lives.
I feel effectively cut off from the world.

# CHAPTER TWO

Deep inside every human being, there is a deep desire, a strong need, a quest to belong[2], to share experiences and beliefs. Everyone wants to feel safe, surrounded by others who share their values. And there is always a need for love. No man is an island. No man is wise by himself. Without a family, you are done. And so on, and so on.
Thus, it is not strange that I also, from my very early years, dreamt of a companion likewise in search of darkness, in the same way that I was. I thought of this person as a young girl, a ( pretty ) girl, and a very intellectual one, and I soon sought after her practically everywhere.
But she was nowhere to be found.

No girl in my town was looking for complete darkness.

I consequently again found myself very lonely, and I soon fell mentally ill and had to set up an appointment with a psychologist.

All this happened when I was in my early twenties, and the psychologist I met was a long, well-built man in his forties - Dr. Rinaldo - who happened to have written a book about the right to love whoever you wanted to love. I had read this book.

[2] All according to the magnificent Carson McCullers. Probably here is the origin of religion. There is not so much the longing for God, that has brought about religions, but more the longing to belong to a community. The more complicated a religion is, the stronger the sense of community. An infinitely complex religion gives an infinitely strong bond between the members of the faith.

It was on a bright summer's day, and I walked into his Florida office, a little tense, as I frequently was. I did not speak until I was admonished to do so by the very practitioner.

- Tell me why you think you need a psychologist! he asked in an alluring fashion, grabbing a pencil with his strong left hand.
-

How very often is it that psychiatrists and the like are lefties?

- Well, some people think I am making this up. But I, of course, know there is no such thing as making things up, psychologically speaking….
- Why is there no such thing?
- Oh, because everything real for oneself is actual.
- I'm afraid I have to disagree. Of course, one can make things up. But let me know what thoughts you experience!
- My problem is … oh, I am so sorry, I am self-diagnosing…
- Carry on; it does not matter if one is wrong or says silly things. We are all wrong now and then.
- Thank you! Yes, my problem is that I cannot sleep, and I think it is because I am supersensitive to light.
-
- But you DO sleep, don't you?
- Oh yes, eventually. At last, when I am dead exhausted from trying to evoke darkness before my sight, I usually doze off in some half-slumber.
- Then, you DO sleep.
- Yes.
- So, what is the problem?
- That is a good question, that one! I said with a broad smile. I like that question.
- I generally pose it because it is relevant.
- The problem, perhaps, is that I am obsessed with the thought that it has to be darkness before my eyes when I am about to go to sleep. Or?
- That seems to be a reasonable conclusion.
-

The psychologist, Mr. Rinaldo, clean-shaven, was sitting behind his desk, wearing just a black t-shirt and jeans, and looked a little like an overgrown teenager.

Why were there psychologists, I suddenly thought. How could anybody be a psychologist? Was that a profession? Was psychology a science?
The apartment where Rinaldo had his practioner´s office was huge, and the rooms had extremely high walls. The windows also were large, and they had massive furnishes outside. Every window was like a room for itself, I thought.
All the time I was in his office, I was more occupied with the size of the room and the windows than with my thoughts on the subject, which was myself.

- The whole thing destroys my life, I said laconically.
- That seems clear. But you may not be completely clear whether it is about a delusion. Are you not confident that it is not a physical condition that prevents you from going to sleep very easily at night?
- You put it so well, Mr. Rinaldo.
- You are putting things rather well yourself, too, Mr. Rosenstein.
  I thanked him with an elaborate, ironic nod.
- Exactly. I think I am different. Sometimes I think so. I generally fancy that I am extraordinarily susceptible. Due to my sensitivity, I often think I will eventually come up with some great scientific idea or someday create some remarkable piece of art, like a massive novel of Modern Man or something.
- And is it a problem that you have these thoughts?
- No, not much. One has to have dreams, hasn't one?
- I see. Now, what do you want me to do? What do you think should be done?
  I looked at him. Somehow, he looked like he was on vacation, in that t-shirt and all. Did he take his work seriously?
  I answered almost as if I was an automaton:
- Is there a scientific way to determine if there is too much light before my eyes, even if my room is point black?
- Do you think that there is any scientific method around to determine that?
- No.
- Neither do I. You are a very clever guy, Mr. Rosenstein, only that you are not oriented toward anything meaningful. What do you want with your life, Mr. Rosenstein? What do you want to DO?
- I don't think you are taking my problem seriously, Mr. Rinaldo. I don't come here to talk about my career.
- You know, Mr. Rosenstein. I will tell you about my profession.
-

I sat back in my chair, content that I had made the psychologist try to explain himself. I was, at the moment, the leader of the relatively trivial intellectual game.

- Mr. Rosenstein. Most of my patients, in the depths of their souls, enjoy having their problems. They actually cannot live without their favorite pain. I suggest you take a turn and try to fancy what life would be for you if you had no more thoughts about darkness. Would life be empty?

I realized that I should leave. So I paid him his thirty dollars and left. I thought about how he, in his book "Love Indefinitely," even opened up for loving dead corpses. When I was going down in the elevator, I thought one might just as well be socially permitted to love darkness.

When Rinaldo took the money, he left me with some advice:

- You are almost a brilliant person. Very intelligent! Your reasoning is very adept and capable, but when you come close to conclusions, you suddenly divert from the subject, so I don't think you have ever drawn a conclusion in your whole life.

# CHAPTER THREE

I often – as you might think - compare physical darkness to a spiritual one, even though I know it has nothing to do with my situation at all.

Sometimes I do think there is some connection. I am not sure. Perhaps there is an inner-outer aspect to this. It can be suggested that people overly interested in seeking concrete darkness have this as a cover or a replacement for the wish for spiritual darkness or interests in mysticism or other shadowy philosophy.

It is wise, at least that was what Kierkegaard thought, always to suspect oneself of having very shady intentions.

My loneliness can most clearly be illustrated by how I feel and behave when making love to a woman because those things happen. Generally, I feel guilty when I am in

bed with a girl of my age ( late twenties ). I think that I don't belong there. I like it, or I should like it because I want sex. But at the same time, I feel I do not belong in such a situation. Naturally, this ruins everything. After the sex act, I might start a conversation with my darling about darkness. This, of course, destroys the situation further, if this is possible at all.

- Yeah, I reckon it is not COMPLETELY dark, but if I notice that, I leave it at that and just fall asleep, she says.
- You know, I read something by Blaise Pascal, the man who discovered air pressure, that sounded a bit like this: "I can easily love total darkness; but if God keeps me in a state of semi-darkness, such partial darkness displeases me, and, because I do not see therein the advantage of total darkness, it is unpleasant to me. This is a fault and a sign that I made myself an idol of darkness, apart from the order of God. "…
- I am an agnostic, you know….

I am looking at Eunice. Her eyes are blue, her hair is like bronze, and her skin is too. She is stark naked and is lying on her elbow facing towards me. One of her breasts has crumpled a bit under her. Her body is gorgeous. It is so gorgeous that I don't know what to do with her. When I tell her, she is offended. She wants me to be interested in HER, not her BODY.
Eunice is from Dallas, Texas, and her family is wealthy. Her father, Charles Hampstead, is an engineer and inventor of surgical instruments.

I suddenly come to think of Jonathan Swift, the author of Lilliputania, and how women repelled him, since he had experienced that if you came infinitely close to them, they were just pores and sweat and nasty odors. Swift finally ended up in an asylum.

- I see. I am a bit obsessed, you know. Maybe I got something that I found a way to real greatness. Perhaps…
- Greatness??
- Yeah…
- Greatness??
- I want to achieve something great.

She then says that she recognizes this. Many of her former boyfriends have said the same thing. She says it seems to be a culturally dependent mental disease going on, she said. All men want to do GREAT things. And generally, they don't

achieve anything, she says and sweeps the blanket around her, so I can no longer enjoy her beauty.

She turns away and looks for her phone.

I am looking at her neck. Nothing in the world is so cute as a girl's neck. I don't know why. The neck of a girl is the last thing you get tired of a girl. Because what can you do with a girl's body? After you have grabbed her here and grabbed her there, there is really not much more to do with a female body, no matter how beautiful it is from certain angles. Not so with darkness. With darkness, there are always new things and new possibilities. That is also why I love darkness.
But why am I feeling this way? Because it is more of a feel than an intellectual recognition. I am sure of that. This has nothing to do with conclusions and is a feeling and an inner urge. Or is it something else?

I am so sorry that I have nobody to talk to about these issues. I will go mad if I have nobody to talk to about darkness.
I wish I got hung up on something other than darkness. But you don't choose those things. Do you?

Eunice is in love with me. She wants to marry me. She has told her mom over the phone so. I happened to overhear her call.
She is a medical student and has a degree in Chemistry. Her IQ is something like Einstein's.
However, she intends to be a practitioner and is not involved in research. I don't know if she will become a good doctor. But I admire her almost boundlessly.
Admiration is not a solid base upon which one might build any close relationship. I know that.

Eunice is in the last term of her studies. She is 26 years of age and younger than me. I am 25.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Almost immediately, I met Raoul Aronson. He was ventilating his apartment, next to mine, on the third floor of the Campus complex in the outskirts of Tampa. It was spring, and the weather was superb. I had managed to get my furniture from the storage, where all my belongings had been taken care of during my time at Saint Monica Hospital, where my psychologist at one point had sent me. They did not think I was sick or anything, so they decided to send me home without any medication at all.
I don´t want to talk about these months at the asylum. There is no need. Psychiatry is no science at all.

Thus, I saw my dear piano again, my large bed, books, and wardrobe, not least my bicycle.
It felt as if life had begun. I had got rid of a lot of unnecessary garbage before I was away, and now I would have a clean start - if it weren't t for the thoughts of the darkness.
Raoul – who seemed a little younger than me - waved from across the space in the hallway.

- My new neighbor? he shouted in an almost overly friendly manner, and his maltreated teeth glowed ominously. I was in the poorer quarters. But I didn't mind. I wasn't rich either. All I wanted was a friend. Maybe a girl, too. If he perhaps knew some.

He let me into his place and gave me a cup of coffee and a cigarette. I had quit smoking, but I didn't think a couple of cigarettes would harm me. After all, I had survived Sancta Monica's.

Raoul was slender, a Jew like me, very secular as well, and had a darkish hue and black, almost curly hair. He seemed enormously intelligent with his giant, coal-black eyes and ever-smiling mouth and knew math and lots about nature, as well as all the details about every computer in the world. I never met anybody who would not want

to be like Raul, except maybe having his teeth. They were nearly not nonexistent. The marvelous thing about Raul was that you knew what you did to yourself was alright after meeting him. His love made you feel that you were entitled to your own greatness. I did not have to pretend.

- I am focused on my sleep, I told him, and I let my own dozen of ugly teeth show.
- You don't have to tell me anything, he said. I did not like that he said that. I had just wanted to present myself as forthcoming and was repelled in that way. But I was sure there was something else behind his rudeness. It always is.

The following day, we had a picnic in the small harbor north of Tampa Bay. It was 35 degrees C and sunny. I had brought biscuits and coffee, and he had only a tiny book. We were dressed in a t-shirt and trousers, and I felt almost like a teenager again, although I was 25 years old.
The book was called "The Green Firestorm" by Unknown.
I love Cornell Woolrich.

I don´t know if I am intelligent. I have never met anybody in my life that I have regarded as truly intelligent. Not even Raoul. I don´t know what it would be like to meet anybody with an intellect that would impress me. In test situations, my IQ is just 110. I know I should not talk about intelligence. Raoul probably scored 160. I don´t know. I don´t regard IQ tests as scientific.

Among the first idols Raoul mentioned when we met on this day in Tampa was John von Neumann. Since then, he has also become somewhat of an intellectual hero to me. I saw his picture on Raoul's wall and decided to try to learn more about him.

Von Neumann was a mathematician initially from Hungary, and he mastered all branches of mathematics for 30 years, starting from the mid-1920ies. Von Neumann did not write much else than books on mathematical subjects, but he had made a deep impression on Raoul. Among von Neumann's friends were Oppenheimer, Einstein, Teller, and Gödel.
Von Neumann was the man who helped Oppenheimer with the mathematics of the Manhattan Project, and much time was spent by him at Los Alamos, adjusting the two bombs that would later destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Other fields he works with are computer science ( he created the first computer virus ) and economic theory, to mention just a few.
He also predicted the takeover of humanity by computers. He called it “singularity.” ( the "ever-accelerating progress of technology and changes in the mode of human life, which gives the appearance of approaching some essential singularity in the History of the race beyond which human affairs, as we know them, could not continue.”) From the time of his early youth in Budapest, von Neumann´s friends and teachers all were afraid of him. He is said to have understood every mathematical problem at once and was later pronounced as the most intelligent man that ever lived.

Raoul and I sat on a cliff overhanging the Old Tampa Bay portside, overlooked by seagulls and tortoises, and Raul read aloud – his dark eyes glittering - while we both drank our coffee and had our cigarettes, which were French-made. The best thing on Earth is a comrade. Friends are magic.

The book, which I never heard of before, was an odyssey through paradise, in a hallucinatory fashion, like Rimbaud or something.
It started exceptionally fervently:

*"All our luggage bags are bent and broken,*
*All our limbs are sore,*
*But our hearts are swollen with the fire of glory*
*And we have drunk the majesty of Unforgotten."*

I wondered who Unknown was, but Raul just showed his teeth.

When I was fifteen years old, I remembered how I bought an anthology of classical poetry, and the poems that I loved the most were not by Philip Sydney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Burns but those written by a strange fellow called "Anon." He was always super. I love books and authorships. I am constantly dreaming about being an author myself.

Once, the marvelous John von Neumann had said: ”There is no use in being precise if you don´t know what you are talking about.” I think he hit something there. That is what fiction is about being precise when you don´t know what you are talking about.

Because I think that is what life is about, being forced to be precise when we don´t know why we are on this Earth.
The best books give us solace and comfort by talking IN A PRECISE WAY about nothing at all.

Raoul and I laughed. Then Raul got bored and told me he wanted to read a science book for a while. He took out a book on the mathematical foundation of quantum mechanics, and without further ado, he was wholly absorbed by it, and it seemed as if he had forgotten that I was present in the room.

I spent my time thinking a little about Eunice. Still, I was soon distracted by a right-sided headache – bordering on epilepsy - and decided to watch the telly, something entertaining, like an old movie or something.

# CHAPTER FIVE

With problems like these, like the one I have with light at night, one often tends to try to find the trickiest reasons for them. How come nobody, almost like me, had SUCH ENORMOUS issues concerning lack of darkness by sleep? Since I – as I already have made you aware, I am psychologically inclined and a big fan of Sigmund Freud. I thought my problem might result from childhood trauma, some unpleasant experience linked to sleep and darkness.
I suddenly thought that my problem might have originated with the tales my grandaunt Nena used to tell me when I was just a toddler.

This day was a Tuesday and still August. I woke up with my local radio station, WFLA, which I greatly enjoy. They are progressive like I am. It is not anything highbrow about that channel. But I am not pretentious. That, says my inner Self, is the absolute pretentiousness. My inner voice is, like inner voices tend to be, right.

I phoned my sister to find out if anybody remembered what kind of tales it was because I had forgotten all of them, and I thought this was a Freudian Verdrängung, hysterical amnesia.
My sister did not remember that Nena had told any goodnight stories.

When I hung up on Bettie, my sister, good old Raul, rang and said he would like to take me on a fishing trip.
I wanted a divertimento, so I agreed.

An hour later, with a small backpack on my shoulder, I met him at the bus station nearby to hop on a bus that would take us to the small marina, where Raul had his motorboat. Raul knew all about the sea, and he brought his dog today. It had been away at his brother's house in Ingham. It was a black bastard, a little like a Rottweiler, but it was no Rottweiler.

The animal was called a "Bandit." A friendly creature, but rather significant, just like a Rottweiler.

I forgot to tell you that it did not seem like Raoul was interested in girls. He was thrilled that I liked Eunice, but I noticed that he looked at boys and girls similarly.
It was as if he was not very much for marriage and family but loved when other people started a family.
I soon discovered, too, that Raoul was in love with me.
It did not bother me much at first, though. I was, in a way, used to it. I have excellent looks, and since I was about five years old, I have always attracted almost everybody, equal sex.
Raoul had a very nasty habit when he was with me. It was shocking. You see, he wore pants but with the zipper open. When I pointed out that it was open, he looked not much concerned but said that the zipper had got stuck. He wondered if I could help him with the zipper. I refused and told him that he was, if not downright crazy, so utterly abnormal. People did not have their zippers open, I growled.

Thus, I concluded that Raoul did not refrain from playing games to get what he wanted. And boy, how right my hunch turned out to be!

When we embarked on the bus at the bus central on the east side of Tampa, we heard a cry from behind, and there, in a red summer suit, suddenly was Eunice, all

alone. She was nearly always alone because she did not have any friends. The girl had put her bronze hair in a horsetail on top of her head, vainly trying to look sporty. She always looked more like a university lecturer than a hefty coed. But of course, she already had a degree in Chemistry. Now, it was Medicine for her.

Raul and I were equally baffled, but we told her it was alright if she came along. I never knew how she found out we were going to the sea.

We found ourselves on the marina Don Carlos after an hour's ride on the small community bus. Raoul had during the ride an intense conversation with Eunice about Medicine.

Raoul was widely read, and he often – when it came to Medicine – referred to a textbook he owned, Cecil's *Essentials of Medicine*, that he almost knew by heart.
I almost trusted Raoul more than Eunice in health matters because I relied on the Cecil book.
Eunice often got irritated when it came to talking about disease. I don't know why. It was as if she wouldn't want to be in love with someone who was subject to disease.
If I told Euince I had a sore throat, she merely got angry.
I concluded that Eunice had an enormous ego, and I thought that one had to put up with things like that. If one did not accept other people's weaknesses, one probably would wind up in complete solitude.

I noticed that the conversation between Eunice and Raoul now and then got my person as a subject. The two of them discussed a suitable occupation for me in the future.
I broke in and told them I wouldn't say I liked that they talked about me as if I had not been present. They might instead ask me what I intended to do with my life.
Neither Raoul nor Eunice had much humor, and they ogled at each other earnestly.

Bandit, the Rottweiler-look-alike, sat on the bus all the time very close to Raoul, and every minute, it seemed, the big dog glanced up towards his master's face as if to read the will of Raoul. In my book, Bandit seemed overly well-trained, which was outright disturbing.
They were, in a way, very much alike in that they were focused. They both knew they were, and they also knew that I was not.

I was in great enthusiasm over the beauty of the landscape. The nearer we got to the coast, the more fantastic the landscape became, in contrast to the inner parts close to Tampa, which were comparatively more swamp-like.

I appreciate beauty, and in some instances, like when I am with friends, I often get immensely interested in the landscape instead of them.
I have never experienced so much beauty as when I am with friends or with people I think are my friends.
The colors of the sky across the Big Gulf are extraordinary. I never saw those kaleidoscopic scenes when I visited my cousin Wesley in LA. I think I will never leave Tampa.

# CHAPTER SIX

It was already 2 p.m. when we arrived at Don Carlos Marina. On this Tuesday, people mostly gathered around a big auction in the small harbor nearby, where items from a small navy vessel – a mine sweeper from WWII - were auctioned out.
Thus, we found out that we pretty much had the beach to ourselves. Because before we set out to the dolphins at sea, out in the Gulf, we would swim by the beach north of the marina.
Don Carlos was run by old Navy veterans in their 70ies and 80ies, but they had been adamant about taking care of the beach, which was white and had excellent waters, shark-free, to swim into.
I had never seen such a well-tended beach, even if it was a small one.

The wind was going from the beach on this day, and we were alone, the three of us. Eunice swiftly got into her bathing suit, and Raoul played with the dog while I took out some coffee cups and can and tried to set up a mall table and chairs, which I found in the shrubs.

A seagull came and sat a few yards from me, and the wind ruffled my hair. It was a fine day!
Eunice ran into the water, and Raoul told her he wouldn't rescue her since he couldn't swim.
I did not believe he could not swim. He just was not in the mood for swimming. Bandit lay on his guard, monitoring the entire beach from a vantage point on a small grassy knoll.
- Bandit could play with you in the water! Raoul yelled out at Eunice.

- Oh no! she yelled back, violently shaking her head.
Nevertheless, Raoul laughed and admonished Bandit to get out in the water and to swim to Eunice.
The soulless creature did so. Muscular and in great speed, Bandit soon was out fifty yards into the sea and closed up on Eunice, who cried out in pure terror.
- NOT THE DOG!
But Bandit laid his paws on her shoulders.
- GET AWAY!! Eunice shouted, and her fists pounded on Bandit's head. GET AWAYYY!!!
But the dog shifted his paws from her shoulders to her head. And the black beast pushed Eunice underwater.
It was not long before she was not seen anymore.
Raoul and I had done nothing. We stood side by side, me with the coffee pot in my left hand, and looked upon the drama.
I understood absolutely nothing. Why did Bandit do this?
WHY?
I suddenly shouted to Raoul:
- WHAT ARE YOU DOING? THIS IS YOUR FAULT.
Then, I threw myself out in the waves and swam out to rescue my love.
On the way out, I met Bandit, who looked very concerned but refused to look me in the eye.
It looked as if even he did not understand what had occurred.
I did not find Eunice.

Finally, an hour later, the police and the divers from the fire apartment found Eunice floating dead a mile to the south. She had distinct deadly bite marks on her throat.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

I had NEVER SAW any human being in greater sorrow than Eunice's mom. Eunice Hampstead's mom, Caledonia Hampstead, a woman in her late fifties, was like a trembling ghost, dressed in layer upon layer of black chiffon.
- Ooh, my darling daughter, my darling daughter, she cried. Eunice's three sisters, Abogaria, Debbie, and Beatrice, were devastated, too. They all blamed me.

From Raoul, not much was heard. The police had questioned him, and after not finding out anything other than that the dog had gone mad, it had been decided by a judge that they should euthanize the dog. This also happened.

I could not stand to see Raoul, and I moved out of my student apartment on the Campus to a cheap motel, where I tried to compose myself and find solace from the loss of my bride *in spe*.

I got a long letter from Eunice's mother explaining how utterly useless, stupid, and ugly I was.

I understood Caledonia very well and would have done almost anything to make friends with her. I even dreamt – and I am ashamed to admit it - I made love to Caledonia.

I had told the police that I thought that Eunice's death was a result of a crime and that Raoul was the killer who had used Bandit as a weapon. They did not believe me. They had found out that I had been on a sojourn to a Mental Hospital in Santa Monica and that I might be a little out of my mind since it was my girlfriend that was the one that had wound up dead.
I assured them that I was not crazy, but that I just had some insomnia troubles and that Raoul was an extremely clever and dangerous person who also was in love with me. Hence, I was sure of the motive, too, and I explained it to them.
The first officer, Hampton Bird, just shook his head.
- We have to have proof. We have no proof. It is just your word. It might be just fantasies. Why couldn´t we just admit that even a dog might go crazy?
- Bandit was NOT crazy. I never seen a dog LESS crazy.
The police investigations led to nothing. They even nearly did not question Raoul. Raoul had just flatly denied that he had had any communication with the dog concerning any attempt of committing any drowning.

He never expressed any sorrow or regret. This was strange to me. But Raoul was not like other folks. Not at all.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

In the following weeks, in my solitude, my sleep deteriorated further.
I have NEVER understood why Mother Nature did not make the eyelids of humans thick enough to shut out ANY light. Maybe Mother Nature had her reasons, of course. Perhaps it was a precaution of some sort. One might be safer if one had a clue about

what is happening around oneself. If there were bolts of lightning or fire, one could perceive that, even with closed eyelids.
During this time, however, I had Skype conversations with Deborah, a Goth girl, Eunice's younger sister, who lived in Sacramento, Texas. She also had grown very suspicious of Raoul and couldn´t believe that the dog had ended up drowning her sister all by himself.

But we had no accurate means and no method either in proceeding in this matter.
Raoul was nowhere to be found, and without him, his help, and the support of the Police, neither Deborah nor I thought we would come nearer to the truth.

Deborah – a pale Goth girl with Satanist interests - seemed very sensible; besides that, she had humor, and nights after I talked to her, my sleep was nearly as good as it should have been.
After all, one nearly – as an insomniac – always underestimates the time one is asleep. At least, this was what Raoul once said he had learned from Cecil´s Essentials of Medicine.

I even thought that if Eunice had had as much humor as Deborah, or if she had had any humor at all, she would not have been murdered.
I know of a substantial number of failed authors or authors who have made it halfway, who are entirely void of a sense of humor. You have to have humor if you are going to succeed as an author.

Deborah had two thin metal rings in her left nose wing.

Some people would say that I looked a lot healthier after the death of Eunice. This is, of course, the epitome of meanness. True is, though, that I was a bit relieved. Eunice´s mother was right in that I was not nearly as clever as her eldest daughter and that the marriage between her and me would have been unequal in every way, and it would have ended in some despair, only unsure what sort.

I don´t know about you, but at least it is so for me that I think that people are emitting signals, or even attitudes, feelings, and moods, silently, without words, and that we are all communicating in an infinite number of ways, besides the verbal one.

Thus, Deborah and I had a way of breathing silently together, yes, whisper, which made us both jolly. We almost giggled at it, too, together. But this is off the record, of course. We were both deeply troubled by the loss of Eunice.
Deborah and I had some virtual sex meetings via Skype. It was a disaster, though, sexually speaking, but we had. Whispering, Deborah was a friendly type of girl: helpful, almost to the border of insanity.
Eunice had been the angry type, and when I think of Eunice, I find it strange that she never uttered anything but yelling or asking. I never heard Eunice COMMENTING or PRAISING. She had been a pain in the ass!
But it is not uncommon that sisters are unlike each other.
And if Eunice had been more kind and openhearted, I probably would never have thought her sexy.

Eunice also had had an overwhelming energy, something which Debbie did not possess at all.

Anyhow, hearing from Raoul did not take more than five weeks.
This confirmed my suspicion.
He had not given me up.
Part of his plan was to get ME - at any cost.

After the disastrous Skype sex, Deborah and I decided not to socialize anymore, and I was alone again.

Eunice had not yet been buried due to some legal matters, autopsy-related. But I was constantly in contact with Eunice´s mother.

Raoul seemed to be able to use this, and soon he had talked me into meeting him in Baltimore, where he now resided.
I took a plane to Baltimore for money he had transferred, and soon I was sitting in his apartment at another Campus area, the Loyola University Campus, Baltimore, sipping on a cup of herbal tea served by his room-mate, Andretta, who was a Jewish girl who studied art in a school in the neighborhood.

# CHAPTER NINE

Andretta had great cheeks. She was glowing and in an un-Jewish way.
On the first night at Loyola, Raoul, who was in an excellent mood, and Andretta, dressed in a blue summer gown, though it was September, were sitting together with me on the balcony, drinking red wine.
Andretta was an ashen, short ( 150 cm ), very pale in her complexion, but a well-built girl. Almost athletic she was. She did not say much, but you always thought she reflected very much on everything.
I always thought of her as "Miss Beige."
She had yellow-greenish eyes and came from the countryside in Oregon.
She was a farmer girl who wanted to be cultural and refined.

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The Campus at Loyola, a University superbly surrounded by a lot of greenery, Chestnut and Oak, in Baltimore, was a bit smaller than our Tampa student complex. But indeed, there were more than a thousand students living here.

I don´t know about you, but balconies have always fascinated me. Aren´t they rare and mind-boggling pieces of architecture? I am not in love with architects, and God knows that the man who invented the balcony ought to have a medal!

Superbly, the balcony is the architectural form of existential PAUSE. It is as if life takes a pause and as if the persons on a balcony are all in a safe place, an asylum, apart from life's troubles.
To socialize on a balcony is the most genuine happiness of our lives. Nothing beats being with friends on a balcony.
Many balcony stories have been written – yes, it is a genre of its own. But I want to give you an example of the bliss of balcony gathering by recounting the conversation Andretta, Raoul, and I had on this mild September evening when we were looking

out over Baltimore Bay and how the sailing ships under the moon silently returned from a day at sea.

- Nobody KNOWS, Raoul said, his rotten teeth glittering in the moonlight, what philosophy is.
- It might be different from person to person, I retorted.
Andretta cuddled in her chair, sipping at the glass of red wine, now and then looking at Raoul and on me, looking extremely secret.
- Wittgenstein once said he wished for a religion without words, I said, but maybe I would even like a philosophy without words.
Raoul glanced at me, and I saw he did not like what he heard.
-What do you mean by that? he asked.
I HAD NOT considered Raoul´s relation to his former dog, Bandit. But now, as he seemed to want to bring up the old grudge, I upfront said to him:
- I mean that you might even silently be able to teach a dog philosophy by showing things with your hands…..

- *"What does the moon tell you?*
*What the grass, what the flowers,*
*On a dusky night*
*When the smell of day has gotten*
*To your nostrils,*
*Through your ears?"*
Raoul improvised in a theatrical voice, and his eyes shone from a strange fire.

- I mean, seriously! I insisted. I was almost scared.
New perspectives regarding life suddenly opened. What was the meaning of Raoul´s pastimes?

Of course, it is not an easy thing to be young. Every aspect of life has to be investigated. That is what youth is for.

- I can tell what a person wants by the look in their eyes, Raoul replied.
Andretta lost her guard and looked perplexed and a little frightened.
The friendly atmosphere was gone.

It turned out Andretta knew nothing about the death of Eunice.

Because now, on the balcony, I brought it all up and thus confronted Raoul with my suspicion that he had trained the dog to be able to kill people.

Raoul did not react at all, but to Andretta, it was all a horrible thing, looked upon from all angles. First, it was an awful event that Eunice was dead. That the dog was the perpetrator also was terrible. Hen the fact that the dog might be trained. Andretta also found it quite horrible that two good old friends were accusing each other in such a terrible way.

Because Raoul was accusing me, too, he accused me of idiocy.

I don´t know about you, but for me, it has always been a sensitive thing to be accused of idiocy. It is pretty hard to defend oneself if someone accuses you of idiocy. And almost everybody might, almost rightly, be subject to such a violent attack on personality. One may even be right to blame Einstein, Mandela, or Churchill for idiocy. In some way, we are all idiotic. Some aspects of our moral acts are always idiotic.

But now, I knew that Raoul had no actual defense. It was a sign of guilt from his side that he called me an idiot.

Andretta did not know what to think.

- It is not an easy thing, I think, to make a dog kill someone…
- Piece of cake, said I. You might train a dog into anything. Some dogs can handle machine guns. But I would like to have witnessed when Bandit, the Rottweiler, was led to execution. I would love to have looked into his mind to see what he thought of his master, the mastermind, Mr. Raoul! I cried out.

I saw in my mind's eye the sorrowful look of Bandit before he got shot.

The three of us then fell into silence on our little balcony. My words had wakened up an older man in the flat under ours, and he had yelled up from below:

- INTERESTING, but do you have to SHOUT?

We soon left the balcony, and Raoul asked me if I would like to sleep on the couch or in a bed in the hall.

Andretta approached me when I was lying on the couch, running her fingers through my hair.

- It will all be alright, she said

-I am not so sure.

-What do you want? she asked.
- I want to get the guilty one.
- But if it was the dog himself?
- No way it was the dog. It was Raoul.
- But WHY would he do such a thing? Andretta cried tears.
- Because he is in love with me.
-No way that he is. I can SEE such things. He is in love with nobody but himself. He is a true narcissist!
- No. He is in love with me, I said bleakly.

Andretta´s – who had the body ( the corporal geometrics ) of a belly dancer from Beirut - cheek glowed intensely, and I leaned upwards from the sofa and kissed her on her soft, firm lips.
Soon, we were lying entangled in her bed in her room.

Several times during the night, we saw how the door was opened, how Raoul glanced at us without saying anything, and how he just as silently let the door lock again, leaving us two lovers alone in our earthly bliss.

I guess that already, at this time, Raoul was planning his next hideous move.

# CHAPTER TEN

On the following day, we decided – when we had lunch in the kitchen to take a stroll in the Baltimore harbor. It is always lovely to be by the sea.

On the way to the tourist's inner harbor, which isn´t far from Loyola University, which is situated pretty much in the center of Baltimore, I asked Andretta about her views on art. Of course, I had seen some of her work in her room: large dusky paintings in

green and brown, and she said she wasn´t sure that art was her absolute dream I wanted to explore, she said.
- I don´t know what to explore. So, this is just the beginning. I am fond of literature and History, too. Mostly French. I love French novels.
- Yes. I am the curious type, too. Raoul too. Neither Raoul nor I know what we are good at. I am not at all as clever as Raoul. Raoul could become just anything. He has an astounding memory, and neither is there anything wrong with his logic.

Raoul was walking on the sidewalk behind us. The sun was sprawling, and in the alley, many birds, not just orioles and seagulls, but dozens of crows, sat and stood.

- Ruben is overestimating me.

Raoul´s voice was dark and had a mischievous undertone.
- I am just comparing you to me.
- You are underestimating yourself, Raul continued.
I laughed for the first time in a week. Maybe everything was just a bad dream. Maybe Raoul and I were real good friends, and nothing wrong had ever happened, and Eunice was just inexplicably gone, and that was it.

Now, there was another day, and Andretta was telling me a story about an uncle of hers.
- You know, I have an uncle who is very gifted too. He has an ENORMOUS memory. He cannot forget anything at ALL.
- Neither van I, Raoul echoed from behind.
We drew nearer and nearer to the boats, and the amounts of seagulls and salty air gusts were appalling. We passed a statue of an ancient mariner from the time of the great ship trade.

The statue was comparatively small. I saluted it and felt increasingly childish.
- Tell me about your uncle!
- He has the most remarkable memory. He can never say that he remembered something because he never forgets anything.
- But he cannot remember everything at the same time? I corrected her. Her cheek was peach, but the rest of her skin was pale and white. She looked a little sleepy.
- Still, he cannot forget.

I thought this was silly, but I did not tell her.
- Raoul has an excellent memory, I said. He can recite the entire History of the Philippian War by Justin. ( Not *Justinian*, a completely other person, and a Kaiser. )

Andretta – although she was kind of an intellectual - had never heard of Justin. Since I am an author in spe, I am very interested in authors. Even if Justin was a non-fiction writer, I was interested in him. ( Nobody knows anything about this very Justin

except that he was a writer of popular History. He lived almost simultaneously with Jesus from Nazareth. The works from his hand all are General History. )

My own stories were mostly ghost stories, and they had been published on the internet and in Tampa Weekly. They had not stirred up any debate, not been praised nor bashed, and I had made zero money on my writings.

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Now, we finally were at the harbor, Miss Beige, Mr. Know All ( Raoul ), and Mr. Unpretentious ( me ) ,and there were ships as far as we could see. We were mostly sailing yachts. It was like every human being owned a boat and was visiting Baltimore.

Raoul was sitting in the shade of a small boathouse, trying to make contact with a seagull. From a human perspective, Seagulls look very stupid and are often afraid. This one, which seemed just half-grown, or was a dwarf, was highly cocky, though. Raoul had managed to get it involved in a game where the two of them were rolling a pebble, or a small stone ball, to each other.

Raoul gazed at it and talked in a low voice, and soon he seemed to have the bird in control, in a mental grip, and slowly led it to come closer and closer to him. Soon, the bird stood with its ches pressed unto Raoul´s hand. They were both utterly still amid all the goings-on on the boardwalk.

Andretta and I were equally mesmerized, and people from outside our company also stopped and stared in fascination. An old sailor was annoyed, though:

- Don´t play that way with them birds. They are wild animals and shall so be!

Then Raoul slightly pushed the bird away, and the white dwarf gull flew away.

We then left the side of the boat house and proceeded out on the bridge.

“He is crazy,” I said to myself. “Always watch out for people who mess with animals!”

Andretta was a bit worried, too.

- I love books about old Indochina, she said.

I love Indochina love stories.

- That is absurd, I said, glancing at her. I took it as an invitation and immediately took her hand, and when we looked at more and more ships from farther and farther destinations, I clutched her little hand harder and harder.

Raoul was silent. His hair was in array, and his eyes looked wet.
- The word “Indochina” is romantic.
Andretta was elusive. I could not understand her. Behind her green eyes, there was a silent dreamer.
In her pocket, she carried “The Lover” by Marguerite Duras. He tried to look like 15½, the age of the heroine in this French novel.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

When we got home to the apartment in the evening, we had supper and decided to listen to music.
Raoul had put up his usual portrait of John von Neumann on the wall in the living room. It was a giant ( 40 x 40 inch ) black and white poster showing Neumann in semi-profile. The eyes of the renowned scientist were just amazing. His gaze was so clear and free-spirited.

I got along just perfectly with Andretta. She had an excellent, normal mind, not fundamentalist in any way – apart from that Indochina thing - and there was a calmness about her that I thought I needed.
Raoul tried to make her uneasy and sometimes scare her, but he rarely succeeded, to his great disappointment.
Eunice´s mom, Caledonia, rang several times and cried but said everything was ready for the funeral. She had bought the most beautiful coffin in a cedar tree and was expecting me.
I told her I would come on the funeral day but would not stay because I had to concentrate on my studies. In reality, I did not care a straw for my studies. I just lived for the day. Raoul had that sort of effect on me.

Mr. Hampstead ( her husband ) sent his regards, and Debbie´s too. Beatrice, their youngest daughter, had been awarded a scholarship and was studying microbiology at Harvard. She never seemed to take any interest at all in her family.

I had never had any real conversation with Mr. Hampstead - Charles - ever, on anything, but a short one when he had shown me the house he had built himself. He was a short man with a broad, reddish face and a white beard. He had a severe stammer and chose not to speak very much. The man, who was relatively bright and still more successful, seemed to be in constant love with his wife. He did not seem to care as much about his children at all. He was tremendously proud of the electrical installations and how one could dim the light in every room without any other disturbances on the electric supplies to the kitchen or the washing machine.
It turned out he had made some groundbreaking discoveries regarding the gall bladder. However, he was not a medical scientist. Charles R. Hampstead had received many prizes as well as a presidential medal.

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It turned out that Raoul had got a sudden interest in hypnosis. He had a whole lot of books on the subject and was convinced he had a talent.
Due to his enormous knowledge, he did not have to study much, and it always seemed he was consumed by this or that new hobby.

Raoul Aronson enjoyed discoveries and wore this seemingly eternal grin on his face, blatantly showing all his brownish teeth.
If I had all that energy, I thought, I would have been a professor at Harward by now.

Outside the balcony, which was on the third floor, there was a chestnut tree home to a dozen magpies.
Since we were a couple of hundred students on Campus, and there were these birds in our neighborhood, it was not unusual to see students experimenting with the clever birds.
Or maybe it was the birds who were experimenting with the students….
Anyway. Students always taught the raven birds how to behave to get snacks. It was all sorts of things. If the magpies cleaned up a sidewalk, they might get a feisty breakfast with hamburgers.

This experiment, though, had been reported to the University's Ethics Committee and, consequently, was prohibited because it insulted the magpies. They should in no way be trained to be our slaves, the Dean had decided.

Raoul had grown interested in these birds as well. His curiosity was boundless.
He told Andretta that since she was interested in young women who were slaves to older men, he would like to perform a study on how birds could be enslaved to each other.

Thus, he made one of the magpies the owner of a corner on his balcony. Raoul trained the bird to defend his corner at all costs. If the bird did not regard his corner as his property, Raoul would not give snacks to him.
Then, he managed to teach the bird to give orders to other birds. If the other birds obeyed the top bird, they would as well be rewarded with snacks.
This wasn't very easy. But the birds soon realized what Raoul wanted. Soon, four magpies had surrendered to the top bird, one with a white spot on his cheek.
We ( I soon got interested in this science, and Andretta.

Raoul had invited the fellows who lived in the next apartment, two gamers in their late teens who were engaged to each other and studied both of them their first year to become biology teachers. Amaru and Blessing were two kindhearted spirits, black trendy but modest youngsters from Georgia, and when they did not kiss each other or were consumed by this or that data game, they played with the magpies on their small balcony, which was just close to ours.
The two youngsters were both very short and uniformly clad in yellow sportswear.

Amaru, who had a tiny mustache and an enormous tattoo on his neck, laughed when Spot lectured the four slave magpies. The wild birds were all sitting on the concrete floor of Raoul´s and Andretta´s balcony on this September Day at Loyola´s.
Blessing was filming with her Android phone, ready to post the happening on TikTok and Dailyvision.
Amaru looked at the scenery before him, where Spot pointed in different directions and bade his men abide by the rules.
- I never thought of it, but I don´t think birds have natural hierarchies.
- Oh, they probably have, I said, standing in the doorway between the balcony and the main room of Raoul´s apartment.

- Here, here! Raoul shouted with a piece of bread in his hand, leading the magpie, who listened to the name “Spot,” to become more aggressive towards his subordinates.
The task that Raoul had set up for the birds was moving a small wooden plate from one side of the balcony floor to the other. The thing was that Spot would not at all participate in the actual work, but he should make the other birds move the object.
Spot finally understood how to get the small piece of bread by watching repeated maneuvers from Raoul´s hands.

Blessing, Amaru, and I cheered on while Andretta had grown tired of the spectacle and had returned to the sofa inside to continue rereading The Lover.

I continued to try to watch what was happening from the perspective of the magpies. Thus, I could not avoid making eye contact with Spot to find out who he was keen to communicate with if anybody.
Then, after a few minutes, I found he wanted to communicate with me.
I was amazed. I did not for a moment think that I was the one who had created this marvelous contact, but I all the time felt that it was Raoul. This shows in whose hands I was, heart and soul, at this time.

Little Blessing now and then looked at me, under her teenage sunlit eyelids, and said:
- You really like this, uh?

The magpies were all in the hands of Raoul, and Spot turned out to be the perfect leader of a small pack of birds that soon were marching on line to and fro on the balcony.
Blessing had made a couple of short videos and posted them online.
It did not take long for the rumor about the trained black birds to have reached several students on the Loyola Campus. As an effect, we could hear calls from below on the street, where a dozen youngsters cried after “Spot.” They all wanted to see with their own eyes the marching birds.
Raul, however, wouldn´t let any of the boys and girls on the street come up to our balcony to see for themselves.
The day was beautiful, with stark sunlight over Baltimore, and although all the manifold trees around our square houses had begun to shift colors into darker ones, it was a sight of boundless beauty.

I have always enjoyed landscapes of all kinds, not least cityscapes. The architecture on this Campus was rather old, and the style was a neo-classicist one. The buildings were dark red bricks, and the rooms gleamed brightly from oxidized light green copper.

I had returned inside, where Andretta still sat on the sofa, her feet under her legs, reading the Duras novel. She seemed totally enthralled.
- That book sweeps you up, eh? I asked while gently stroking her hair.
- Yes, submerged, she answered.
I playfully snatched the book from her and glanced at some pages. I smiled knowingly.
- It is written in first person past tense. You cannot expect any distance in a book written in that tense.
She looked up, and strangely, she seemed to lose interest in the book and said:
- I am so bored.
Only young people get bored, I thought. I have never heard older women complain in that way. But I said:
- Maybe you are hungry?
-Ah, you are a sweetheart, she said, looking very common and beige.
Andretta was moody, I thought. I also regarded her as pretty silly and not at all as sexy as Eunice. But Eunice had been something special. I thought you could not expect to find another Eunice in a hurry while talking to Andretta about food.
Blessing and Deontay had entered from the balcony, too, and they were in a good mood. Oth sang a popular tune and tried to sing the song in different keys, eventually ending in chaos.
I laughed, too, and asked them what Raoul was up to now.
- He´s just talking to the birds, Deontay said.
- He´s just tanking the birds for today, Blessing laughed.
She had fine eyes—very kind, sweet regards.
Although Raoul was on the balcony, I felt his strength in my body. All the time when I was with Raoul, although he did not do anything special, I was envigoured. In the evening – when he was around – I fell asleep just like everybody else, had normal dreams, and woke up refreshed.
Raoul was like a miracle to me. I feared the day when he was not around anymore.

I had taken a massive liking to Deontay and Blessing. They were people you wished you had for friends all your life.

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In the evening, when we were all dazed in front of the telly, Caledonia rang for the fifth time that day. She wanted me to come tomorrow, although the day for the funeral was now set to the day after tomorrow.
I managed to ask why without seeming rude.
- I want to show you Eunice´s things…., she said, crying loudly.
- I see, I answered, mumbling.
It was such a tragedy. I thought that I could not grasp that she was dead. I planned to say just what I thought when I heard Eunice´s mother´s voice, and she now pronounced every word in a distinct, menacing way:
- *I think she was murdered. I have hired a detective to find out about Raoul Aronson!*
I gasped.
I thought that I KNEW that Eunice was murdered, but that I had my whole life to think about.
I could not possibly care for dead people.
- I don´t know if I can make it tomorrow, I answered, and simultaneously, I realized how heartless it sounded.
I now started to get exalted, and I fantasized about having sex with Caledonia.

- But you are not a monster, I heard her say.
I did not answer, but I excused myself by pointing out that I had a company that craved attention.
When I hung up, I did not know if I would attend the funeral anymore.

I WAS NOT COLDHEARTED. I just needed DISTANCE, I thought, and I felt a little dizzy and wanted to take a walk to clear my thoughts.

Andretta suddenly gave me a warm gaze as if she knew what I was thinking. She was a sweetheart, and I felt when I took on my little gabardine jacket and slipped out of the small apartment for my evening walk.
When I walked among the large, expensive yacht down in the Baltimore harbor, I was again caught by the fantasy about Caledonia. Sometimes, it has been a secret pleasure of mine to think of older or middle-aged women in explicit situations.
I remember when I grew up and was fascinated by my mother´s best friend, and made up childish plans to beg her to have sex with me, to introduce me to the forbidden land. I was about fourteen years old. But I might have a better chance if I waited a

few years. Her husband was very sick; he had heart disease and was panting when they were out walking.
I thought that after he died, I might visit her, and we would have the most beautiful time.
When I turned seventeen, the old man was still alive and even seemed a little healthier, while she had been hit by severe dementia. She no longer knew her name and could not orientate in the surroundings. She also had lost every ounce of sexiness.
I then thought that sex must be organized immediately. You can never postpone sex. You cannot plan sex but must always make your advances directly or let it go.

Later in life, I often had nightmares where I met the husband of my mother´s friend and how he, only using his bleak blue eyes, accused me of having caused her dementia by my filthy thoughts.

Now I thought of Caledonia, and I could not even refrain from giving the health of Charles Hampstead, her husband, some thoughts.
I suddenly feared for my mental health and thought I should have a bath or something to clear my mind.

But instead, I slowly walked back to the Loyola Campus, realizing I had to attend the funeral. If not for Eunice´s sake, so for Caldedonia´s - or vice versa.

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# CHAPTER TWELVE

The following morning, a Tuesday, I took the train to Dallas. I wouldn´t say I like flying, and trains are beautiful.

There were not any acquaintances to make in the coupé, but I just sat philosophizing and looked at the landscape that flew by outside the train window.

- *Even IF Raoul was a murderer*, why should he stand trial for that? I thought.
- Was life better for anybody if Raoul got behind bars?
I wondered about Caledonia and what her detective, whoever he was, had managed to dig up concerning the background and character of my best friend.

The train zigzagged through the valleys of the Carolinas on its way to Florida. I should change trains in Tallahassee.
The way I see things is mighty strange. I think that IF Raoul was the killer, he ought, IN PRINCIPLE, to be put in jail or put to death. But since a perpetrator of a crime is not alone, but since his incarceration in many profound ways affects OTHER PEOPLE, one has to consider THE GREATER GOOD.
I thought the greater good, at least for me, was that Raoul never got tried for any crime because I needed him so badly.
I could not sleep in an orderly fashion if he were not around.
God knows I thought when the train rushed over a large bridge, and it sounded like thunder, what my sleep would be like when I came to the Hampsteads. I probably would not be able to sleep a single wink in Texas.
I looked around in the coupé and was nonplussed since I did not find anybody I thought would understand my new theory of justice among the people I saw.
Nevertheless, it was my firm belief at the time that in the future, there would be two sentences delivered at trials: 1.) principal sentences and 2.) actual sentences.
The enormous problem of overpopulation in State and federal prisons would eventually be solved.

I was convinced that I was not in love with Raoul. Not even platonically. I had no warm feelings for him at all. I just felt invigorated and blessed when I was in his proximity. I NEEDED the crazy youngster with his ugly teeth and malicious grin.

I thought that maybe later, I would come to love him. You never know.

I cannot see any moral deficiency in my reasoning. I am not judgmental, and I have very few prejudices. People who have self-confidence are seldom prejudicious.

I watched South Carolina through the train window, how all those early autumn colors formed a symphony for my eye.
I have never wished to LIVE amid woods and pastures. It is all right to be part of the world, watching nature through windows. After all, nature is everywhere: inside train wagons, inside me, and in my thoughts. My thoughts are perfect examples of nature. They are natural products, all of them.
Suddenly, A young girl entered the compartment, carrying a massive traveler's bag on wheels. Since a seat close to mine was free, she sat down after putting her bag under the seat.
- I am Dona, she said.
I was thrilled. I had never seen such a pretty girl in my entire life.
She was dressed like a fairy, too. Her coat was yellow, her frock was orange, and her hair was ornated with small strings of pearls. I would probably have thought she was pretentious in ordinary circumstances, but I embraced the opportunity since I was in a precarious situation.
- I work with a circus, she excused herself.
- Damn, damn, damn! I said. You are a beauty!
She smiled.
The other people in the train compartment, beautifully lit by sunrays from southeast, were three young men from the northern states, equipped with several camping kits and fishing gear. They had stopped chatting when Dona entered and were, just like me, upset by her appearance.
“What are you doing at the circus?” I asked her, fumbling with my hands along the seat.
“I am a juggler.” She answered.
“Not with these.” She added and attempted to juggle with her breasts, which were neatly pressed against her body by an elastin sweater.
I had a T-shirt with the face of John von Neumann on it, which I had borrowed from Raoul.
“Oh!” I said.
She asked me what I was doing and where I was going.
I tried to accidentally cut my thumb to try to lure her away with me to the toilet.
This failed, and she laughed. She was not born yesterday. Her folk came from Finland, she said. Her name was Dona Dukelsky.
It turned out that I was left to nothing but my fantasies about her soft and fit body. I don´t regard myself as a sex maniac. But, of course, at times, I did not have much in mind. After all, I was 25 years old.

When we got to Savannah, she departed with her giant bag, beauty, and pearl strings in her hair.

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In Tallahassee, I finally got off to change trains.
It was now 02.30 p.m., and I figured I would get to Dallas about 08.00 p.m. that evening. Charles and Caledonia had promised to meet me at the station. They had their mansion 15 miles south of Dallas.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Without much hassle, I got on the Dallas train and tried to get a little sleep before reaching my destination. At this moment, I used my standard techniques, which I had developed through all these years when I did not have the presence of Raoul as a mitigator into sleep.
I was, of course, worried.
There was not only that I had to face Caledonia and Charles, and the detective, and the accusations of having allowed Raoul to meet with Eunice, letting Raoul introduce Bandit to her, and so on. No, I also had to meet with Eunice´s sister, kid sister, Deborah, alias Debbie, with whom I had had an encounter via Skype of a sexual nature.
I sweated, and I needed to relax. But it didn't seem easy.
I tried, though.
I closed my eyes, having placed my NY baseball cap over my forehead, and then felt where the tension was. It is usually on the right-hand side of my skull at 3 o´clock.
Then, when the disturbance, which I regard as epilepsy, is located, I turn my attention to the left-hand side of my brain. By mustering all remaining energy, I then envisage a black cloud in the left hemisphere. I focus on this area, and if I try hard, I eventually fall INTO THE CLOUD and go to sleep. At least I sleep for some minutes.

What I just described is ONE OF my methods to get some sleep.
I generally do not dream very much on those occasions.

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Soon, I reached Dallas ( without having slept anything at all ), and Charles and Caledonia were so thankful that I had arrived. They both wept, but Caledonia wept FLOODS.
As always, I thought she was a beauty, and she reminded me of Eunice, and they were, in some aspects, very much alike.

Charles was a master in handling the old Pontiac. We swayed along at 200mph while darkness fell around us. When we stopped at a gas station, he got out for a few minutes, leaving Caledonia and myself in the car.
I looked at Eunice´s mom and took her hand, giving her wordless solace.
When Charles got back, he had bought ice cream for everybody. I was treated like a son.

---

I have always wished to have a family like that. Both my parents died in a boat accident when I was just five years old, and I grew up with an aunt, Aunt Eleonore. She was okay, but she was no real family.

I nearly indulged in the feeling of being their son, but due to the circumstances, I did not dare to allow myself to feel at home and like I was a son to them.

They did not talk much, and I did not dare raise complicated matters while driving.
Thus, I decided to discuss the matter with the juggling girl I had met on the train.
- Oh, I read about her in the newspaper; Charles laughed and refrained from making a dangerous move on the highway.
- Soo? I said. Is she famous?
- Sure. She is a swindler. Do you still have your wallet?
I felt for the wallet in my coat.
It was there. And I had my mobile too. Of course, Dora was no thief.
We argued for a while, and I was happy to talk about a more distant matter, if just for a minute.

I was lucky that I had my wallet and phone because I did not want to feel naked when I was far away from home.

I longed for my mini-apartment in Tampa, which I had left empty and unattended. But soon, I would be back there. And hopefully, I had brought Raoul with me to my hometown again.

Perhaps all would soon return to normal.

I did not know how wrong I turned out to be.

I ought to tell you who Caledonia was, but I haven´t had the opportunity. The fact is, that I learned about her story many years later, and it seems not right in a narration about actual occurring things to put in information that was not available to me at the time.
But I think I have to tell you about her now, anyway, for the sake of clarity and completeness.

Caledonia did not have very much education. She was an artist in the kitchen, however. When Charles started earning big money, she thought she would get a career after the kids had started first grade. So she rang the local TV station and begged them to let her try as a TV chef and cook. And they took her in, and to make a long story short, she succeeded manifold and became rich and famous in her own right in middle Texas.
But misfortune struck.
In the third year of her food show, she poisoned one of the TV anchors so severely that she died after just a few days of illness.
After this, Caledonia never cooked any food in any TV show.
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The Hampstead mansion lit up when we arrived on the front porch. The doors to the garage were open, and several cars were already inside.
A man came out from a side door in the garage and helped us out of the Pontiac.
It was Mr. Verhaag, the detective.

In the doorway, pale and without a smile, Debbie lurked, dressed in black, and I felt as if a hand clutched my throat.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Hampstead mansion, placed on the outskirts of a 40-acre land area, was built in the 1930ies in a classic Texas style. It was a two-story building with a terrace in front of it. On the first floor, there were five rooms, and on the second, seven.
When we arrived, it was lit by external lamp posts on a row; all of them emitted a mild yellow light, and I very much thought that if Eunice had not deceased, I might have had a chance at least to be once one of the owners of this small architectural masterpiece from a golden Texas era.

Soon, we were all seated in the parlor, with coffee and sandwiches.
Charles, who in the car had forgotten his stammer, now was troubled by it again and let his wife do the talking.
Debbie was not to be found. I had hitherto not changed a word with her.
It turned out to be not a jolly evening at all.
I thought it was best to get the difficult part over with, so I said:
- I respect your point but can´t entirely agree with it. I think Raoul is completely innocent. The poor dog acted out of some unknown impulse. We will never be sure what was wrong with Bandit, as his name was.
- We know the dog's name, Caledonia said, and now her face was dark.
- Mr. Verhaag ( she pointed with her pinkie towards him ) has thoroughly investigated Paul Aronson, and it seems he is a shady fellow. Isn´t he?
She had turned to Verhaag, a slender man in his forties, a typical lawyer type, with bushy eyebrows and a stern chin.
- Exactly, I have.
Verhaag now laid bare the mirky character of my friend for half an hour. G pointed out that he had found that Raoul almost had no healthy interests at all, as far as he had seen.
I protested meekly, and Verhaag continued.

- I have never run into any person who seems so entirely destructive in his character, Raoul Aronson. It is appalling, and it does not seem like he ever had a decent job. No

sports, no social life. He has been merely interested in mysticism, hypnosis, role-play, gaming, and computing.
I did not ask him what was so destructive with computer science.
- I did find out that he had attended two separate courses in dog training last year. Did you know that? Louis Verhaag continued.
- No, I have never asked him if he had done so, I said.
- Well, I have phoned the police in Baltimore and told them. We´ll see what they intend to do. The public prosecutor may take an interest in that.
- Perhaps they already know. I said they do not pick up every suspect on every circumstantial evidence.
Caledonia and Charles were silent, but they followed every word of the small debate that played out between me and Mr. Verhaag.

- Oh, this is so terrible! Caledonia cried out, and I saw how all this hurt her.
- Perhaps Ruben was in on it? A voice, Deborah´s, was heard from behind a sofa.
Deborah had been lying flat on her back behind the sofa for at least fifteen minutes. Now she stood up.
- That man is a criminal! She continued.
- He wanted to have sex with me over the phone, over Skype. But I luckily said "no." Debbie started to cry when she delivered her last lie.
There was a silence before Charles raised his voice:
- Now, this is not decent behavior. Mr. Rosenstein is our guest, and I will no no no not permit anybody to come with lose accusations against a guest. He is our guest, and furthermore, he will stay and spend the night here peacefully and in perfect safety!
His voice was steady, and the message was clear.
- I will not permit this!
Charles repeating these words had a calming effect on me, and my pulse was almost regular after I had taken a couple of deep breaths.
- I miss Eunice exactly as much as you do! I said, and then looked at the red carpet on the floor.
- I am so sad. Caledonia mumbled.
Debbie walked out of the room with straight composure, and I looked around to see if any coffee was left.

Charles and Caledonia had decided to walk Mr. Verhaag to his car and wave him off. I sat in the big chair in the neat parlor with my coffee and reflected upon what had passed.
Everything went just as expected, was my conclusion. The only baffling thing was, I silently supposed, that Mr. Verhaag had been in contact with the Baltimore police.

I was sorry about Deborah. She looked suddenly so pale and so frail. All this had struck her hard. I had genuine – unmingled - feelings of remorse. I did not often have true feelings, and I was surprised.

Deborah's parents indicated that the girl had been hurt badly by her sister's death and that it had not dawned upon her until lately that she was much more lonely than before. Her other sister refused to come home and had more or less severed the bonds between her and her parents.

I decided not to make any more advances with Deborah, and I certainly would try to leave Caledonia alone. I would try to be entirely decent. This I promised myself, and then the Hampsteads returned from the parking plot.
While Caledonia laid her final hand on the supper meal, Charles – who had aged some five years or so in just a couple of days - took me aside and led me into the library packed from bottom to top with all sorts of expensive books.
He said:
- You know how hard it is for us. Our angel is … gone. But I want you to know … that I do not for a moment think that you are in any way guilty of her death so that you know that.
I thanked him.
Then, the conversation was over.
Charles only talked when he was driving a car. Perhaps car vibrations helped against severe stammer. Charles might get a patent on that.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After a small supper, where Deborah was absent, the Hampsteads asked me if I would like to sleep on the second floor or in a room in the basement that initially belonged to a housekeeper.
I chose the room below.

Caledonia had taken countless photographs showing Eunice from her first days to a few months from now. It was all so sad.

The mom did not again ask me about Raoul; I could see how tragic it was for her. Eunice had been the apple of her eye.

All was set for the funeral the following day, and she asked me if I had any black costume. I said there was one in my portfolio. But I just had my walking shoes, which were brown ones. Caledonia did not think that it mattered much.
- You are a sweet boy anyway, she said.
I disagreed, but I did not protest loudly.
We bade each other tonight with the waves of our hands, and I went downstairs to my quarter.

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The room was small but neat. I soon crept to bed and shut out the lights.
Before I went to bed, I had looked at myself in the mirror. Who was I? What I saw was the usual impeccable face in all its beauty.
I have to stress that this is a story told by me. I know that I have good looks. But I can assure you that if someone else told this story, but me, this fact would have been stressed so many more times, because it is essential if you have a fantastic appearance, not least in these times.

I was lying on my left side, trying to sleep.
Everything was absolutely terrible.
How on Earth could Eunice say to me that she thought that “I was a sweet boy anyway” if she thought I was covering up the murder of her daughter?

When my phone rang, I was just about to start my usual procedure with the brain hemispheres. The time was 11.23 p.m.

I had put it on a small table beside me, and I now lifted it and answered.
It was Debbie.
-"Zumzumzum", she said.
- Stop bothering me! Please!! I told her anxiously.
- Heeeezy, breezy!
- You are a mean thing! I shouted and ended the call.

Now, it was high time for me to work on my sleep. How was I going to sleep with all these problems? I tried my tricks with the big black cloud to the left, wriggled my toes ( like the genius electrical wizard Niccola Tesla always did before he should sleep ), and took deep breaths.
Nothing worked.
Once, during the m night, I went up to look at my black costume. To ensure everything was ready for the following day, I took all my things from my ordinary coat and put them in the costume coat. Then I discovered a small card in my breast pocket that I had never seen there before, as far as I could remember. I took it out and looked at it. It was small, white, and rectangular with writing.
It simply read:
Dona Dukelsky,
Circus Artist
0334-47665-332-xxxx

I smiled. Perhaps someday, I thought, I would call that number, but certainly not tonight.
This made me a little happier, though. I felt warmth in my heart.
Even if she was a con artist and a thief, she had won my heart. And she certainly had not mugged me!

I lay there in the dark all night without getting a wink.
At eight o´clock, when I was ready to rise in order to put on my black suit, the phone rang again.
I swore, and sure that it was Debbie again, I almost shouted:" HELLLLLO!"
It was Deontay.
I have often considered the famous quote by von Neumann about preciseness. "There is no use being precise if you don´t know what you are talking about." I have recently wanted to add that there isn´t even any use being UNPRECISE if you don´t know what you are talking about.

This is, of course, heresy. You are not supposed to correct the magnificent John von Neumann.
Many times, historians focus on tiny details while they are in complete disregard for the big picture. For example, let us take unimportant things like HOW Charles XII of Sweden or Adolf Hitler ( of Germany ) died. Historians have written countless articles about the bullet that killed the Swedish warlord. Still, there has been less research for the overall narrative regarding the importance of his life and questions about why somebody would want to kill him. The detail has overshadowed the totality—the same thing about Hitler. I couldn´t care less about Hitler´s end, but I am more interested in why and how he could rise to power.
Thus, I agree with von Neumann. But I would add that science is also no use taking those details lightly. It would be best not to say about the bullet that killed Charles XII when he tried to beat the Norwegians (e.g., the Danes ): "There was some bullet that killed him."
Bullets do not fly around for no reason.
If you don´t know what you are talking about, you had better not speak at all!
But I am not the mastermind here, of course. I certainly am not. I am not a Historian either.

Deontay´s voice was tense.
- What is the matter? Deontay!? Speak up!
- Andretta is dead; Deontay finally let his throat tell me with a hoarse whisper.
I nearly fainted.
- DEAD?
- Yes, with a knife.
- A knife?
At the same time, I heard that Caledonia and Charles were in the kitchen. They slammered with kitchen utensils and were probably making breakfast, ham, and eggs or something. I could see the sunrise over the Terxan fields through a small window in my room. An old oil rig had its severe look neatly gilded by sun rays.
- Tell me all about it! I ordered.
And Deontay finally told me the whole story.

Blessing had early in the morning, when she had gone out on her balcony, how the small magpies were chattering on Andretta´s ( and Raoul´s ) balcony, which was just to the left of theirs. But there was no answer when she tried to contact Raoul or Andretta. All she could see from where she stood was that some bird had arrived and

jumped inside her friends' apartment and that the bird later left with a modest croaking.
Blessing took on her clothes and decided to knock on the neighbor´s door. She did. But nobody opened it.
She knew that Raoul was not there because the police had arrested him, in fact, the night before, at about 09.00 p.m., but Andretta ought to be at home, of course.
Blessing took out her phone, standing in the apartment complex hallway, and rang Andretta.
There was no answer.
She tried the door, which was unlocked, to her big surprise.
When she got inside the mini-apartment, she got the shock of her life.
On the sofa, just under the giant poster of John von Neumann, Blessing saw Andretta sitting, half erect, bending lightly forward, with a knife right in the middle of her stomach. Blood had been pouring out and down on the floor, and the dark red fluid had proceeded up to the hall in two rills.
Blessing had yelled for Deontay.
When Deontay came, he saw the dead girl.
The strangest thing was that on the head of the dead girl, a black bird, one of the magpies sat, completely still, watching the two intruders. When Deontay approached the bird and the corpse, he saw that " Spot " was crowning the girl´s head. Deontay remembered how Raoul had pointed out that it had a white spot on his cheek. It was him. It was the trained bird!
Well, then they had called the police, and this was the situation.
The knife had come from the kitchen drawer, Deontay added, sobbing.
I could HARDLY BELIEVE WHAT I JUST HEARD. How could this have happened? It has to be Raoul behind it, I thought. It was that shithole Raoul! I was mad from rage. My arms trembled, and so did my voice.
Of course, he wanted to kill every girlfriend I had!

- Thank you, Deontay. I will be back tonight. We have a funeral here. I have to attend this funeral. Will you take care of Andretta and the apartment?
- Sure. But it is shut off. It is a roped-off area.
- I see. Well, I´ll be back.
I finished the conversation and silently put my phone back on the table when I heard a slight knock on the door. It was Caledonia, of course.
I answered that I would be right there in a moment.
I decided not to tell them about what had been happening in Baltimore.

They would find out through mass media. Hopefully, they would not be oriented about this case before the funeral was over.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Texas funeral is a huge arrangement. Black, shining limousines picked us up around 11:00 a.m. We met Charles´ old parents by the Evangelical Monastery Church, where the altar posed Eunice´s casket. It was clad with red chiffon and had golden letters that spelled EUINICE. A cousin of Eunice also attended, as well as Caledonia´s brother and two sisters. There were classmates from the universities where Eunice had studied and several of her teachers, from primary school teachers to the professors that had appointed her Ph.D.
The minister, Duncan R. Kind, held a masterful sermon, and we all cried like we had never done before. It was all so enormously sad. The only one amongst the attendees who did not call but stayed all pale was Deborah, who had brought a set of flowers that she kept pressing to her chest, and she could not make herself go to the casket to put them there. I tried to help her, approached her, and whispered in her ear that I would help her go up to Eunice´s coffin to lay the flowers there, but she refused. She just gave me a terrible glare.
The grandparents approached me, expressed their grief, and gave me their condolences. They had understood that Eunice and I had been about to get married.
I thanked them a lot.
When I left the church, I saw her flowers thrown in a corner in the vestry.

- Maybe she lived her days in an ongoing shock. Maybe I was on the brink of doing the same.

At the funeral dinner, which took place at a restaurant downtown at 03.00 p.m., I heard one of the most beautiful songs I had ever heard, a folk song performed by one

of Eunice´s childhood friends, who had lost a leg in a riding accident. Sitting in a wheelchair, she sang until all our hearts were completely broken.

At five o´clock, without speaking to Caledonia, Charles, or Deborah about the goings in Baltimore, I hopped on the train that would take me back there.
I was more tired than I had ever been before. Not only had I not slept the night, but I had witnessed the most tragic funeral I would ever attend.
My own feelings for Eunice were never present on this day. I was merely trying to survive. But I saw many others who were present with heart and soul and all their love for Eunice.
When I was in the coupé of the train, I took out a picture of Eunice that Caledonia had given me before I left in a cab for the station. Eunice's eyes were big and black. She looked at me. There seemed to be a question in them, too. Maybe the question was, I thought:
“WHO KILLED ME?”

I had not yet adjusted my seat in the compartment properly when there was a pinging sound from the message function of my phone. It was Caledonia.
I took out the message, which was very short, and read:
“So, your friend has been at it again?”

When I took out the news on CNN, the murder of Andretta was top news. And they also had made the connection with Raoul and with the death of Eunice. They had vigilant crime reporters on that TV channel. They always liked to jump to conclusions; if it was not about the effects of Hurricanes, it was about the murderer's identity.

I was in a growing shock and unsure if I wanted to return to Baltimore. Maybe it was best if I went back to Tampa and locked myself up with some music by Vivaldi?
I texted back to Caledonia:
“Dear Cal, I just could not let this destroy the funeral! Forgive me!”
After 10 seconds, there was an answer:
“DON’T YOU “CAL” ME, MR. HANDSOME!”
I did not respond.

I was thinking of who she was.

I had noticed a peculiar thing about how she behaved in public. She was very much AWARE. The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that in the case of Caledonia, you just only did not have a firecracker, a moody woman, an aggressive bitch, that was the role model for poor Eunice, but you certainly had a self-conscious person.
The self-conscious walk of a person can be described as a "consciousness of the moment," while average persons are conscious of their goal. Normal persons do not refer to themselves in how they move from point A to point B. Still, they are in their walk referring to an imaginary point C.. But Caledonia was referring to a fictitious point D., which was the NOW, between points A and B.

A woman like Caledonia STOOD OUT in her self-consciousness, in an ALMOST PHILOSOPHICAL BEING. Her moving Self was more like a statement than an existential expression of an existing human being.

That was how I thought of Cal.

But she was very sexy too.

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My thought, however, soon walked back ( I looked out through the train window, and it was a dusky evening with rain pouring down on the locomotive with its eight wagons ) to the events that had played out at the Loyola Campus in Baltimore.
And my thoughts eventually stayed with the fate of Raoul. Now, he apparently was locked up in the arrest facility in Baltimore State Prison.

Even if he was a maniac, IF HE WAS that, it was so sad. And this seemed to mark an end to my mostly joyous youth.
Now it was time to learn from this and transgress into adulthood, I thought to myself.
But how had he managed to kill Andretta? Had he hypnotized her? Or had he made "Spot" hypnotize her to commit suicide? I was all questions.
Could such a thing be done?
Could I ever know about such things? How much precise knowledge could a human encompass?

Without further ado, I must have dozed off.

When I woke up, the train was just five minutes from Baltimore. There was no rain or wind in Baltimore—just fog and night.

One generally does not need much sleep to survive. Alexandr Solchenitzyn and John von Neumann never slept more than four hours of sleep per night. They did not sleep together, I might add. Von Neumann did not live in Russia. He always was of the firm opinion that one ought to bomb Russia before they bombed the USA. According to John von N., the best tactic was to bomb them not next month but TODAY.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At 11:30 p.m. this Wednesday, I walked from the train stations towards Portland Road, where I planned to take a bus. I had a short conversation on the phone with Deontay, who offered me a bed stay with them in a quick text message.
Now, I was more inclined to take into a small hotel instead. I needed to think the situation over.
But I changed my mind again and told Deontay I would come to sleep on their couch for tonight.
Blessing and Deontay were such a pair of sweethearts. Deontay was not a very talkative young man but very sincere. Blessing was everybody's helper, and she worked extra at Johns Hopkins´ Hospital three nights a week, surveilling older people who had undergone surgery. Deontay had extra work as a photo model and as an Uber driver.
On this day, when I met him at the door of their apartment, he had shaved off his small mustache, and both Blessing and he had changed from their usual baby blue sports outfits into dark blue jeans and a T-shirt.
I also had changed from the funeral costume, and I wore jeans and the black man, Raoul´s John von Neumann T-shirt. Von Neumann looked from my chest upon the world with his natural curiosity and intensity.
I thought I could not give in on my friend ( Raoul ) so quickly. Everybody in this world has to stand trial. But any mischievous demeanor must undergo the scrutiny of

the law before any final verdict could be established. I did not favor the law of the jungle nor the parliament of the street.
But it looked dark.
I could not understand how Raoul could be tried for Andretta´s death if he – as it certainly was – was in police custody when she died.

I was welcomed by Blessing and Deontay with all the warmth I needed and hugs, too. Although it was past midnight and we all realized that we ought to go to sleep, we did not, but we spent an hour in the kitchen, talking the situation over.
I sipped on the Ceylon Green Tea from a dark blue cup and asked them:
- Did the police think that she ( Andretta ) could have done it to herself?
- They did not say, Deontay answered, and his black face tonight had not its usual thin film of sweat over it but was dry, and he looked both tired and sorrowful.
- They referred to investigation secrecy.
- How about the birds then? Where is "Spot"? I changed the subject.
- "Spot," and the others are entirely gone, Blessing said, clutching a small striped handkerchief. I searched for them all evening. There are no magpies at all in our yard anymore. It is so strange….
I was stunned, too. At least two dozen magpies, three or four crows, and some seagulls had been in our yard.
- Are there any seagulls, then, I asked.
- Maybe. I saw one at least, and one oriole, too.
We sat silent.
- What do you think of the situation? I asked both of them
- It is creepy! We don´t know what to think, Blessing said, and she almost always cried. Poor, poor Anretta. She was such a kind girl!
They were afraid. They probably did not think that Raoul had anything to do with the death of Andretta, but it was apparent that they were not sure. They were not sure of anything. They seemed pretty sure that I was not to blame, though.
They asked about the funeral I had attended, and I recounted the ceremony and underlined the serenity and earnest loveliness of it all concerning the unity of the Dallas people.
Deontay took out some pictures from his phone.
He had taken several shots of the murder scene, and he showed me the picture of Andretta´s head with the magpie standing on it, with the c von Neumann poster as a background.

I could not stop looking at it. Andretta had her face leaned forward, so you could not exactly see her eyes, but they were open. That much you could see.
- This is hideous! I said.
I got several of Deontay´s pictures of the dead friend sent to my Dropbox.
I looked at the two youngsters, who both of them now seemed so very young and innocent. I felt old.
I was convinced that we would never be the same again.
I also thought of the police and Hampstead´s detective, Mr. Verhaag, and how Raoul would have little chance of avoiding a witchhunt because of all these mystical circumstances. He had played with fire, and now the fire had got to his trousers.
I thought it would not take long before I met the Dallas private detective again. And now he had yet more circumstantial evidence to bring forth.
I made up my mind to visit him at the Police tomorrow. But I did not reveal this to the youngster.
At 01:30 a.m., we decided to go to sleep.
I was – as usual – not sure if I would get any.

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After my two friends had gone to sleep in their bedroom and I had arranged myself on the sofa, with two embroidered pillows ( Blessing´s grandmother´s work ) under my head, I decided that I should try to message Raoul.
He did not often use the message function on his phone and did not like it. But I thought I would try. I had my concrete errand. I wanted to see him. Thus, I texted:
"Dear Raoul, I am thinking of you. Can I visit you tomorrow?"
There was no answer.
Maybe Raoul was not allowed to have any phone in the cell and no communication at all with the outer world. How could I know?
I put my head on the pillows, and despite their stiffness, I fell into an unruly sleep and did not wake until daybreak, when Deontay shook my shoulder and served a cup of hot, black coffee.
I dreamed of hypnotized birds that killed each other using large forks, like tiny pitchforks. They held the knives with their claws and swayed them around so the heads of the other birds flew around like wild apples in an autumn storm.
I was so fond of those two young black people. If I ever had some friends, I would wish they were just like Deontay and Blessing.
It never dawned upon me that I could have Deontay and Blessing as my life-long friends.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

On the following day, we were summoned to the Police. They wanted to get all the facts about Raoul we could give. It took all day for Blessing, Deontay, and me.
I never had a chance to meet with Raoul, who was not allowed to meet with anybody. I felt sorry for him, and I thought that he perhaps had dropped his usual smile and sunk from his ordinary state of joyous curiosity into something more like melancholia. I would at least have been appropriate.

I was interrogated by two policemen, two males, of which the good cop, an elderly policeman named Knowles, took the backseat. At the same time, the bad one, Hibbert, repeatedly asked all the troublesome questions in all 24 keys.

Later on that day, during the lunch break, when the police officers served us some coffee and sandwiches with eggs and sausages, I got a text message from Caledonia: "Our baby is laid to rest now. God bless us!"
She also sent a picture of the grave. There was, of course, no gravestone yet. They would arrange some behind glass, with her photograph in color on it. I decided that I would visit her grave.
But I never did.

---

During the interrogation, the police concentrated on how much I knew about Raoul´s knowledge of hypnosis.
- Raoul is a person who is hard to get to know. He is full of surprise, and what is more, I said He likes to surprise people.
- You did not answer the question. How much does Aronson know about hypnosis, as far as you can judge?
- I guess I don´t know.
During the interrogation, I tried some balance theory. I tried to remember some of what Raoul had taught me about von Neumannian equilibrium theory, and I said, using more of Machiavellian tactics ( The princes of the ancient Italian small states –

according to Niccoló Machiavelli's famous The Prince, - frequently used to play one enemy out against another until it was time to strike ):
- If you let me speak with Raoul now, I think I can find out more than you might get from me by putting this kind of pressure on me.
- Don´t try to be wise, Mr. Rosenstein. We have talked to your psychiatrist, Dr. Rinaldo. According to him, you don´t know anything at all about anything. He said you probably live in a grand delusion and never escape it.
I was stunned. I composed myself and answered:
- Then it is meaningless to question me.

After a while, Knowles and Hibbert decided to let me meet with Raoul.
- If Mr. Aronson wants to meet with you, you might have a chat with him. I´ll go and ask him. He is probably asleep; he does not talk much, by the way. He actually does nothing at all. He does not even sleep, they say.
- Listen, Rosenstein, Knowles said, you did witness Raoul when he trained the magpies, didn´t you?
- Well, some of it. I don´t know if Raoul had trained them for weeks. I have no idea.
- So he could have trained them for weeks.
- Yes, he had been in Baltimore for a couple of weeks.
- Okay, we´ll see what we can do. Wait here. Knowles added a cup of coffee, maybe while he tried to loosen his shoulders.
- Thank you, but I am fine.
- I am sorry if we have been a bit rude to you. It is part of the procedure, so to speak. You know that, don´t you? We are distraught by this murder. So young!
I nodded and tried to get some micro-sleep by shutting my eyes, turning my eyeballs up, and then backward. I guess it is an ancient Indian Yogi technique, but I am no expert on India.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Raoul was sitting on his bed, which was not more than a plane metal surface covered with a thin mattress.

He looked as he always did, but he was a bit pale. He rose from his bed and took my hand. His joy was unmistakable. He looked a bit like a miner who had been locked into a mine for a month but had now been found and recuperated by his compatriots.
- So happy to see you, he grinned.
- Oh, you look tired, I said, hugging him fervently and patting his head a bit, almost like I was a soccer coach.
I have always been irritated regarding the way soccer coaches pat their players on the head, players that are millionaires and sometimes a hundred times wealthier than themselves.

Raoul and I sat on the steel bed, and the guard left, locking us up for fifteen minutes in the small cell in Baltimore State Prison.
- There is one thing I don´t understand, though, I said. Why don´t you try to defend yourself more intensely? As far as I know, you have almost said nothing in your defense.
- I am innocent; that is the whole thing.
Do you mean you don´t want to be precise about the crimes you are indicted for since you know NOTHING about them?
- Exactly.
- But you might be convicted on circumstantial evidence. They think you are a shady guy, a Satanist, or something….?
- I remember that Sören Kierkegaard once wrote: ”He who is writing his apology is writing his verdict.”
- He never was accused of murder, I contorted.
- He also wrote:” Being an author is being in service of everyone.”
- You are incomparable. You are one of a kind; I laughed and patted him on his arm.
We sat silent, listening to each other's breath
I asked him again if he was guilty of having trained Bandit to kill.
Raoul did not respond. He just repeated one single sentence.
- I am innocent. I am so sorry about the death of Andretta. She was a fine girl.
It slowly dawned upon me, the more I thought it over, that Raoul´s method of defense might be the best in this very situation. Why should he, in this tricky situation, indulge in details in a matter that contained so many details, where uncertainty was a prominent part?
I hugged him again and left.

- By the way, I said, you remember the magpies, I said, They are all gone. They are nowhere to be found.
- Maybe they are trained to disappear, Raoul answered with an ambiguous smile, almost blotting his brown teeth to their roots.

I left the prison a lot happier than when I came there and returned by bus to campus, where Deontay and Blessing waited for me, having cooked fresh river salmon for me.
- He was sorry for the death of Andretta.

---

Violent forces were fighting in my chest. Who WAS this man? I suddenly missed Eunice´s little hand in mine, and I felt a pang in my heart.
If Raoul had killed my sweetheart, he was the meanest creature on earth. And – I DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO THINK – if he was completely innocent, he was the saddest victim of unlucky circumstances there ever was.
I had loved Eunice, and I was sure of that now. But I also loved Raoul. Andretta had been a good friend, that is true.

---

My hosts nodded. They had met with Andretta´s parents, who had arrived this morning and were in a hotel in Fell´s Point.

Mr. and Mrs. Martinsen – Andretta´s parents, both secular Jews of Danish origin – usually lived in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, a tiny village on the plain. It turned out that they were very ordinary people, owners of a small convenience shop.
Andretta had been their only child—the apple of their eye.
They had repeatedly called Deontay to set up a meeting and were anxious to meet the three of us to know as much as possible about the death of their loved one.
“Not again!” I thought. I was not prepared to comfort anybody. But I had been greatly strengthened by meeting Raoul, so I thought of this encounter as something that could help the silent accused.

Irma och Johan Martinsen rang the bell to Deontay´s and Blessing´s small apartment at 04.00p.m..
Deontay opened the front door and let them in.
They were crying.
They looked around and said that they had been told she had been stabbed and that Deontay was the one who had found her.

It did not seem as if they knew that a magpie had been sitting on the head of their dead daughter.
We all were anxious not to tell them about this.
If the police had not told them, we certainly would not do either.
- But WHY? Why would ANYBODY want to kill our Andretta? They kept asking, over and over again.
It certainly was absurd. If I ever had been in a situation of absurdity, it was this one.
Deontay, Blessing and I could not take our mind's eye off the mental picture of "Spot" sitting right in the black, curly hair of Andretta while Andretta´s parents kept asking about the reason for her death.
I was on the brink of saying:" The birds told her to kill herself.", but instead I said:
"Maybe it was a burglar."
I thought it was better to say something than nothing to ease the tension in their hearts.
My heart is not made of rock.
I felt relieved, even if I had broken the von Neumann rule about not being precise in matters you knew nothing about.
- But she did not HAVE anything, right? Johan said, pounding his fits on his knee, sitting on the small sofa where Blessing used to lie, reading science fiction novels.
After an hour, the sorrow-stricken couple left, and the three of us were left with a feeling of guilt.
We had not been sincere. But we had to do what we had to do.
This was an awful day. Disgusting!

# CHAPTER TWENTY

- Scientifically speaking, I said, when I was standing with my three friends ( at least they were by now more than just acquaintances) after the Martinsens had left, on their

small balcony, watching some students playing with a basketball, “the magpies in this case are just circumstantial evidence. They are not part of the investigations as real acting subjects.”
- I am so tired, Blessing responded, suddenly spitting over the balcony rail.
- Do you want a bourbon or something? Deontay asked me growly, adjusting his belt on his trousers. His black hands were restless.
The boys outside were very good with the ball.
I almost laughed when they repeatedly hit the basket.
I have always been envious of people who can handle a basketball. I am just awkward with balls. I can´t dance either. I am – regarding my bodily talents - clumsy.
Then we heard the doorbell.
I looked at my watch ( I wear a wristwatch ), and it was 05:00 p.m.
Deontay left to look who was calling. When he came back, he said:
- We have got a visitor. He wants to speak with you. It is a Mr. Verhaag.
---

Louis Verhaag still wore the black suit at Euinice´s funeral ( I forgot to tell you that he attended this ceremony ). He looked just as tired as we all in the Baltimore trio felt.
At least he had changed his tie and now wore a blue one.
- I am sorry to disturb you, he said. Only this case becomes worse and worse.
It was apparent that Verhaag had changed tactics, I thought. He wanted to make friends, to point out that we were all in the same boat and had been severely stricken by an evil fate, which seemed to want to destroy us all.
But, of course, the only thing he was after was information that could put Raoul in the electric chair.( That is, Raoul could only suffer death penalty for the crime he was the prime suspect of in Tampa, FL, not any crime committed in Baltimore, since Maryland has abolished death penalty.[3] )
- We know nothing, I said, and I suddenly realized that I was echoing Samuel in John Cleese´s Faulty Towers. “I know nothing!”
- But you know Raoul, don´t you? And maybe you can make him talk. He has to realize ( The meagre detective raised his voice ) that these poor people have lost their darlings. Aronson has to have a HEART!

[3] 1976.

The detective, also a lawyer, had brown, tiny eyes that did not seem to belong to his face. His eyes were like autonomous questioning creatures with their own minds and purposes.
- Perhaps he is innocent; what if...
Verhaag interrupted, grunting and laughing:
- Come on, come on, Mr. Rosenstein. You know as well as I do that the dog drowned Eunice and that no dog ever drowns anybody UNLESS HE IS TOLD TO DO SO! You SAW the drowning, didn´t you? Mr. Rosenstein?
I was stunned. Verhaag now shunned no means. Soon, he would probably see to it that I myself was put in jail.
- I saw no dog drowning nobody, I spoke clumsily.
I continued.
- I saw Bandit swim out to Eunice, but I don´t know; perhaps he was on his way to RESCUE her from someone who tried to drown her. Maybe Bandit tried to get at the perpetrator but missed his bite and happened to hit Eunice´s throat. This is the way it could have happened, you see!
Verhaag looked at me as if I had lost my mind.
- You have imaginative powers! You have creative abilities, Mr. Rosenstein. You ought to write horror stories! I never heard anything like that. Or perhaps you should take a vacation or ….
Verhaag paused.
Deontay had raised his arm, pointing at the balcony behind us.
On the railing, whipping his tail, “Spot” was sitting, looking as if he wanted to cuddle in somebody´s arms.

Louis Verhaag backed off. He pointed at the bird and seemed well-oriented about all the details concerning Andretta´s death:
- Is this the bird that sat on her head?
- Yes, I answered.
Verhaag then backed off to the hallway. He looked as if he wanted to leave immediately.
Deontay and I had a rapid exchange of gazes, and then Deontay said:
- I don´t think he is in a bad mood today.
The rackety black little bird made some noise and waved his tail.
Verhaag backed off more, adjusted the blue tie, excused himself, and left the students´ apartment.
---

In the middle of misery, we could not help but laugh aloud. It was probably even so loud that Mr. Verhaag heard it on his way down the stairs.

One should never miss an opportunity to ridicule superstition and prejudice.

If I were to live another life, I would indulge in ridicule 100%; yes, I would do nothing else than ridicule prejudice and superstition.
“Spot” did not say a word.
We took out some Maryland Cookies to feed him, and his eyes shone.
Soon, he crept up in the bosom of Blessing and fell asleep.
- Of course, he had nothing at all to do with her death, I said to Deontay.
- Birds cannot kill adults with knives; he agreed and turned on the telly for us to watch the latest news on CNN.

# CHAPTER TWENTYONE

The 06:00 news was concentration upon a hurricane closing on Florida's west coast.
Deontay and Blessing had changed into baby-blue jogging dresses they were most comfortable in.
We then had a game of cards. I won a little.
We almost forgot about our miseries.
“Spot” was walking around the apartment and had a good time. I thought he was just like a little dog.
In the card game, Blessing suddenly won a lot of my marks.

I was a bit shocked, and to regain my composure, I needed a glass of water. I went into the kitchen and found “Spot” on the kitchen counter on his way to try opening a box of sleeping pills.
- Oh, NO! You BASTARD! I shouted, gripping the bird around its neck.
I carried the mischievous creature, who did not even try to speak, out on the balcony and threw it out in the arriving dusk.
It flew away on unsteady wings.
The moon was full.
We wrapped up our game of cards and let Blessing keep the money. It was 20$.

I decided to sleep on the sofa, and Deontay and Blessing consequently moved to the bedroom and closed the door after we wished each other a good night.
I promised them I would try to get some accommodation of my own on the following day. Either I would try to get an allowance to live in Raoul´s and Andretta´s apartment, but if this were not doable, I would try to make the police pay for a hotel room.
---
As often was the case, I was unable to sleep.
I tried all the means and tactics, but on this night, none worked.
My mind apparently had decided that it was time to think things over. I mostly think you have insomnia for a reason. Sometimes, one can fall asleep only when the day's problems are sorted out and when you have decided to do better the next day. So, I decided to try to recognize what was ailing most in my conscience.
I took an imaginary walk through my mind to see what was bothering me the most.
All the time, I ended up wondering who Raoul was.

After half an hour recount of nearly every minute of the time I had known Raoul, I sat up on the sofa and told myself:
- I do like him, but I don´t really know WHO HE IS.
I tried different alternate realities:

a.) Raoul is an alien.
b.) Raoul is sent by the FBI or CIA.
c.) Santa Monica sends Raoul to try to find out if I am crazy.
d.) Raoul is a journalist from The New Yorker.
e.) Raoul is a distant cousin of mine with an inheritance.
f.) Raoul is my friend.

g.) Raoul is my enemy.
h.)  is not interested in anything at all but himself.
i.) Raoul loves me.

After a while, I realized that *maybe none of this* was true.

Raoul probably was Raoul in his complexity. I thought of the von Neumann rule. DO NOT TRY TO BE PRECISE if you don´t know what you are talking about. Maybe the essence of this half-silly maxim was that one should not waste one´s time.

I trust my own reason. I have no gods. I think Bob Dylan is silly when he claims: ”You have to serve somebody.” I don´t have to serve anybody at all. In the words of Sancho Panza in the famous novel Don Quixote by Calderon, “my own master, and my own slave.” In Hegel´s Phenomenology of Spirit, from 1807, after witnessing Napoleon take his troops through his hometown, Jena, claimed that the Master was an unlucky fellow, only waiting to be ushered from his castle by his slaves.

I dozed off.
I slept until Deontay woke me up in the usual manner. He presented me with a cup of smoking hot coffee.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the following weeks, not much importance to the cases of Eunice and Andretta happened, and I started to
I feel a rising annoyance at my situation. Through help from the authorities, I managed to hire a small flat in Baltimore, quite close to the Loyola compound, and I even bought a big black upright piano so I could be distracted by indulging in music. I got money to buy the piano from a publisher for some translations of short stories from the French. I had always loved the stories of Ottave Mirbeau, and consequently,

I translated some of them into English and then introduced them to Suller & Sons, who had promised to publish them.

I met with Blessing and Deontay now and then, but it soon became apparent that we did not have much in common, and I was looking in other places for company.
I heard nothing from Caledonia or Deborah, and I was satisfied. I truly missed Eunice.
I missed her more than I ever thought I would miss her, and I remembered how she sometimes snuggled her arm in under that of mine and held her arm around me.
I almost cry when I think someone wants to hold an arm around me hugging me gently.
Oh, it hurts so much!
I do not find any interesting people to associate with and socialize with within this ancient town.
I sit by my piano all day, trying to make some music.

Recently, I stumbled on the music of Allan Holdsworth, an Englishman, and I am fascinated. Imagine this man did not think of scales the usual way. To an ordinary musician, a scale runs for one octave. It comprises five, six, seven, eight tones, or twelve, but it is always limited by one octave, from, say, one C to another C, or from one A to another A, one octave higher or lower, but not for Allan. To Allan, sometimes a scale was constituted by many tones ( or notes ) over, say, THREE OVTAVES. Then music could brighten up! A new world dawned on me, and I wondered how the music I had listened to before Allan´s Wardenclyffe Tower could have fascinated me! But to learn and to implement my knowledge about the music of AH was another thing, and every time I try, I feel that I haven´t got the energy to encompass the findings of Allan Holdsworth into my mind.
But I still try.
I had thought of writing a miniature symphony in a Holdsworth manner.
However, there were obstacles, more of them. Every time I sat down to write music, I thought about Raoul. Even if I thought I would write music for Raoul, it did not help.
After a few days by the piano, I shut the piano down and started taking long walks on the outskirts of Baltimore instead.
It was not that pleasing to me, but it was better than just sitting and waiting for news about the case of Raul Aronson.

I've visited him a couple of times. Even if he was in a good mood, the circumstances were so depressing that we decided not to see each other so often. Our usual objects of conversations, like the ethics of science, seemed obsolete or something like that.
I gave him a copy of my Mirbeau translation, which he appreciated greatly, something I had expected. “The Hallucinating Pen” would be one of his favorite books in the coming months.

---

In November, there was what they called a “breakthrough.” The authorities in Tampa had decided to press charges against Raoul, and it was agreed that Raoul should be moved from Baltimore to Tapa State Prison before a new investigation should be opened in the case of Eunice Hampstead.
On the 7th of November, Raoul was transferred by a small black guarded bus to the Jurisdiction of West Florida.
I then decided to leave Baltimore as well.
After visiting Blessing and Deontay, who were willing to take care of my piano, I moved my few other belongings to Tampa by a small transport company and transitioned my body by a train ride.
I did not meet anybody interested on the train, although I looked for Dona and thought I saw her several times.
Back in Tampa, I went to my apartment, which was in perfect shape and had been attended to appropriately by the landlord during my Baltimore sojourn.

I felt as if my life would turn for the better again.
I was sure Raoul was going to make it, too. But it would probably not be an easy win. Raoul always thought he would make it. It is not enough to call him an optimist. He was a winner in every situation, no matter the circumstances.

Since Raoul was not wealthy, the state provided him with a lawyer. As soon as he got to the court building, he was taken into custody at their police station and booked into the system. The arrest charges put forward by the District Attorney against Raoul Aronson were then reviewed by the district attorney of Tampa, second district, 2nd DCA,1700 on N. Tampa Street, Tampa, Florida. The charges were “First-degree murder where the killing is premeditated or planned. Murder by assault of trained dog.”. The defense lawyer was a young J.D. Deidrick Saunders. As far as we all saw, the case would most certainly go to a Jury Trial.

At the arraignment before Judge, M.L. Small Raoul had immediately pleaded not guilty.
Now, we were set for the big battle. Mr. Saunders and the public prosecutor, Theodor V Carambolas, had a massive task before him.

I had the strong impression that Raoul did not want me to engage too much in the process, so I did not contact him often but tried to get going with my life in Tampa.
When I oversaw my situation at Tampa University, I could not remember which courses I had planned to take this term, nor did I even remember within which area. I had lots of half-gone projects behind me.
Perhaps it was better if I took a pause from my studies and got a job, translated a book or something, I thought.
This was very imprecise, and I felt bewildered.
It was like in the song where someone could not distinguish “elbow from knee.”
Then I came to think of Dona Dukelsky.
When my reality had developed into such an enormous mess, who could sort things out? Who had the mental capacity among my friends? Nobody. Nobody but this circus artist, I believed.
So, after a couple of days of latency and passivity, I rang the number she had given me on the small card.
She was infinitely glad to hear from me, she said.
- What are you doing these days? Where are you? You can´t help me in a tricky situation? I blabbered in my phone.
- I live for the day, you know. It does not matter where I am. But I can come and visit you or something, she said calmly.
Dona Dukelsky always sounded as if problems were something utterly unknown to her.
It was undoubtedly a relief.
I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted off my shoulders. I had known I had a burden there but never how to lift it off.
- You have no idea what I have got myself into! I said.
- Are you referring to the thing with the dog and the Hampstead girl? She asked lightly.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

She came on the following morning by train from the north.
She had hung up on me when she said she would come the following day.
I had no time to tell her I hadn´t any money either. I had no clean sheets for my spare bed or food in the fridge. I was broke.
But when I met her at the station, she just said she was loaded. I imagined she had robbed a bank or two on her way.
I wondered what Charles Hampstead had heard about her on the radio that I had not been able to verify. When I looked online for "Dona Dukelsky," there was no information whatsoever.
I had checked her name on the small white card and double-checked the spelling of "Dukelsky," but there was no Dona Dukelsky – or Dhona - to be found anywhere.
She had an oversized white Kaschmir-like coat, dyed her hair all dark red, and was carrying an enormous, expensive travel wallet ( without those terrible wheels on it that trashy people always have ) that seemed made of oxen with a gold locker on.
She wore sunglasses made on a turtleback, although it was October.
When I was about to show her the way to the bus, she ordered a cab and guided me into it while she lightly touched the cheek of the young driver.
- Address! She said.
I told the driver my address.
- You look marvelous.
- It is my job.
- What is your job? I asked, and I felt like a schoolboy.
- To have fun.
- Give me a break! I said.
- Perhaps I am just one of those many people in this country who are too wealthy.
- Of course, I have always wondered if I would meet one. But I thought that they only socialized with each other.
- You are right. Most rich people are somewhat secluded, of course. But I am not.
- Then we might buy some food on the way. I asked.
- We might call for some food when we are at your place, she corrected me.

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I love this, I thought to myself. It was like a movie. There was a whole genre, I remembered, where either he was rich, or she was poor, or vice versa. And those movies were the biggest blockbusters.

When we arrived at my tiny apartment in the student quarters at Tampa University Campus, she lifted off her coat, laid her glasses on the hat rack, and relaxed.
- Oh, how wonderful to be at your place! She said and poured herself on the sofa.
I sat down in my TV chair.
Before I had time to ask her about a possible food delivery agency, she said:
- Never mind food if you are not HUNGRY, but tell me what´s bothering you now!
I was consternated. Once again, I thought I had to ask her who she really was.
- I wonder: Are you a scammer, a con artist, a pick-pocket?
Dona stared at me.
- Charles Hamptstead, the father of Eunice, said that he had heard about you on the radio, how you emptied people´s pockets on trains…. That you were famous…
She looked at me, her eyes widened.
- Oh, you are referring to that girl "Dupelsky"?
- "Dupelsky"?
---
When we were done with the laughing, I went up to her and kissed her on her mouth. She felt so fit and fresh. When I touched her arm, her body felt firm like a car bumper. Yes, her body was like one giant, curvy car bumper.
I was not sure, of course. I will never be sure, but it was a relief that she denied being a criminal anyway. As long as all my friends deny they are criminals, I feel safer.
- My folks are wealthy. It is that simple. Do you want me to show you a picture of my father's estate?
I felt relieved and decided I would immediately bring up my problems.
Since she already knew a lot about the Hampstead case, it was easy to give her my version and my opinion on that version.
During my talk, I felt wow; my heart was glowing from luck to have her with me.
I could not believe she was in my home. It was like a dream.
- Do you think he did it? Raoul? She asked.
The eternal question. The usual question.
I began to hate that question. I hated the situation. But I DID NOT HATE RAOUL. All the time, I had that liking for him, and it never disappeared. I had to give myself that. I was the essence of perseverance.

When I had met with Raoul, he had never expressed any yearning for ME. I would never kill anybody to be able to be with me more easily!!
I had grown more and more sure of Raoul´s innocence.
- No, I don´t think he murdered anybody.
- Neither do I, she said without any particular facial expression. Her large eyes were looking right into mine.
- So, there is only one thing left for us to do, she said.- What is that? I asked with a toneless voice.
- We have to prove his innocence.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Dona and I woke up the following day, I was still unsure if I dreamed.
We told each other our dreams, and I assured her my dream was nothing compared to reality.
- We don´t have anything else than those two, she said. Either something is a dream, or it is accurate.
- You are quite a philosopher, I smiled.
("Dupelsky," I thought. Of course, there is no "Dupelsky." She is a con artist. A cheater. A defrauder. A trickster. I was not easy to convince in any matter whatsoever, and this was probably a mayor fault.
At least I had a good night's sleep, I thought. And I was in love with her. But of course, she would leave immediately, and if I had anything of any worth somewhere, she would take that with her. But I said:
- Do you want a cup of coffee?
"It is the nature of a lie to increase itself to a tenfold degree," I thought, reciting something I long ago had read somewhere.
- Of course, she said, looking around my room.

There was not much to see. Some clothes, a small bookshelf. A small table. A rug. A tv-set.
- Who did it then? She asked and searched in the bed at the foot end for her bra.
I thought I should say it was a good question, but I halted.
- I thought you knew that already, I answered.
- No, who could I know that she said. She looked at me, all sore.
- I am sorry, I said. I just am baffled that you are here. I feel…
She said, "Never mind, " and sounded like when an adult corrects a child.
- I think we ought to leave the dog out of the picture, she said.
- But she had dog bites on her neck.
- I don´t think dogs are biting people by the neck when people are swimming.
- So?
- It is just such an unlucky misunderstanding, the whole thing. Of course, the dog was swimming out to Eunice because it had noticed that she was threatened by someone or something. Bandit was swimming out to help her. She was drowned and mutilated by someone or something out in the water, someone who was swimming beneath the surface.

Because of the suspicion against the dog, the police failed to perform an ordinary, sound investigation of the crime, according to the standard scheme. They did not look for suspects where they should have looked for them in all the ordinary directions.
- What do you mean….

I was perplexed. Of course, Dona was right. The dog thing had blinded the police!
- You mean…., I reiterated.
- Where do you look for suspects in a murder case? Normally, you start with the family. The killer is almost always somebody who knows the victim. And somebody with an emotional motive. Who in the family is overly emotional and wacky? ONE SINGLE person is overly emotional and wacky. Her name is Deborah. Little Deborah!

The easiest thing for her would be to steal some money from her family and hire a hitman to get rid of her sister, the beautiful, intelligent Eunice, who had such a handsome boyfriend who did not even SEE HER.

A killer in a wetsuit could quickly follow you to the beach, glide into the water, swim out and near Eunice, and kill her, making marks on her throat that looked like dog bites since the hitman saw the dog. Ince the hitman was armed, probably with several weapons, the dog did not dare to attack the hitman, but the dog swam out, got dragged down under the surface by the hitman, and when it got lost, it swam ashore again. Laer, they executed the dog, who had failed to save the poor girl. That is the

whole story. That the dog was trained to do a lot of things did not matter at all. Bandit could not fight the underwater killer.

I stood in the middle of my room, coffee pot in hand, and listened to Dona.

Of course, she was right. How silly we had been.

It was Deborah who was the killer.

- I am not finished, Dona said.
- So? I said and sat down, bewildered on my chair, still holding a coffee pot.
- Deborah found out about your new sweetheart, Andretta, and made friends with her on the net, then talked to her hitman again. She knew about everything and decided that she would tell him to stab poor Andretta as soon as the police had got him in custody. Se told the hitman to put some jelly on the girl's head for the birds, that she knew that Raoul had trained, and for the hitman, it was a routine job, much easier than the diving job.

And the hitman knew that Deborah had arranged so that nobody would be looking for any hitman at all. Deborah planned to get P Raoul, your best friend, fried in Florida as a punishment because you had ignored her and had thought she was just a little Goth with a silly ring in her nose.

I was stunned.

It all seemed so obvious. But even if I was bent on believing every word she said, it was just a theory.

- We have to have proof, I said.

She nodded while putting on her bra.

Her breasts were magnificent, but I knew that already.

- I´m going to get them proofs! She said.
- Tomorrer, I am leaving for Dallas alone. And I will get them proofs.

She had the most terrible accent. Miss Dupelsky…

We drank coffee from the same cup. We felt like that was more safe.

Nobody knew how this would end.

We somehow had a feeling that Deborah would not surrender without a fight. However young she was, she was no fool. And we could not send the police on her as long as we only had our theory.

After all, it might still be that Bandit had killed Eunice.

- Perhaps we should talk to the police? I said.
- Since we would hurt their self-esteem, they would mess it all up, and Charles and Caledonia might become the next victims. There has to be someone with a little brains to handle this.

I reckoned she was right. But that meant that Dona and I would have to become the ones who would have to take all the risks. And I wasn´t used to taking physical risks. I was deadly frightened.

I thought of a line I had read in that Anthology of Poems with a lot of poetry by someone called Anon. There, I had read an epigram by a Mr. Philip Sydney, which read:

"Everybody would be a coward if he dared."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dona and I went to the nearest Burger Restaurant for a Big Meal.

I thought of Raoul and his defense lawyer and how much effort they put into discovering things about dogs and their ability to drown people.

Dona looked tense. I saw from the outside that her brain was working at top speed.

I was not sure what she thought we should do to be able to prove Deborah´s guilt.

- What do you think we should do to prove…

- We should get her laptop. I should do that while you are taking her out to McDonalds.

- Should I?

I thought it would be advantageous if I acted a little stupid.

- Do not pretend to be stupid, Dona said. I know that you are competent.
I blushed. You cannot fake a blush.

When we were done at McDonald's, Dona asked me if I had anything special to do that day or if I could take a trip with her to Dallas immediately.
I agreed.
She went to an ATM and took out some money. Then I looked up timetables for trains.
We decided to take a Greyhound to Dallas.
At 10:15, we boarded the bus at Tampa Street and got two seats in the rear end of the old Greyhound-lady.

When I tried to snuggle my hand into hers on the bus, she bade me to wait.
- I have to think, she said.
I like buses. Mostly, I like them because I get sleepy by the vibrations, and I have a problem with insomnia.
Thus, I shut my eyes and thought it would take several hours before we got to Dallas, so I might try to sleep.
But soon, I realized that I was wide awake and that I was too troubled to be able to fall asleep.
The things Dona had told me were just too embarrassing.
Of course, Dona was right! Deborah was the natural killer in this case.
Why hadn´t anybody seen that?
Just because the dog had caught everybody´s attention, and Raoul, the mystery man.
If Raoul had not been such a mystery, he had never been a suspect.
When the Greyhound was about to cross the border to Texas, I got a call on my phone. It was Caledonia.
I silently laid a finger on Dona´s knee and whispered soundlessly, with large lip movements:
-“It is Caledonia.”
Dona nodded and had an intense look.
- How are you? I wondered, addressing Eunice´s mom.
- Oh, things are fine. How are you? I just wanted to know if you were alright and if you needed anything now when you are back in Tampa.
- I am fine. I don´t need anything, thank you, I said.
- You must have changed your mind about Raoul, haven´t you? She asked, feigning nonchalance.

- No, not really…
- But it is obvious that it was Raoul who did it. You are not dumb, are you, Mr. Handsome, she said provokingly.
- I think he did not do it.

Dona bumped me into my side and signaled that I should ask about "DEBORAH." She whispered to the girl's name.

- By the way, I said on the phone, is Deborah there, and Charles?
- Oh, why do you ask? Yes, of course, Deborah is here. She is always at home nowadays. She sits in her room writing Fantasy stories. Almost every girl is an author nowadays. She publishes her novels on Amazon. She is pretty successful. I think she is feeling better and better after ….
- Ah, GOOD. I am worrying a bit, I said.
- Charles then, I asked, how is he coping….
-Oh, you are a sweetheart, Ruben! I have always loved you. No, he is not at home. He is always working, you know. He is at the office, inventing things. Downtown. In his laboratory.
-Ah, that is good. Well, I think I have to go now…
-Are you sitting on a bus? Caledonia asked.
Oh, mm, yes, we have buses in Tampa, you know…
-I see. Well, bye for now. We´ll hear from each other when it draws nearer to the trial, sweetheart!
- Okay, take care and give my best!
I hang up.
Dona and I sat silent.
- Debbie is at home, writing stories.
- I heard, Dona said, scratching her arm.

I tried to kiss her cheek, but she pushed me away.

- Let´s sleep for an hour, she said.

I nodded, turned to the dusty bus window, and tried to relax into the bus seat.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

There was something wrong with her theory, I thought, after having slept for a minute. I am an expert mini-sleeper and mini-dreamer.
“The dream is the giant tube leading to the land of the unconscious.” I quoted from my memory the famous drug addict and essayist de Quincey, who lived in England about 300 years ago.
I had seen “Spot” in the dream trying to open the sleeping pill box.

It was, of course, possible that Eunice had been drowned. But why did it have to be Deborah who was the mastermind? Why couldn´t Eunice have other enemies? She was not the nicest person on earth.
In many aspects, Eunice had been a selfish tart.
Suppose someone else than Deborah wanted her out of the way.
After all, Deborah was in no way THAT SMART! Not at all, I thought. She was not intelligent enough to do such a thing, to be able to plan all this. She was not at all like Dona…

I suddenly felt how my heart jumped in my chest.
Suppose it was Dona who was the perpetrator. Let us see.
I pressed my temple towards the bus window, and after a couple of swift calculations, I was clear that it was much more probable that Dona, for some unknown reason, could have SWAM OUT AND KILLED Eunice, and it would have been easy for Dona to kill Andretta. Dona knew how to blame Raoul. She could have silently contacted all the girls online and could have known about me, Raoul, and them.
Eunice, Andretta, and Deborah were all girls yearning for company. Of course, they could have had their best friend online under an alias like Moon Goddess.

And now we were on the way to Dallas to kill Deborah!

I also had her motive. She wanted everybody but Charles out of the way so that she could marry Charles and get the money, the estate, and all the patents.
Somehow, she had met with Charles, and she knew him.

I suddenly remembered how Charles had lit up in the car and even stopped stammering when I pronounced her name. “Dukelsky,” he had said,” Yes, she is a famous con artist.” Of course, Dona was his mistress. Charles wanted to turn my attention away by telling me she was dangerous.
Of course, she was. But Charles did not yet know how dangerous she was!

We were on the way to Dallas to kill her. That is, I thought, SHE WILL MAKE ME KILL HER!

I slowly turned my head to get an undercover glance at Dona. She sat, staring ahead, and it almost seemed she was sleeping with her eyes open. Her beautiful eyes, large as Vesuvi craters they were.
- What is the matter? she asked tonelessly.
- Nothing, honey.Nothing.
I turned my head towards the bus window again.
And I thought, who is next but Caledonia after Deborah is dead?
How will I be able to stop all this? I started sweating. If only I had been bright, like Raoul or … Dona!
My hands started to tremble.
- What is the matter? Dona asked, touching me gently on my knee.
- Nothing. I am just afraid. Terrible thing. Murder is a terrible thing.
It was a cloudy day—Temperature c: 55 F.
The bus continued its way along Route XX.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

We had left the bus and were standing at the bus station by the railway station in Dallas, looking for a cab to take us a little closer to the Hampstead mansion. Dona was confident but very tense.

- Call Deborah, and tell her you have something important to say to her. Tell her you´ll meet at McDonalds. Buy her some burgers and a Cola, and while you are there, I will go to their house, talk my way past Caledonia and into her room, and grab the computer. I know how to do such things!

- It is best you collect her by the house. It seems more earnest, Dona said.

I listened and did not what to do but play along, at least for the moment.

My theory was not proven. I did not at all believe in her theory. I was more trusting mine.

Some things did not add up, though.

Why ( my brain was working at top speed ) wasn´t I able to recognize her name anywhere online when Charles knew her name?

Of course, I had learned that Charles did not like publicity, and he kept his entire business with all the patents under the most profound secrecy, as he was aware that they were valuable to many. He was an inventor of medical instruments, but those instruments could be helpful in many areas since they were technologically advanced. I did not know the names of any of his employees or partners.

- Call her up, take her to McDonalds, and let us get the whole thing over! Dona said when we decided to split a mile from the Hampstead mansion.

- She is at home, Dona continued. Caledonia said she was.

---

I thought of calling the police. But I did not know if my theory was correct.

I thought of Dr. Rinaldo and how he had told the investigators in Baltimore about me, that I was living in a “grand delusion,” and that I could make anything up. My greatest enemy was my imagination, I thought.

What was true?

I called Deborah while I was standing outside the Hampstead villa, looking at the horse stable, where Deborah's horse stood, its head in an opening in the barn, looking straight at me, strangely moving its lips.
I have always been afraid of horses. They are like lie detectors. They can discern truth from falsehood and honesty from dishonesty, which I have never liked.

- Hello!

I heard the voice of Debbie in my Android Galaxy A52.
- I have to meet you and talk to you. It is urgent. Our lives are at stake. Somebody wants to kill us.
My voice was trembling.
Deborah did not believe me. But she agreed to meet at McDonalds.
- I am outside your place. We can go together. Do you have a car or something?
She had a car.
After a couple of minutes, she came out on the terrace.
She had a red dress on and a black hat. Very chic, I thought. She was almost beautiful.
She still had those rings in her nose, but they did not bother me so much any longer.
The horse was looking on from the barn. She did not wave at him.
Then we drove off in an old MG, to Dallas City.

Suppose I was wrong, and Dona was right. Suppose I was sitting in this car with a killer by my side.
I was looking at my hands. I needed to stay calm.
I took a deep breath.
Then, it dawned upon me that McDonald´s probably was the most unsafe place in the world. McDonald's would be the right place if someone wanted to kill or poison you.
Then, I decided not to let Deborah consume anything at McDonald´s. We would go there, but she would not bite any burger or sip on any Coca-Cola.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Deborah and I were sitting at McDonald´s with a burger and a Cola in front of us.
I was sitting messing with the gallery on my phone. Deborah was silent.
After a few minutes, I found what I was looking for a picture of Dona I had taken when she slept in my bed in Tampa.
- Do you know this woman? I asked Deborah and showed her the picture.
- Oh, yes, not in a sleeping state, of course. But how did you get that? She is my father´s assistant. One of them. She is Dona.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the doorway. A big clown rushed in, offering an advertisement for a fur shop.
It rushed past everybody and continued along the tables, throwing small sheets of advertisement around, and when it got to our table, it tickled my back. It swayed a paper over our meals, patted Deborah on the head, laughed, and then ran out of the restaurant.
I was stunned. Of course, that had to be Dona. And what she had done now was pour poison into Deborah´s Coca-Cola.
I hadn´t seen it, but I knew it.
- Do not touch your food! I told Debbie.
She looked at me, her eyes wide open.
- Dona is trying to kill us. First, she will kill you, then Caledonia. She has already killed Eunice and Andretta. Now it is your turn.
She started to cry.
-Don't worry! I said, touching her arm. She drew it away, not knowing what to think.
- I´ll call the police now. They will come here. DO NOT WORRY. Now Uncle Ruben will take care of everything!

When the police arrived, I told them to take care of our food and that I would say to them the whole story at the station.
They evicted the entire restaurant, and even if they did not believe me, they promised to pick up Dona to see what she had to say.
The forensic apartment would analyze the Coca-Cola cups.

Soon, I learned from a policeman that the clown who had been at our restaurant had a car, a white van, and that they had been given the number of it by a "meter maid."
I asked them if I could get in a police car to run along to identify Dona when they caught up with the vehicle.

They would not initially, but they changed their mind, and we entered the chase, where half a dozen police vehicles were involved.

Soon, I saw the white van and saw the clown's face.
The clown waved its hand.
Then the car smashed into a pawn shop so that a bunch of musical instruments, trombones, trumpets, and clarinets of different sizes flew up in the air among all the debris.

Dona was pronounced dead at the scene.

# CODA

A couple of days later, Raoul and I were walking along the quay in Tampa Old Bay, looking at the fancy yachts and the tourist ferries that sailed by in the breeze.
Raoul had his winter jacket on. He never used to wear many clothes, and indeed, not giant parkas when it was October, but it seemed as if he had become a little more susceptible to cold during his time in custody.
He smiled, though, and said, in his usual taunting way:
- I always knew, from the first time I saw you, that you were a very reliable person.

FINIS

# THE LION´S DISEASE

Personnel and passengers on m/s *Punjab*:

Daniel Stork, Captain of m/s *Punjab* of London

Ruth Stork, wife of Daniel´s.
Mr. Nicholas Williamson, a doctor, and his wife
Mrs. Tonya Williamson, also a doctor, passengers.
Midas Sully, 1st officer
Alfonso Ruiz 2nd officer
Samuel Diggersson, 3rd officer
Harmenz Verstegen, Chief Engineer.
Ralph Bartlett, communications officer. ( Telegraphy, telephone, satellite.)
Bernard Schoener, the cook.
Geronimo Weichsel, representative of Rattner & Rattner.
Paul Contour, an author, passenger.
Derek Holtz, a banker.
Joseph Johansson, carpenter.
Abubakar, Petty Officer.
Linda Benson & Dorothy Carlson, animal caretakers.
Eleven others, incl.: steward, shipmates, electricians, machine-men and other ship´s personnel, kitchen aides, cleaners, etc...
among them:
Midshipman Witherspoon.
Oliver Haskett.
Rufus Conway, purser.
Leo Hart, steward´s ass.
Rodney Small,
Toby Panetta, Engineer´s appr.
Ruben Leopold. Med. Dr.
Miss Cumberstreet. Med. Dr.

All set in LONDON and at the OCEANS in the year of 20xx.

# CHAPTER ONE

## LONDON HARBOUR

*"Et si le soleil ne revenait par*
*demain ... N'est-ce pas, ajoute-t-il,*
*le plus veille angoisse du Monde ? »*
G. Simenon, Le Roman de l'homme, p.27.

All this took place only years after the horrendous pandemic, the Covid19, had paralyzed the world. Economy had been slowing down, and the tricky disease made a lot of people face death, sorrow, hunger, as well as homelessness.

In November of this year, Rattner & Rattner, the renowned and prosperous London Shipping Agency, had hired me as an officer onboard the Punjab, a Handysize Geared Bulk Carrier. Minutes after being appointed an officer at a visit to the Staff Employment Office, I set out to find my ship from Emmet Street, where the office building was situated. I was on foot, in light rain and some wind in the dusky remains of the Tuesday afternoon, out for the vessel, which was an immense one, lying at anchor outside the Northwest Pier of London Outer Harbor. I had been hired in an extreme hurry due to a mishap on a red London bus on the morning of the ship's departure; the ordinary 3rd Mate – a man whose name I forgot - unprovoked got busted up by a drunkard, and, because of a broken arm, was brought to the hospital for surgery. The Company was in dire need of a replacement, and with a terse notice, I, who was then 1st Mate on another Carrier - the Swanee - of the same size, but an oil carrier, decided to jump in.
It was a commotion to try to reach the area. My beloved Swanee lay by an anchor in a whole different part of the port. I went by subway and by bus and on my way

happened to end up on a small bridge, about a hundred yards tall, in one of the harbor areas, viewing a large portion of the London port from a distance. The harbor rested with thousands and thousands of ships, cranes, sheds, and piers in front of me. Stairs and viaducts, trains and carriages were seen everywhere, and miles of rails in grey and blue nuances, covered by smoky fog, were spotted in all directions. How strange are the cities, man built out in the plane and by the outpour of rivers! But they were part of work, of human endeavor.
Work, this rather primitive agreement between people, is often not entirely rational or logical, but still, the only meaningful agreement, precisely because it since primordial times stays based on reciprocity. This small mutual agreement is quite fundamental. There was since the earliest epochs no other decency to be found in the world of humans anywhere in the world than in the simple agreement of work. Some say that slavery was born the day after work was invented. I realize that. Maybe so… But that does not affect the nobility of Work itself.
The city, this immense organism, the actual big city, skyscraper City, was the predicament, the condition, and the very place of this decency and agreement, and in this decency, quite simply, marked by smoke, fog, and thousand smells, … marvelous. So this was the city of British decency, of the decency of civilization, I thought, as I folded my collar against the wind, which came in, gust after gust on this evening, from the West.

"Of all the airts the wind can blow,
I dearly like the West,
`Cause there my lovely dearie lives,
The girl that I loe´ best."

I silently hummed. I always loved Robert Burns. My father was from Edenborough. But as for myself, I have mostly been living in New York.
Cooperation is beautiful. Capitalism is not. Collaboration is healthy and decent. Decency is beautiful. The most beautiful thing in life, next to love, is decency.

When I approached my future home, m/s Punjab, now by foot on a distant busy narrow pier, I noticed that my ship, a relatively modern and ingenious one, ( which my former ship, the tanker, was not ) with its 160000 deadweight tons was towering over far more modest and older vessels, which also were part of the London fleet of conventional general cargo ships. This fleet consisted solely of cargo compartments that could carry rare, sensitive, and expensive goods long-distance. These goods

typically are famous cars, old aero planes, sculptures, racehorses, circus animals, and ready-made building elements to bridges, in short things that could not be taken across the globe by container ships.
When I was brought out to m/s Punjab by the company extra ferry, it was already late in the day, 08.00 pm, and I was at the first real sight of her body, impressed by the size and beauty of the ship and, as I thought, the ingenuity with which it was built. In the shade of progress related to the money-intense internet and communication industry, the development of the ancient art of ship construction has been thriving too.

I escaped from the ferry to a steel ladder, on which I, with some effort, climbed up along the side of the vessel. Halfway up a small door, which was set on the side of the ship and had the door neatly shut behind me, when a small elevator in seconds brought me right to the main deck. The decks were perplexing, in light blue, and shining. Leaning towards the hatch of one of the large, square cargo holds, which all four of them were neatly covered with orange steel hoods, large as tennis courts, the Captain was standing, together with the 1st officer, to welcome the new 3rd officer, who so late at night was about to report himself to them.
The ship was magnificent, like a white castell. The Captain was a man in his sixties, thus 25 years my senior, by the name of Daniel H. Stork. He was Irish and born in Dublin. This was his second journey with the Punjab. He told me all this when we, after a walk around the remarkable wonder of a floating castle, which it seemed like to me, were sitting in the gunroom, one deck below, in the aft of the ship. He was a rather tall man, looked more like an American, with dark hair and a piercing look in his blue eyes. Stork had an air of seriousness about him but seemed, all the same, not entirely without vanity.
Last five years, he had been with Rattner &Rattner, mostly on container vessels. He had been the boss on many a tugboat, cargo ship, and ferry and had enjoyed it. The grave but very talkative Irishman said that he had often been flattered by being entrusted as a captain by the Rattners on still more modern, still more expensive, and still more beautiful ships. The executive director of the Amsterdam office had asked him to take on the “Punjab” on a trip with to Surabaya, Java, he thought it was a tough job, and he was looking for a crew, and – through connections, I had been recommended to him as a reliable chap, he said.
The reason the ship too was in a hurry was, though the Captain did not tell me until many weeks later when we had become friends, was that it first-hand was bound to Cherbourg when it should pick up the manager´s daughter. The latter had a yearning

to be with the ship on its journey, this time to the exceptional destination it had. The Captain had protested against this, claiming that he was hired to take responsibility for the ship, managed by a company, who was to be governed on reasonable grounds. He could not act in his profession for a company run on grounds such as "not waiting for crew, because the need to pick up the CEO´s daughter."
Mr. Kaminsky then simply retorted that the Rattner& Rattner Company always had a multitude of agendas, of which getting the cargo out for delivery was the main one. The other reasons were of less importance but had to be waged in, he said. They always said things like that. Miss Kaminsky should be picked up on the 22nd.
The Captain had not in turn answered to this, he recalled but simply told Mr. Kaminsky that as soon as they had left London harbor, he was the Captain. He merely hoped they would reach Cherbourg and Rachel Kaminsky, he had added in a casual tone. "Ultimately, the Ocean decides."
The Captain was a man of strong will.
The ship was painted white, the hull and deckhouses, hatches, masts, and rafters. The decks were blue. She was enormously big, rectangular in shape, as modern ships are, very high, sturdy, deep, and comprehensive. We were twenty-five people on board, twenty in the crew, and eight passengers, when the two animal tenders, Linda and Dorothy, were included. On this trip, the Captain also brought his young wife, Ruth.
It was now October, the month of storms on the North Sea, and "Punjab" had in the afternoon just haply gotten underway from Amsterdam, via Le Havre, carrying lots of wheat, a couple of cars, and some horses as well as some other animals, amongst them a lion. Then they added more cargo here in London, more machines, an old airplane, parts of a submarine, and more animals, while they unloaded the wheat. The lion was a lioness, brought aboard, of course, in a cage. She was dressed in a suit, a green one, made of thinnest tarp, and, although I just spotted her very casually, as I was inspecting "my new backyard," I felt sorry for her. To take a lioness from Amsterdam all the way to Java in Indonesia seemed to me on the brink of animal cruelty.
All cargo was stuffed in the big four compartments by experts on loading these things and experts on airplanes and animals. The animals were held in hatch No.1, closest to the main deckhouse and the bridge, amidships.
Like most general cargo bulk carriers have some 4 or 5 holds covered by metal hatch covers, Geared bulk carriers - as the Punjab - are mainly in the giant size range. All ships nowadays are too big. They often have several cranes mounted that allow them to load and discharge cargo everywhere without shore-based equipment in foreign harbors. A typical General Cargo Carrier of the geared bulk type has a crew ship has

a crew of somewhere around 13-35. There is a Captain; the Captain is in charge of everything. We always have 3-4 deck Mates, and the 1st Mate's in charge of the cargo. Chief Engineer, The Chief Engineer, is of course, in charge of the engine and systems. 3 to 4 other Engineers, 1st and 2nd Oiler, 2 to 4 deck crew, and 2 to 3 galley crew, plus Radio-Electronics officer, one Bosun, one Electrician, and a Cook, a Steward, and 2 Steward's assistants. Some ships house a couple of deck-engine utility men extra.

The Punjab also carried a few passengers: two doctors who were also veterinarians, who mainly were there to look after the horses and the other animals, one author of novels, Mr. Contour, and Mr. Schultz, a banker, probably an acquaintance of the Rattner family or something. Initially, all passengers were told they would have to reside by themselves since captain Stork was busy taking command of a ship that was entirely new for him. The company representative on-board, finally, was Geronimo Weichsel, a supercargo clerk.

Stork wandered around the ship, and one could see it on him that he thought it was way too big by the way he watched his craft. Even I thought it was not wise to build ships of this size. These ships are made in Japan, and the Japanese know what they are doing, of course. Only I wouldn´t say I like these seafaring monsters.

The doctors were a middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Williamson. The writer, who was a tiny, slender boy from Texas, USA, by the name of Paul Contour, claimed he had written a novel set in Baltimore. We were later not able to find it on Amazon or elsewhere, though.

Since it turned out that the only reason Punjab was anchored up in this part of the London harbor was to wait for me, we, as soon as I had accepted to be a member of the crew on this ship, which was set for Surabaya, Java, we raised the anchor, telephoned for a tugboat and for navigation aid out through the Thames and out into the English Channel.

The weather was sort of windy, but the magnitude of the vessel impressed the forces of the Sea, and we withstood any influence, either from waves or wind, and our maneuver out into the open Sea was like gliding out on a dancefloor.

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26th of October. I was standing in the night on poop deck only hours after we departed from the port, watching the many-colored clouds in the sky. The lights of the small cities ashore were slowly gliding by as we sailed southwards in the English Channel, more to precisely the Strait of Dover. We thus ultimately headed for the Atlantic.

I had earlier introduced myself to the rest of the crew, which besides the captain and the 1st officer, Mr. Midas Sully, who just looked stone-faced at everything, all were of the average competent kind. I learned the name and face of the 2nd officer, Alfonso Ruiz.

The stone-faced 1st officer, Sully, with hazel eyes, was a strange character. He was a tall guy, fifteen years my senior; big black tousled hair, whiskers, and light grey eyes. He spoke in a hollow voice and was a big, dominant type of guy. He said he had seen my credentials and said that he also had attended Christ College.

Alfonso Ruiz, a young fellow from Paraguay, stood at the steering wheel, and we had put out a whole bunch of sailors on the lookout. These waters by the French coast have heavy traffic by everything from fishing vessels to tankers. We wanted at least to come through the Channel before some of us went to bed that night. Sully and the carpenter stood aloft in the back talking, puffing cigars. Longitudinal on the port side, two dolphins had strangely spotted. They soon disappeared, though.

I ransacked my memory. I thought I had met Sully on some occasions. But I did not know where or when. He was significantly older than me - I was just thirty-five - so I don´t think we had been in the same classes in high school or at the same parties. I often let my thoughts go back to my year at Christ College because it had only been one year due to a catastrophe regarding my family. I was not at all sure if I had met him at all.

Amidships, a sailor shouted out in a harsh voice that one of the horses had become sick. Some horses were located in large boxes in cargo compartment number two, where there also were a couple of other animals, and in one of the boxes, one of those beautiful black creatures was lying down on the floor. If you know about horses, you know that they very rarely prefer to lie down. If a horse is on the ground, it is either sick or dead.

When I got aboard, I had laid out the course on our main chart and put up our destinations into our logbook. We had told our telegraph operator, Ralph Bartlett, to cable to our destinations. Later, I could not find the chart. I told Sully. He could not find it either. Then I saw I had by accident placed my coat on it. Paul Contour, a vain red-haired fellow with a bent nose, who had eyes like a hawk, but seemed a little mean, like a snake, laughed at me.

Just hours into this journey, this bode no good.

After dinner, which was a steak we all ate under silent conditions, the captain, who said he had a headache, withdrew with his wife. The latter also felt sick and stumbled on a shipping threshold, one of those tall ones, to the captain’s departments, which was a small suite consisting of three rooms on the starboard side of the white ship.

“Well, at least we are on our way,” Ruth, who was black and ultimately from Trinidad, flustered in my ear, before disappearing, probably in a try to make me feel cozy, despite the strange atmosphere on-board and my own hasty departure. I had only had time to bring a fraction of my luggage due to the hurry of the escape from London. Every hour in port costs millions of pounds to a ship of the Punjab´s magnitude.
She had let out her large, black, curly hair over her red dress and smiled generously, and her large, healthy teeth shone in the light from the small yellowish roof lamps.
“Sure,” I said, echoing my younger self. “It will be a gas coming to Java.”
Just to be aware of Ruth made a man feel younger.
I took a stroll on the deck. We were now well off the coast and should be able to relax a bit.
I then met with the doctors, who highly were taken aback by the sight of the Nord Sea. They flung bits of bread towards the seagulls, but the birds just looked perplexed. In the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Sully, however, and I thought I could discover a wry smile on his lips.
Tomorrow we would reach Cherbourg for sight-seeing, Captain Stork had told us. They sent the luggage to Cherbourg for me to pick it up at the Mair´s office, he said. None of the crew knew the exact plan of the journey to reach Java. This was all due to safety measures, according to what the Captain and the Rattner man, Mr. Weichsel, had told us. The other officers and I were just hired as crew, and the captain is always the sole master of the ship. That is – as it has always been – the rule of the Sea and an anthropological truth.
The ship was at her maximum speed and had moved the southwest trades freely through the Atlantic Ocean. I looked forward to the sightseeing in Cherbourg. I had a distant relative who lived there. When I stood there, trying to focus on the birds and on the two doctors Williamson, I noticed that Mrs. Williamson rubbed her eyes and then, after a second of hesitation, cried out in a loud, harsh voice:
“I cannot see a thing! I am BLIND!”

# CHAPTER TWO

« Je puis bien aimer l’obscurité totale,

mais si Dieu m'engage dans un état à
demi obscur, ce peu d'obscurité qui y
est me déplaît. »

- Blaise Pascal, Pensées, 1670.

## Who am I ?

I am sorry to interrupt, but I think it is right to do, to try to tell you a little about myself at once. There are two main reasons for this. It is because I am AS AN AGENT an essential part of the story you will read 1.) as an agent on-board the Punjab, 2.) I am the one who narrates the story, and – as we all know – the one who is the sender of the message often has control over it, its content, the pitch, color, and tone.
I am from Glasgow. My parents Espen and Elsa Diggerson, both of them architects, raised me there. I was their only child, apart from my sister Gwen, who – bright and beautiful as she has always been – did not pose any trouble of any kind.
With me, it was different. I had no real interests and no talents. I was not exceptionally bright and did not form any circle of friends around me.
My parents grew exceedingly worried, and at last, they decided to send me to New York to try to make me more competitive. At nineteen years of age, I was thus transferred from the suburbs of Glasgow, without any prospect or interests – other than the reading of novels – to Queens, NY, and started my real education at Columbia University.
I intended to become an author, and my idol was – and there was no question about that – Cornell Woolrich, the master mystery and thriller writer, whose book "Fright" I thought was the best book I ever read, and hence, the best novel that was ever written.
After a year, it turned out that I had no talent for writing.
I then looked around for a real education. I soon found that being a sailor nowadays was not only reserved for boys who had grown up in canoes and on fishing boats but that it was a modern, quite technical occupation, with a good salary, regulated work hours, and a solid pension.
I decided to try to become a Sea-Captain.
I asked Gwen about it. She said:
"Definitely! If it is not just another of your whims, that is!"

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I rushed up to her to assist; however, both she and Mr. Williamson showed me away. “Now let´s see, are you really blind, Tonya? Honey!” Nicholas, her husband, said, almost in a mocking way.

He waved his hand before her eyes as she was standing by the railing, clutching it with both her hands, but turning her head one to the left one to the right, in what seemed a desperate try to be able to perceive anything of the outer world.

“Oh, I see now; on the right side, I can see.”

“On the right side…?” Nicholas Williamson mumbled, disgruntled in disbelief but definitely more serious. His small face, a little reddish, was ridiculed by his abnormally small nose, which always had a tremble. The head was small, too, in relation to his body, which was 195 cm tall. Of course, as a doctor, he had known about one-sided blindness, homonymous hemianopsia, which if not a symptom of stroke very often just a hysterical condition. Still, he seemed to think that this did not usually occur during action but more when a person is tense and immobile.

Here they were amid wind and air, the huge ship plunging southwards across the Atlantic, and highly unlikely that any partial blindness of that kind would ever occur, he seemed to think.

“Yes, Nick,” she panted, grabbing his flannelly coat, ”it is so strange. I know, I know, it is so weird.”

Now the Captain became visible on the stairway, high up, and he shouted:

“What is the matter Mrs. Williamson?” in a high voice.

Midshipman Witherspoon, a young black man with a mustache, came running, bringing a deck chair, in which Nick and I placed the woman so troubled by her at least for the moment inexplicable condition.

Ruth Stork, Captain Stork´s wife, also came rushing from the ship's aft, which she had a particular flair for and took out a small bottle of whisky - containing at most 2 decilitres of fluid - from her handbag. Tonya, who saw (!) the tiny bottle, waved her away with a gesture of dismay.

“No-no, no whisky. This will pass.”, she said. ”This will pass by itself. It is just tension of the ocular nerve, or the brain itself”, she said, broadly anatomically.

Sickness is in itself something quite out of the ordinary. It is an aberration, not very common either. And life is such that the rareness of sickness and the sadness of many sicknesses do make sicknesses since they are a threat, a thing handled with as much fear as superstition. Doctors are welcomed, and doctors are feared. Doctors live amid

a non-ironic duality, the like the human community never have produced. Doctors are people with a strange profession, and they are men and women from Hell and Heaven. Mr. Nick nodded professionally.

After a couple of minutes, Mrs. Williamson was escorted by her husband to their quarters, which was far below deck on the starboard side of the enormous m/s Punjab, which continued its journey heading southward in the light breeze that caressed the faces of the rest of us, who were standing on different decks of it.

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Dinnertime was approaching. It was five o´clock, British time, and we all streamed on staircases and through narrow corridors which, due to the solidity of the ship, dampened all noise to a minimum to the two dining rooms.

As was the ruling habit in the old English commercial fleet, since Captain Bligh of s/s Bounty, the Captain was dining with his wife, the three mates, i.e., the officers, the Chief, and the passengers.

The rest of the crew – the "petty officers" and the able seamen - were dining in a larger dining-room situated deep down in the center of the ship's hull, with only artificial lighting in it. However, the Captain´s dining room was on the third floor of the main deck´s building, with large square portholes on three sides and a panorama view of the surrounding Sea. Out there, white foam erupted on the tops of the dark blue-green salty waves that swiftly ran northwards, coming way far from the waters of Madeira, the Canary Islands, and still further away.

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Mrs. Williamson did not attend the dinner. But all the others were there. All the other eleven persons sat down at the dinner table, all treated to by one single purser, the very competent, Mr. Rufus Conway, who was from Lancashire.

Dr. Holtz – who had a degree in Economics and thus was the most educated person on board, as far as academic merits befell, started the conversation since an important phone call had delayed the Captain. Stork stepped out on the side of the dining room, on a small runway on the side of the ship, where the rest of the dinner party members could watch him talking and making gestures.

"So delightful an assembly, a congregation of extinguished people I will have the luxury of being dining with during the next thirty or forty days until we will be arriving at Surabaya."

"Shouldn´t we be waiting for the Captain?" Linda commented, also with a small gesture biding the purser, who just was about to place some crawfish on her plate, to slow down.

Holtz waved her comment aside. Not only had the man a degree. He was a multimillionaire too and owned c: a 11% of the entire Rattner& Rattner sphere.
“I wouldn´t be surprised if we got acquainted very well and will have an extraordinary time all of us!” the banker continued, caressing his trim beard.
“I´ll wait for the captain.”
“He told us to dig in.”, Contour, the author said, who apparently was in a state of hunger.
The captain now returned in a state of commotion and anger.
“It was the Office. I had just forgotten to bring another man with us. I am sorry to trouble you with this information. It does not matter, because he will catch up with us in Cherbourg. Nothing to worry about.”, he said, panting, while he sank in his chair that had curved, rounded supports for both elbows and was made of Scottish pear tree.
“Aye, but who was that to be, sir?” Sully asked, almost before the captain had finished his sentence.
“The security officer, of course. “ Stork answered, smiling a little, to release the tension around the table,” The man from Secret Service.”
Here Weichsel, who was a slim, tiny fellow with watery blue eyes, blushed. He realized that it could have been his realm of responsibility that in an unfortunate and to him dishonoring way had been thus displayed.
Ruth Stork, who wasn´t much of a talker, hindered further discussion on the subject since she very wisely now opened her mouth, smiled and bowed to everybody, and said:
“Very welcome, all of you!”
This small speech was highly appreciated by the entire dinner party, including Weichsel. Verstegen, the Chief, even enthusiastically clapped his hands at Ruth´s words, hands that always had a small portion of motor oil on them, just by the sleeves of his shirt.

# CHAPTER THREE

“How is the lion?”

WE all ate our dinner in a heated discussion over our exciting journey. Most of us were unfamiliar with Surabaya, and the excitement boarded to ecstasy. We were none of us much taken aback by neither the incident with Mrs. Williamson´s vision nor by the fact, that we until Cherbourg, did not have any man from the MI5, Secret Service, to supervise us. I immediately guessed that he had something of substantial economic value in our cargo that was not openly accounted for and which needed special protection. Still, as a newcomer on this ship, I thought it was not for me to start to question what it was all about openly.
I was delighted to be hired for this trip.

Verstegen, who sat by my side, which I had never met before, asked about my previous experience of the Sea and welcomed me onboard while drinking a pint of Scottish beer in heavy clunks.
“You are from Holland?”
“The Netherlands,” he corrected with a friendly smile and a wink of the eye. The man was utterly sympathetic and unpretentious and seemed to have a heart of gold. He reminded me of my best friend in grammar school, whose father had looked like Mr. Verstegen and drove a taxi and who at that time had been my idol. As a kid I thought that driving a taxi-cab was the ultimate adventure.
Not much of value was said during the dinner, and we afterward sat in the saloon, some of us watching the telly, others just enjoying each other´s company. Dorothy, one of the young animal lovers, approached me and welcomed me as well, and asked me for my interests, aside from ships and the Sea. She said that I looked quite like a gambler like I was good with playing cards.
“I actually don´t ever gamble,” I said, with a certain shyness before the young blond girl,” I mostly read books, and I am pretty much interested in everything, aside from gambling and sports,” I answered in a modest way.
“Do you like animals?” she asked, and I did not know if she was serious. But when I was going to ask her if she was, Mrs. Williamson all of a sudden appeared eerily in the doorway to the dining room, where the rest of us just minutes ago had our dinner. She probably had had some in solitude:
“I still cannot see anything on my left side.”
All of us went stark silent.
“Well,” Captain Stork said - since he was the Captain: ”We certainly hope that your eye-sight will return until tomorrer.”
He did not sound exactly irritated, but there was a certain bite in his tone yet.

“It is not that,” Tonya said, while she kind of turned her head in a wider circle, ”I have investigated the symptoms, and, although I have not yet conferred with my husband,” – she nodded at Nicholas,” I think I could have been infected by the lioness.”
“BY THE LIONESS??” the Captain, Dorothy, the banker, and the Chief shouted out. Nicholas stood staring like he had seen a ghost.
“Are you sure?” he stuttered.
“Are you sure?”
Of course, Tonya was not sure, I thought to myself, while I with rather for me common naiveté tried to conclude, what many of the people, that had their job to look after the animals for sure already knew very well:
“So we have a sick lioness on board?” I asked.
“Yes, the lion is sick,” Nicholas said, ”but lions cannot infect people.”
“They can. It is rare. But they CAN!” Tonya said, mustering her man up and down with her - gaze. Maybe she implied that she had looked up things in some books or on the internet, which was available on the ship due to the ingenuity of Mr. Bartlett, the communications officer, who, for some odd reason, was not invited to the Captain’s table.
“Now, I need clarity here. I will not let anybody leave this room until we have sorted this out!” the Captain said in a loud voice, shoving everybody what a clear-cut skipper he was. Agile and ready to deal with whatever adversity that came before him.
“Is there, or is there NOT a possibility for lions to infect people with eye disease?” the Captain asked all of us, but of course, the two doctors in special, who seemed to have some marital trouble between them.
This question was hanging in the air. Soon many of us realized that the answer would not be easily got. But for now, the able Captain insisted, and like a man entrusted with omniscience, he turned right away to the one person, who according to him had at least part of the answer:
“How is the lion?”
The question was directed straight to Dorothy.

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# CHAPTER FOUR

## LIKE A TRAFFIC LIGHT

“It is true,” Dorothy said, who seemed to be a clever, apt, and educated young girl,” that she came on board in Amsterdam a fortnight ago. She was in good shape, and she was part of the late count Hillman Estate. Carson Hillman, the rolling in riches businessman who owned a castle outside Amsterdam, and his wife, Lorna-May, just died. In their multimillion dollar will, some of the….”

She was interrupted by the pretentious banker, who seemed furious over the two young, uneducated girls, who got more attention than he did.

“Do we have to listen to this? Just kick the lion overboard and let us get on to Surabaya! For God´s sake!!” the tongue of the banker ran wild.

The Captain blinked coldly and in a contrastingly calm and steady voice he addressed the whole assembly:

“Proceed, please! I do want to listen to the whole story, in just the way Dorothy is presenting it.”

Dorothy, without any change in her tone, took up again:

“Sir! Some of the money, left by the Hillmans, was marked to ensure that their much loved Betty – the lion – was brought back to her native Java.”
“Amazing story!” the author exclaimed, as he seemed to think it was almost a saga.
The author had, like all authors, a strange look at life.
To the author, events are real enough, but more real are events, if they are dramatized and described in a narrative. They are then transformed and transmogrified into the Universal and brought before the eyes of Humanity, to the realm of understanding and reflection, and aesthetic beauty and inserted in human history and civilization. Drama is the form that the human mind most easily understands. Drama is the thrill of mind. All events ought to be part of the marvel of being put in the right place in a book. But most of all marvelous events, and fanciful things, like this about the Carson Hillman Estate.
“The lion was safely on board when there was an accident, though.” Dorothy said. “Five large boxes, containing four mongooses, from the Flanders, were taken in, and the personnel just dropped one of those boxes in proximity to the lion's cage. One mongoose got out, and out of fright it happened to attack the lion, which had started to roar at the whole scene. The mongoose bit Betty in her nose. And a few days after this, Betty became sick and lost part of her vision. Mrs. Williamson - who was on-board - decided when we were about to leave Amsterdam, on our way to Le Havre, that the mongooses should be kept under surveillance.”
“So?” said the Captain. “And why wasn´t the lion and the mongooses unloaded for care and examination in London? Or Le Havre?”
“Mr. Williamson thought that it would go away by itself.”, Dorothy said and rubbed her own nose as if she was going to sneeze or something.
“But the mongooses then?” the Captain insisted.
“They are still with us, in their boxes.”, Dorothy answered. “It is nothing wrong with them. They are thriving as usual. I see to them every day.”
“But why weren´t they taken off the ship? They are likely the source of the strange disease.”
“I don´t know. They are well, anyway, all four of them, sir. Two males and two females.”
“I bet they are.”, Stork said, relatively calmly.
There was a pause.
“I understand.” He then retook now slightly more pensive.
Stork looked down, his left hand again on his chin, as was his habit, and said, now to Tonya´s husband: ”Mr. Williamson, can you please tell us a little more about the exact health of the lion?”

The tall Nicholas was sitting straight-backed on the edge of a stool near to the led monitor.
“Of course, Captain …” he said, but without real conviction, ” … she lost her vision, alright, but I didn´t think it was more than a temporary effect of the mongoose attack. Nothing serious was my initial response to it. I actually didn´t even look it up in my books. I now can see that this was maybe rather unwise.”
“It probably was.”, Mrs. Williamson filled in, winking her eyes in all directions, now and then covering up one eye or the other with a piece of cloth.
“Don´t you have a diagnosis or something on this condition that this Betty is suffering from?” the Captain asked, whose determination and strength appeared to me of a grandeur that I hitherto never met by any superior officer in any fleet with which I had served. Not to talk about the professors at Colombia, where I studied.
The Williamsons looked at each other. They shook their heads.
“No,” Tonya finally said, ”you see, the eye condition seemed so strange and varying. One day she could see things on one eye, the other on the other, and one day she couldn´t see a thing. But, at the time, we thought that we would soon figure it all out.”
“What about your own condition. How exactly is your own eye condition?”
“Well, sir. Not so well.”
Tonya, who was extraordinarily pale now, trembled and looked at her tall husband, a man who had as long a body as his head was small and suddenly started to cry.
“You won't believe me!!” she shouted. “You will not believe me!”
The Captain, as well as Nicholas, rushed to her, and they both put their arms around her to try to solace her.
“Now come on, come on!” the Captain said, comforting her, ”Nothing bad is going to happen to you. Just tell us how your eyes are! Please!”
“You won´t believe me. You´ll think I am mad!” she cried again, all red in her face.
I stepped into the discussion and humbly asked if she would like a glass of whisky or something.
“Yes, whisky.” she whispered and looked at me, in her curious way, with a little smile, which did not look much of a smile.
After Sully had brought her a glass of bourbon, she said:
“You know, I would not believe it if it was another person. It varies. It is like a stop sign. A couple of minutes, I can see clearly on the left side, and then, all of a sudden, I can only see on the right. And it just goes on and on and on….”
She cried and drank. Sully had to fill up her glass once more. Water poured down on her collar.
“You didn´t tell me that.” Nicholas groaned reproachfully. “If you had…”

“No, I didn´t.”
The Captain was, like all of us, bewildered.
“This is serious. This might cost millions and millions of pounds! If not trillions.”, he concluded.
“This is a disaster.”, he added.
We all stared at him.
“You are jumping to conclusions, aren´t you?” both the banker and Alfonso Ruiz, the 2nd officer, who almost had been all silent all day, said. Alfonso was not someone who generally participated in discussion, without being asked to do so.
Then Linda, the other animal carer, lifted her head, which she had held low, and partly covered up with her hands, when she spoke.
“It is the same with me. JUST LIKE A TRAFFIC LIGHT. LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT, NOTHING, LEFT, RIGHT, NOTHING. And it goes on and on and on….”

We almost all of us all rose from our chairs and retreated from each other in a panic. We were all amid a new strange pandemic. Out on the Sea, and with a condition, which threatened us all, in a way, that nobody ever heard of! This was maybe way worse than the obnoxious Covid19.
The Captain thought that the name “Betty” was silly, and he said he thought the lion should just be called “The Lion”, because we only had one on our ship. Later he apologized and told everybody that they of course could use whatever name they pleased. But he added that his late mother´s name was …“Betty”.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## I know things about hysteria…

The Captain, who had remained seated, told us to stay in place.
“Think also of the lion.”, he said, ”She must be mad now.”
Everybody gasped.
“The Lion? Why are you talking about THE LION?” the banker shouted, who had everybody against him, anyway.

“Because I think we are luckier, who can talk to each other about our condition. The lion cannot.”, the Captain said.
“The lion,” Dorothy said, who had rushed to Linda, her colleague, and now was comforting her by holding her arm around her and pressing the side of her own body towards her side. ” … the lion, like all lions, actually never can talk about anything. She is used to having her miseries by herself.”
We all looked at Dorothy in admiration. I silently thought that animal carers, vegans, and the like are often underestimated and looked upon as whimsy and a little strung up. It seemed to me that this was certainly not the case with Dorothy.
The Captain nodded and said:
“You are right. It was maybe just foolish of me. I was just trying to look upon our situation from all angles.”
We all, kind of, sobered up a tiny bit after the shock. When somebody in a state of crisis admits he is wrong in such a solemn way, it is a comfort. Maybe, I thought, the Captain just was such a wise man that he had foreseen even this??
Even the banker calmed down. He asked Linda:
“Please, young lady, how long has this been going on?”
Linda then - expelling a glance - told us that it had been since yesterday. She hadn´t told anybody because she thought it was all hysterical like anybody would think.
“I know things about hysteria.”, she chuckled, “because my mother died from hysteria.”
( She is not the type that can lie about anything at all, I silently thought.)
“You can´t die from hysteria.” Paul Contour retorted. He had read all Dostoyevsky’s works, and hence thought he knew absolutely everything that was worth knowing about hysteria.
Linda just stared at him or tried to.
“We must make a plan.” The Captain said. “Let me think for a minute. Let us all think the whole situation over for a minute.”
A minute passed when we all sat down on chairs and edges of fauteuils.
Ruth Stork was not participating in the discussion. Seated by her husband’s side, she felt satisfied with the words and actions of her able husband and thought her best place was in complete silence. She was an eager listener; that was obvious, though. Her eyes were following every speaker without missing a single whisper or even attempted mood.
Daniel Stork said:

“Go tell the rest of the crew to come here, except the man at the steering wheel!” and he summoned up 2nd Officer Ruiz and me. “Then fetch me a paper and a pen, and a steady table,” ( He looked at Harmenz, the clever and authentic engineer. )
” … and go get more chairs, deck stools, or whatever!” “And you,” he pointed twice using his right index finger on Nicholas and Tonya: ”Start studying all about cat diseases at once at your computers. I guess the connection to the internet is okay, as it always is on this ship. You should be able to confer with all your colleagues all over the globe. Then soon, we will have the Health Department on a line too. Derek, you call up the Health Minister and you, Weichsel, call up the Rattner boys. I will personally call the Prime Minister. If I can get through. I don’t know…”
I rushed aft along the bulwarks to get hold of the rest of the crew. I was anxious to know whether any of these might experience some sort of “traffic light syndrome.”
I was terrified, and at the same time, feeling an intense calm, probably due to the extraordinary capability shown by our Captain.
I thought of Herman Melville and Captain Ahab and Moby Dick, the giant whale for some curious reason. I am not an aesthetic, but I am well read. And then my mind went to the lion, who down in its cage, deep down inside this vessel, next to the remains of the mongoose boxes, was fighting her “traffic lights,” all alone, in the way that, as Dorothy so wisely had pointed, lions always do, like any other animal, without a true descriptive language like ours. And my mind then went on to the microbes and to the viruses that we have learned so much about in recent years.
The crew was in a complete array. They were bewildered, like the rest of us. While we headed up to the Captain´s large saloon, I could not refrain from asking them if they happened to have trouble with their eyesight. Some looked at me, and others kept their silence.
Most of these men had not been born yesterday, and they were, none of them, of the spoilt type.
The large vessel continued on its route through the water, heading south on her long journey, which in many ways seemed curiously endangered.

# CHAPTER SIX

# In search for the soul of the lion

5th of November. Of course, it is, of course, the case that all cats are highly special, both in manner and appearance, especially seen in relation to other animals. There is something extraordinary about huge cats. Even small and medium-sized cats have the cat's mystique, dignity, and ability to hypnotize with the giant feline, indeed the largest of them all – id est: the lion, the King of the Savannah. The lion has these legendary qualities, emphasized and enhanced degrees, so one should only judge them by just that.

And perhaps it is the case that when an animal within a species becomes the largest and most dominant, especially if it is a predator, it also happens that this animal, to some extent, becomes different, especially in mind.

When a species' properties become highly developed and pointed, then something mysterious happens with these properties. Then you can, e.g., imagine that the lion is different from other cats, and evolution - this peculiarity that underlies so many strange things - in them has seen completely new lands to explore, in the soul of this animal, s soul that so often in all of us has to stand on its own due of its non-material content, which it is assumed to own.

For every human being on earth - it must be interjected here -, as the very least knows about lions, lions usually mean a lot. Man is in several ways to some extent defined in relation to this animal, or to its equivalent in the continent one now happens to grow up. And it is indisputable, moreover, that every man on earth, for the most part, could, albeit under a certain compulsion, give a little lecture in an hour or a quarter of an hour about this animal, about the lion, or the panther. But let us concentrate on the lion.

Man has evolved - probably randomly - to be able to talk about lions for a long time on request. Not with them. Lions are in this way abnormal.

People, in general, have a great longing for someone who can save them. People often deny that they want someone to salvage them. And among the most dangerous in the world is this fear and this desire to have a saviour. Because you can quickly find yourself standing under someone's command, someone you first thought would just help. But that de facto overturned. It is dangerous to put one's destiny in the hands of another. People are usually heroic. Heroically, they seek help. Until they finally

realize that there is no one, they typically find themselves courageous in it. But everyone is afraid.
Among those who man believes can help them escape loneliness, confusion, and anguish of death, some groups of objects crystallize particularly clearly: Other people, gods, animals, alien worlds, philosophers, musicians, mystics, tantric teachers, and those who resurrect the dead from the frozen state. Other people cannot help you, and you know that yourself. You know that you are like them, and what you can do is not enjoy and be comforted by the friendship and love of others. This can be helpful enough.

But one does not usually talk about love as a help. There are no gods, so they are not much to talk about. On the other hand, Mystics exist, and they are those who, to live a good life, exploit the uneducated masses, invent a lot of hocus-pocus, and teach it to the masses. Usually, it all ends with the mystery being forgotten. Tantra teachers are good because they encourage enjoyment. But in the long run, you get tired of seeking pleasure. Philosophers examine the world and language, but not even they help against death, disease, and destruction. Musicians can comfort a lot with their seductive, muted tunes. Perhaps music is the most reliable of all worldly escapes.
There is actually nothing wrong with music, as long as you do not try to vanish by it. Some people try to resurrect the dead. Those who actually resurrect the dead still have an uphill climb.

Few of us stop believing in these people, the Tantra teachers, the philosophers, the priests, the fiddlers, and drummers. However, while the bodies rot still in their boxes, in the ice, we are still turning our eyes to ever more distant stars, formulating more complicated solutions to the human dilemma. And you then might turn again to a lion, for comfort, and for the mystic union, with an Other. Some philosophers think that the more radical (?) an Other is, the more holy (?) you might be able to think you are as a human being. We are, anyway, never too proud not to give things another try. It is so much at stake. The human condition probably isn´t worse than the condition of any other living creature. Still, we generally believe that it is much WORSE to be aware, in the WAY that we are, which probably is a very SPECIFIC way of being aware of reality. For instance, not that other animals should not have a diligent way of being conscious, but we often think we ourselves are subjected to a particular nastiness because of the way we are presented to death by the eloquence of our language and consciousness. The despair created is something we try to escape. Through the company of animals, through listening to and the playing of music, and

through the reading and writing science fiction, as well as science itself, you might try to escape. And the search for the soul of the lion is not very unlike the search for life on Mars! Few people do realize that it might be the same thing! The soul of the lion might actually be identical to life on Mars.
Nobody on-board Punjab, however, had thoughts like these on the day they discovered that a lion in the cargo might have a contagious disease.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## The lonely yacht

18th of November. Captain Stork now was sitting at a table by the far end of his moderately lit saloon, in which one had arranged furniture so that he could be seen by a little more than twenty people at the same time.
Apart from the midshipman, who was at the steering wheel, everyone was present in the saloon.
The activity had during the break been enormous. Phone calls had been made crisscross over the globe, and now, at a pace of a notice quite like one concerning a presidential murder of some indispensable nation, the whole world became aware, through all the different time zones about the possibility of a new pandemic. This possible pandemic furthermore was of a kind that was previously to its character brand new. It seemed to affect the nervous system, central parts of the brain; it spread very fast, maybe through the air, and was – in short – a threat to our civilization. Furthermore, it was a threat to our existence because it seemed to be that it not only affected humans but mammals; maybe all vertebrates may be extinguished because the eyesight could be severely impaired with all higher creatures. Perhaps it was so with smaller and simpler organisms too. We did not know.
The whole world was about to become paralyzed.
Captain Stork had promised the BBC an interview for them to broadcast worldwide just in twenty minutes. He had requested time to deliver the terrible news to his

nearest and to those who were his immediate responsibility, the crew av m/s Punjab of London.
They summoned scientists to the tv-studios, and in the laboratories worldwide, threw lions – as well as mongooses - under scalpels to be subjected to rigorous autopsies. The life of humankind, as we knew it, was severely at stake.
The men and women of the health department, the prime ministers' cabinet, and the news media had to make a rapid choice: either to downplay, to question the whole thing, to postpone the alarm or to believe what they heard, and to take into account with seriousness what was presented by the banker, by Weichsel and, first and foremost, Captain Stork, a respected captain of a proud giant cargo ship, risking their lives on the Atlantic.
I tried – like everyone on Punjab – to keep my head cool and my thought clear. The situation was all new - and a scary one.
Then the Captain got a message on his phone from the midshipman. There was a sailing boat in disarray just half a mile ahead, sending emergency rockets. He did not know what to do. Stork lifted his finger and called upon me to go to the steering quarters and take command. The sailor must not, under any circumstances, be brought aboard. He also sent away Sully and Ruiz to take care of the situation. He told them to give any assistance that was needed to the poor sailor but to bring him aboard. Stork told Sully and Ruiz to avoid immediate contact with anybody who was not already onboard Punjab.
Neither Sully, Ruiz, nor I were needed when he brought the ghastly information to the petty officers, the boatswain, and the rest.
---
The Captain now gave the order to raise the pestilence flag.
The hearts of all of us sank.
---
I noticed that Ruth Stork got out on the main deck. She probably thought of herself as momentarily dispensable too, and maybe she just wanted to breathe some fresh air and not indulge in trying to rescue the sailor. But she soon accompanied me to the prow of the ship, from which Ruiz, myself, and Ruth tried to get a better view of the situation. Ruiz brought a large binocular, and we saw, all of us, that the sailing boat had lost its only mast and was helplessly torn about by the waves. The wind was about ten min/sec, so the waves were not posing a direct threat to the little yacht. But the mast was still hanging by all the falls and stays, and this prevented it from gliding on top of the waves.

“What shall we do?” I said to release the other two from the obligation of having to utter these words.
“We must call upon another ship.”, Ruiz answered, letting the binocular drop to his cheek.
“Couldn´t we give him a lifeboat of ours?” Ruth proposed, looking at us.
“It would crush him if he even has time to reach for it.”, I said promptly but with a tremble.
“But that rig could tear him down, for sure….” Ruiz said with true worry.
We were much too far away from shore for any helicopter to reach this guy in time.
It appeared as if that the wind was rising.
Sully was at the bridge in the steering hut with the midshipman by the name of Witherspoon, and as confused as we were, I guess. They had slowed our vessel down to a minimum, and now I watched the hideous yellow flag intermittently be hoisted up by a line into the main mast of our proud ship.
If the wind raised, it would be able to catch the fabric of the flag and make the black and yellow chess-like pattern clearly visible to each and every one.
“We have sickness onboard. Do not come near!”
“Do you think we will end up like that?”, Ruth asked and I felt her little hand grabbing the sleeve of my blue coat.
I felt a warmth by the touch but cold by the words.
She was obviously thinking a few steps ahead and was imagining the Punjab as a ghost ship on the seven seas, not welcomed anywhere, and us ending up like a bunch of beggars, not very unlike the poor fellow that we now were observing fighting for his life.
The ship was probably be going to end up as a wreck by a desert island outside of a distant coast, I thought.
I sharpened up, took one free hand of mine, placed it over hers, and assured her that we were living in a time when science and technique had answers to all our questions and troubles.
Only after a minute or two, a larger wave caught the little boat, turned it over, and sank it, just as if it had been a small box of matches in a bathtub. The man swam around for some minutes more, and then he also disappeared. I took up my phone and filmed his last moments. There was nothing else I could do. We never could see the name of the boat, and I have never got to know who the sailor was.
But I have got the film on my phone still.
We then returned, in a sad mood, the three of us from the stern, and Officer Sully alone, from the commanding bridge, where midshipman Witherspoon raised the

speed of our vessel a little so that it would stay on its course, which still was SSW, toward Cherbourg.
Before I got into the large saloon again, which looked more like a press center now than a ship´s cozy salon, I let my gaze sweep across the horizon. The Sea was wide as ever, the clouds light and grey, and in a shimmer, in the west, I could see fractions of the red sun setting.
Ruth had not approached me any further, and I was happy about that. She bore her curly head low, and her lips were pressed together in a way that I thought was very rare for her.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## The Captain talking to the prime minister

The evening this very day, which was a Thursday, proceeded with a lot of miscellaneous speedy actions, instigated by the Captain, of whom everyone not only on Punjab but also worldwide got a very positive impression, to say the least.
One of the first tasks, after having talked to the Prime Minister, was to perform a visit, accompanied by Ruiz, Mr. and Mrs. Williamson, Dorothy and Wilma, and two sailors, to the lion´s den.
Paul Contour insisted on coming along but was denied to attend.
( He retreated to his cabin.)
On recommendation from Nicholas, we all had taken blue latex gloves on. He obviously realized that he had to try to muster some courage and willingness to act like some medical expert. His wife was relatively impaired by her sickness and was more and more inclined to keep silent and to avoid any company. She had a lot of contacts, through her phone, though, with different colleagues, veterinarians, and such, and they discussed the severity of the situation. Any explanation or remedy was not yet in sight regarding the illness itself, which had not yet even a name.
On our way to the lion, I asked Dorothy, who walked with Wilma, if she was afraid. This was probably a bold question because she appreciated it and smiled at me:
“Of course! But I am, first of all, taken aback by the prospect of the whole world being forced to go through a Covid19 thing all over again. Will there be revolutions? Will there be wars? How poor will we all become? And civilization?”

Wilma did not comment upon that, but she blinked and tended to be constantly moving her head the way Mrs. Williamson also did, from one side to another, like a cardinal or something, walking up the aisle, bowing for other cardinals up to the altar, to the left, to the right, to the left, to the right.
It was extraordinary and probably had nothing to do with correcting the vision loss, but I assume that it was psychological. The disease seemed to me absolutely terrible. Everybody noticed their behavior, and Sully even called it “The lion search.”
The words “lion” and “mongoose” were on everyone´s lips and were pronounced thousands of times by us on that miserable day.
The strangest thing of all this was, perhaps, though, that panic did not break loose. I do not, to this day, understand why it did not.
---
When we got down in the lion's den, the sailor on guard - Pete Burton - told us that the lioness had slept for hours and that she seemed to think that sleep was the best way to handle the situation. I had had the same idea. Early on, I had been on the brink of telling both Tonya and Wilma to go to rest. Maybe one might “sleep it all over”?
We were standing outside the cage for twenty minutes. Wilma, already infected, went in and up to the lion, who was entirely tame and brought up in captivity, even in her homeland, Java.
She cuddled with the lioness, which barely responded, but, after a minute or two, just gently with her large right paw, pushed the girl aside, as to tell her: ” So so, I just want to sleep, honey!”
The Captain asked Wilma if she could swear that the lion´s trouble was her eye condition, and Wilma said she couldn't swear on that, but that the lion had acted strangely and not been able to move lately the way she moved when she first came to Punjab, three weeks ago in Amsterdam.
“Now, may we have a look at the mongooses?” Stork demanded.
Pete Burton pointed a few yards away, in a darker spot, behind some steel barrels, where four boxes were placed in a row, next to a box with a swine in it.
The four mongooses were all looking at Stork through the small cage doors, which were covered with wire-netting. They looked happy and immensely cute with their small black eyes, like black peas, eagerly and incuriosity in action.
There was nothing wrong with them; even Stork could see that they were perfectly sound. Little noises came from them, like chirps, twitter, and growls. Ruiz shook his head and wondered why people couldn´t let wild animals remain in their habitats and let them be.

At least, I silently thought, the mongoose had not had their ears marked with ugly yellow plastic things.
I always thought there should be a law against marking up animals by their ears. I thought invisible ink would do.
---
We thus left the ship's inner compartments and went up again to return to the command center.
We met up with Sully, who had been temporarily in charge, and we entered the room by the back stairs. The room was packed with people, and there was talk and rumble of chairs, phone signals, and a lot of commotion.
The TV set was on, where the American president, John Ellis, dressed in a black suit and wearing a red tie, spoke to the people about the probable danger of a mongoose/lion disease.
“Anything new?” the Captain asked rather stupidly while he took off his rubber gloves and threw them in the paper basket. We all took off our gloves and disposed of them.
“Well, Sir, tons of it.”, Sully said.
Contour, Nicholas Williamson and Harmenz formed a line. They stood with papers and phones full of memos. They most of all had scribbled information with their Bic pens that they had been provided with by Bartlett, who had set up all the technical facilities in the saloon. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing. All the laptops were in ship shape and up and roaming and working at top speed. Ruth participated in trying to get information about matters, while Tonya and Nicholas had collected a pile of papers on a table, where a small piece of paperboard on the wall behind signaled:

”Information
on big cats
and mongooses”.

I thought this was madness, but I had not myself any better idea. We had no scientist on board.
“Well, shoot!” Stork said while he sat down by the main table by the wall farthest away from the windows.
“Cherbourg will not permit us to enter their harbor, sir. But still worse: A sailor is sick.”

And Sully, in uttering these words, pointed at a chair by the door to the steward's hallway, where a young sailor sat, a little bent, clad in green military trousers and a green woolen sweater, with brown leather enforcements on elbows and shoulders. He held his left hand over his eyes while the right one lay in his lap. His posture expressed full capitulation.
Captain Stork immediately rose and went up to the man:
“Hello, you; what is the matter?”
“I am sick. Sir.”, the man answered, without letting his hand off his face. ”I am having flashings in my eyes.”
“I see. What is your name? When did that start?”
“Just some hours ago, sir. Oscar Petersen, sir.”
“Mmm. Okay, we will let Mr. Williamson, the doctor, look at it.”
“He already has. He said it was exactly the same as his wife and the other girl had, sir.”
“You mustn´t lose the grip, son!” the Captain then mumbled while he put his hand on the shoulder of the young man, who was maybe 19 or 20 years of age and had corn-colored, blond hair.
“It is so awful…” Oscar groaned.
I, who had not been assigned any particular task since the horrible accident with the sailing boat in distress, now sat down by the sailor´s side.
“Have you been occupied with the mongooses?” I asked.
“No, sir,” he said, lifting his hand from his eyes a little.
“But with the lion. I was in the cage with Dorothy and Wilma, and we played with the lion. It is a real gentle lion….”
Now there was a roar in the room.
There was going to be a talk by the British Minister of Health broadcasted by the BBC.
Mrs. Tobler, as was the name of the minister, approached the microphone, standing against a red background, loaded with papers, from which she picked one, and started to read aloud, in the flashing and ticking of the cameras and all in the London studio:
“Dear friends, ladies, and gentlemen! I am going to speak to you on a serious matter out on the Sea, on behalf of the government.”
At the same time, I heard by my side the Captain talking to the prime minister:” Yes.” Stork said, ”A sailor, sick with the lion´s disease. Yes, male. Yes, a young boy. Oscar. Same condition. A very strange eye condition.”
I again listened to Mrs. Tobler.

# CHAPTER NINE

## Science must have its say

29th of November. “As you all perhaps know, we seem to have an international crisis and may be heading for another epidemic if we are not acting fast and resolute. There is just now a ship in the Atlantic, off the coast of France heading southwards, a British cargo vessel with a crew of 15, and they have a strange, hitherto unknown disease onboard.

I will tell you what we know of this disease and then tell you what we intend to do about the ship and the condition.

WE don´t know more about the disease than that it affects the eyes. It might affect other organs too, and we do not know that yet. But the eyes we know because it causes the patient to be one-sided blind, on one side for 10 seconds, then blind on the other side for 10 seconds, and then back again, indefinitely.

It is a dreadful disease. There is no cure as what we still know of, that is.

It is a new disease, terrible, and, as I just learned: it affects both men and women alike. I can tell you too that if you have this disease, if you then shut your eyes and have a night mask over your eyes, you will notice nothing abnormal or extraordinary at all and feel no pain, and life is just normal. Hell breaks loose, so to speak, the moment when you open your eyes and are trying to do live your life. Then the traffic light-like muddle or jumble starts. And you are in distress and topsy-turvy and can barely execute anything. Not the simplest tasks. At least not for a more extended period than five minutes at a time, according to Dr. Nicholas Williamson, who is onboard the m/s Punjab, which is the name of the wretched ship. The poor ship. There is nothing wrong with the boat. Though.

Now to what the Prime Minister and I have for a plan, following advice from the UNHCR and the US President and the UN general secretary, to act pro-actively, I will tell you now.

Since we know nothing and do not want to subject anyone to the possibility of harm, we have decided that no one leaves the ship and no one enters upon the ship until

further notice. The ship will stay on the Sea and not go to any harbor whatsoever. And then we will make further decisions when we know more.
It will be challenging to research without personnel in place to investigate the contagion source, which is a lion and a mongoose. Still, we cannot take the risk of having material taken from the ship to shore yet.
We thus just will see to that the ship stays where it is.
We will drop down food to it and material for scientific research to the people there. One doctor there, Mr. Williamson, who is not infected, will do the research in place, followed up by the entire international community of science. That was all. Any questions?"
Mrs. Tobler looked up from her paper, stretched her neck, and wet her lips with her tongue.
"I am Mr. Hadley from United Press." a voice was heard, and a picture of Mr. Hadley was shown in the right bottom corner of the monitor in the saloon of the Punjab, where we all sat or stood watching the broadcast. It was also shown on more than a billion other monitors all over the world.
"These animals are the sources?"
"Yes," Mrs. Tobler answered." The mongoose bit the lion, and the lion got sick, and the lion, just by playing with the crew, infected some of the staff and passengers as well."
---
I now left my place by the TV and returned to the Captain who was standing by his small desk, listening to Mrs. Tobler. I walked up to him and whispered in his ear.
"If you have any plan, just let me know!"
The Captain looked at me in surprise.
"Plan? What plan, … plans?"
"We might throw all the animals overboard, and I think it would be the best thing for us, sir," I said, in a very sudden way as it seemed.
---
"Are you crazy, Diggerson? Science must have its say.", the Captain said. But I saw that he took my suggestion earnestly all the same.
"I just thought…." I said with artificial nonchalance and then moved away and looked for Ruth.
The Captain looked after me.
"Hey!" he shouted for me and called me back.
"Let´s go to my quarters for a minute."

I obeyed, and soon we were both in the Captain's little personal study, where there only were a desk and a bookshelf and two comfortable chairs.
“Sit down!” he said, and we sat down.
“Explain to me the background behind your idea about the drowning of the mongooses and the lion!”
“And the pigs, and the horses.”, I said.
“Well?” the captain looked challengingly straight at me.
“I planned to be concentrating on us humans. If we have no animals onboard, we might just be concentrating on - and studying - our illnesses, be concentrating on testing drugs on us, and then, when each of us carries no infection, we may be let loose and go ashore, and it is all over.”
“Continue, please.”
“If we don’t drown the animals, we must endure endless procedure in letting people in, making them go to the animals, and have millions of testes, and we may never be sure of who us infected by this or that animal, and we might never get off the bloody ship!”
“You are a clever man.”, the Captain said. And I realized that he meant it.
“But,” he added, looking at his hands,” we cannot do it. We will be put in prison, and we will be a disgrace to humanity if we do!”
“I know.”
“But we might ASK them, or at least someone, like the prime minister, personally, if we might do it.”
“No prime minister will ever go for that.”
“No, I don´t think so either. But then we are free to proceed the democratic way.”
“What way?” the captain asked.
“We should have a referendum on board.”, I said,” those who want to get rid of all animals raise their hands.”
Stork looked at me in a kind of horror.
We then sat silently looking at each other until someone knocked on the door.
Then Sully´s voice said:
“There are warships all around us, sir, and lots of them. From several nations, sir.”

# CHAPTER TEN

## We were not free anymore. The offering.

"Our admirals courted war like
a mistress. When the news
came to Essex before Cadiz
that the attack had been
decided, he threw
his hat in the sea."
- R. L. Stevenson,
Virginibus
Puerisque, p. 190.

Within a minute, the Captain and I were on deck, gasping at the sight.
All around the Punjab, on a respectable distance, c:a 2two miles, a complete ring of patrol boats, destroyers, cruisers, hangar ships, submarines in a visible position, rafts, and police boats with sirens, were at anchor, formed a solid fence.
We were not free anymore. Punjab was a prison in the midst of the Atlantic ( or at the east side ) and what used to be the nearly endless realm of possibility, besung by bards and poets since Homer, now more seemed more like a scene from a Hollywood shooting of "The Capture of Battleship Bismarck."

Just as Sully mentioned, we saw that there were not just ships from Britain or the USA, but Russian ships, Chinese ships, Danish ships, and even ships from Virgin Island and Taiwan.
Soon both the Captain, Sully, and I realized that there was no accurate information to be got from standing and staring on this view, 360*, resulting in us leaving for the saloon, to be updated again, in this dram, which had priority One, all over the world.
While we slanted up the stairs from the deck, I saw how the Captain occupied himself with heavy analysis. Maybe part of it had to do with what I had brought forth to him during our conversation á Deux.
The Captain is always alone. The rule of the Sea is that he is alone, and that he is alone in his decision. In the end nobody but him decides on the ship.

---

When we entered the saloon, the doctors were busy. There was going to be a significant health conference. Bartlett came up to the Captain and asked permission to use the exercise room to set up the doctors there for the meeting not to be disturbed up here.

Stork granted permission to this and told Bartlett that he was delighted with all his work and that he may decide everything about the conferences and where they were going to be held.

“I do like your speed and craftsmanship.”, the Captain said, and Bartlett looked delighted. The controversy, or what it was, seemed to be all forgotten.

I decided to help Bartlett move some gear to the exercise room, that was situated five floors below from where we were now, and he was thankful for that, although there were plenty of sailors, who had not much to do, other and to see to that our saloon conversions and our planning went smooth. The ship now lay by the anchor, a decision made by the Captain through a simple sign up to Witherspoon at the bridge. Ruiz had executed the order while he was close to the machinery anyway. Bartlett, I, and the two doctors went to organize our part of the conference while the Captain once more decided to visit the lion. This time he only took Dorothy with him, and Dorothy later told me what happened.

Wilma was in bed in the girl´s quarter, and she had an eye-mask on, a black one, which Dorothy had made for her, by using a toy Pirate flag with a skull on it she had brought with her, to use when they should pass the equator and have extra festivities.

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The British Government had an offer that was going to be presented to the people on-board the Punjab, in the evening on the following day.

The Captain, however, asked me to come to visit him on the night before, and it turned out that he had been oriented by the Prime minister, Hubert Ellis, regarding the

The international community had its mind made up.

We were – in short – offered an entire island. The island in question was Nightingale Island, close to Tristan da Cunha, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Fear of darkness

"He suggested
in a few words, that one of
us should die, in order to
save the lives of the
others."
( The adventures of
Arthur Gordon Pym,
Edgar Allen Poe )

Dan Stork and Dorothy climbed down the steap narrow ladders down into the lower hold, and none of them uttered a word. When they had reached the bottom floor of the cargo shaft, the Captain looked around and eyed the surroundings carefully. There were a multitude of boxes, light green steel pillars, and sacks of barley and grain because it was the animal department of the hull. He halted for a while, his hand on a sack of barleycorn.

He bade Dorothy sit down on a small sack of corn and placed himself on a small bench close to a small table which seemed to serve as an accountant or tally desk or something. There was a whole lot to think of to keep animals alive during long journeys at Sea.

"Now, Dorothy," the Captain said:

"There are a lot of clever people on this ship today. And fools too.

You are a clever girl.

I am in a peculiar situation. You know that. In the next few hours, I will have to make a series of difficult decisions that may affect us all, us on the ship, but many other people all around as well. This we do not know. The situation is dire because there is so much we do not know. And a decision about what to do cannot wait. If we wait, we will have to face the consequences.

I am the Captain on this ship, and I am thus the sole decision-maker here. That is the way ships are. It is according to ancient custom, and it is according to the law, too, both maritime and general law.

I have to handle a pandemic. If I were to leave the responsibility for the pandemic to other instances, for example, to the British government, to the scientific community, to United Nations, to a conference set up by some strong nations, the whole thing will take not only weeks, but months, and maybe years.
And during this process, we, you and me and thirteen more, will be stuck here out on the Sea, with warships all around. They will undoubtedly send us plenty with food and all the things we might want on countless rafts and driverless vehicles. They will do what they can to please us. But we will be prisoners of the Punjab, maybe for the rest of our lives. And it is for me to decide, whether or not we will stand all this, or try to do something else, that maybe is not in the interest of democracy or science, but that is in our own interest, and that would not either be of any specific direct harm to anybody else.
The thoughts I present to you, my dear Dorothy, were presented to me only an hour ago, by my excellent officer, my 3rd officer, Samuel, that you know. He namely suggested that we should immediately – hear! – DROWN ALL the animals, and simply then see to our own health by just waiting until we are either dead or free of contagion.
We might never be free of the virus, and we might always be contagious, but it is not likely. The most likely is, which I think Samuel was implying, that we will all be healthy in a couple of months, and then if all the animals are dead, we w might then just walk from the ship as free citizens.
Should we wait for all the animals to be free of any virus, even the mongooses and all swine, papagallos, and rabbits, it will indeed take a much longer time. It would be, of course, much more interesting to the scientists if they got the opportunity to examine all animals on board. But we would deny them this pleasure, to be able to go on with our own lives.
Now, if you please, what is your opinion on this, being a clever girl, and with all your life ahead of you?"
Dorothy had expected nothing of this sort, and she went all red in her face.
She understood, but it was all much too much for her.
"I do understand that you are telling me all this, sir, because you have to think it over by yourself, but it is easier to get a picture of the situation if you present it aloud with an audience. And the audience happens to be me…" she said in her clear voice.
"You are partly right.", the Captain said, fingering on a pitchfork.
"But my plan also actually included an answer from you, with your opinion on the matter. But please, take a couple of minutes!"
"A couple of minutes??" Dorothy shouted. "It is not decent at all."

“The situation isn´t very decent either”, the Captain retorted with a wry smile.
Dorothy did not answer. With a small beckoning of a finger, old Stork bade her follow him to the lion.

The lioness, guarded by the usual young sailor, was deep asleep. Daniel Stork and Dorothy Carlson stood by the small fence that separated the lion from a small passage that ran through a multitude of boxes, where swine, horses, birds and mongooses, and other animals lived in sort of temporary harmony and prisonry.
“She sleeps.”, the Captain said.
“Yes, Captain. She does.” Dorothy said.
And this simple conversation felt like strawberries and milk to both of them. What an exquisite happiness life was offering, at times! And what horrors there were to be dealt with, when times were harsh!
There is perhaps no sweeter conversation in the whole world than that of two caring persons agreeing that a third living being seems to be having a good sleep.
Dorothy suddenly brightened up.
“But Captain!” she said, ”it is not such an awful thing to sleep. What if we all decided to sleep it through?. We might just sleep and sleep and sleep for months here. Read some books and sleep while we just wait for the scientists to solve it all?”
The Captain looked at her, nodded, and fell into consideration.
The lion suddenly moved its paws and hind legs and then lifted its eyelids and looked at the two intruders, who stood but two yards away from her giant head.
“If it were not for the warships, we might look for a deserted island, to go ashore and live there like in a paradise…”, the Captain said, who apparently, apart from sound logic, also was blessed with a superb imagination - and playfulness too.
“I am just confused,” Dorothy said.
“I don´t like killing animals either.”, Stork said, looking the lion in the eye.
It seemed as the lion had no trouble with its eyes. But how were you to know? Maybe the lion just acted as if she had a clear view of Daniel, while she, in reality, only saw half of him. You had to run a test to be able to know for sure, Stork fancied.
Dorothy looked down on her left hand, where she bore a small ring. A camaraderie ring.
“I miss all the little things already.”
Stork looked at her and saw the tears that ran down her cheeks.
This was a sorrowful day, he thought. But he had to make some decisions all the same. He shut his eyes and thought that he could not expect poor Dorothy, who was

almost a child, to give him advice. It was, the whole thing was, indecent. He was a beast, a coward. He did not know what to do.
His hands trembled a little when he said:
“Let´s go back!”
And they did, without further ado.

---

1st of December. Every severe eye condition also carries with it, inevitably, the fear of the dark. Even if many people are leading a good life, although they are blind, darkness is feared.
I lay on my bed that night, reflecting upon our situation. Through my small porthole, I could see the moon and the stars in heaven above.
On the Punjab, both darkness and exclusion were feared. It was primarily the very exclusion BY FEAR that blindness normally carries with it. But now also, partly on top of risking blindness, or semi-blindness, all the people on the Punjab were subject to exclusion by FEAR because of the contagion risk. There actually was NO PERSON nor ANY ANIMAL that actually had gone totally blind or died from the disease itself. Those who had died had died of fear for the disease or from madness caused by the disease.
Among the greatest threats to us was the REACTION to the disease.
There indeed was a DARKNESS presented by the countless warships that were surrounding and circling round the m/s Punjab.
One might say that FEAR OF DARKNESS WAS A MORE SEVERE TYPE OF DARKNESS. IT WAS - and is – A DARKNESS OF THE SOUL. Many a physically blind person might testify that blindness is terrible, but that FEAR is blindness still more severe.
WE on the Punjab were very few, not more than 30 souls, we might be doomed to live the rest of our lives together, not being able to meet up with any other person IRL ever, just because of people´s fear. That too seemed a “dark future.” We were not that impressed by each other. I could easily say that I would be extremely tired of being forced to live with these people longer than a month. If one amalgamated our two “conditions,” they presented a possible future existence that would be of such a severe kind that it was likely that we all on the ship would not survive this very long.
We would soon present each other with an ACTUAL reality ( onboard the Punjab ) that caused madness, sickness, and murder, just like our present reality already had claimed victims.

Therefore it was time that we stopped acting as if we just were handling proof results and a Queen's offer and started planning for pure survival, realizing that our main enemies might be ourselves, this group of 30 people on the Punjab.
This I thought. But I did not communicate my thoughts. I simply did not know what to do. When I went to bed that evening, I nearly thought it would be better to run around on a Volcano island than to go mad on the Punjab?
I did not sleep much that night. But I decided that I would on the next day I would tell the Captain that I feared we simply would end up murdering each other. Perhaps none of us would survive this nightmare. If we weren´t killing each other, sure enough, the patrol boats and the airplanes would do the job. We would soon – definitely long before summer – all be DEAD. I did not tell this to the Captain why I don´t know.
But in the morning, when I woke up, I thought that now I knew why we all were not particularly scared of the virus and the disease. Unconsciously we were all aware that the disease was not the real threat. We were ourselves the real threat.
We were aware of the DARKNESS OF THE HEART. This was the Nyctophobia of Mind.
The darkness of the heart was all those people who, out of PURE FEAR, wanted to exclude us from humanity. They, on their patrol boats and destroyers, through their offers consisting of volcano islands, wanted to exclude us from real life. They rather wanted us all dead. They would not take the risk. The risk for humanity was far too large, they thought. The rational thing was, like in many a paradoxical problem posed by weirdoes on the Internet, to sacrifice a few for the sake of the majority.
But, there was only one catch. They would sacrifice us ON THE BASIS OF AN ASSUMPTION. They assumed that everybody would be sick, semi-blind, and eventually blind. Or even die. That´s why they thought we should rather die on our ship. And this ship would probably be sunk by a B-52.
What could the Captain do?
It seemed to me that he had thought it over and that he did a not very radical thing. He just sailed on. Whether this was a good decision or not, I didn´t know. What was the alternative?

# CHAPTER TWELVE

# The most wonderful swimming pool

"I have seen those symptoms
before," said Holmes, throwing
his cigarette into the fire.
"Oscillation upon the pavement
always means an affaire de coeur."

A.Conan Doyle, Tales of Sherlock Holmes (ed. 1915)

*2nd of December*. “Stunning weather!”, I grunted and turned a page in a book about Paul Gauguin.
We were now outside of Lagos, Nigeria. It was 32° Celsius.
The extra-large black and yellow, checkered, quarantine flag, presented to Punjab in a small drop package from a Swedish Cessna, with a clothes company logo in the bottom left corner, was swaying from the foremast.
Three months now had passed, and we had got permission from the UN Security Council and from the USA, China and Russia, to proceed a little southwards.
We sailed on, were released, but escorted by six war, the scientific investigation of our vessels was decided higher up in the center of the scientific community in Switzerland.
“Amazeballs,” Dorothy answered, stretching out in a deck-chair, marked Coca-Cola, presented to us by a helicopter.
---

Witherspoon stood by the wheel. He looked happy, and I just asked him if he could read the chart, although it was an improvised chart. No problem, he said.
Then Midas Sully appeared in the doorway, smiling. He carried a giant camera with a massive objective and was about to take a picture of us all. Nicholas Williamson came by with the latest report from the animal compartment. The doctor had educated six sailors to become animal observers and now had them perform a series of tests on the animals each morning when the sailors, by ingenious experiments with food, tried to establish with a certain degree of certainty the state of their eye vision.
The trend seemed not very positive, though. Neither the lion, the swine, nor several of the horses - which most of them also had gotten the disease - were able to present

any improvement of health. The horses seemed to suffer the most. They grew thin, mostly the full-bloods, and two of them had deceased in the last week.
Sully asked him about today's tests. Blood tests also had been performed and analyzed with apparatuses that were brought to them by helicopter and left on deck with wires and all.
The virus was strange.

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Everyone on the Punjab tried to get used to the new reality.
On initiative from Harmenz, a fishing contest started up with money that he had made Rattner&Rattner donate. Fishing gear was produced by the carpenter, and a set of rather complex rules was constructed by the banker, Derek Schultz, who was a statistician. He soon got tired of overseeing the rules, and the contest then entirely was run by Johansson, the carpenter himself.
There were nine contenders, and it was the number of fish that were hauled in an on-board that counted, not the size of them. Swordfish and tuna and bigger fish like that were not allowed because of the risk to the fisherman or –woman him- or herself.
The prizemoney was 5000 Pounds. The contest was set to last for two days. I myself participated, Contour and Mr. Williamson, as well as Dorothy and one sailor, who had a bad knee and could not make himself useful in any other way.
Dorothy was the most eager of us, and she won the contest. She then bought from the cook a lot of champagne and bakery, and we finally had a party.
It was a divertimento, anyway. We were going to be stuck here on the Sea for a long period of time.
---
Joe Johansson, the carpenter, also had been allowed to throw the ancient airplane – which looked like a Spitfire - and the building blocks for the new skyscraper in Manila overboard, to create the most wonderful swimming pool on-board our boat, and in it now Ruth had a wonderful swim together with Bartlett, who nearly was an acrobat in water. The half-blind sailor, Oscar Petersen, was among those who turned out to be coping the best with the sickness. He was standing on the trampoline and shouted with vivid gestures:
“Look out! Here we go!” and he jumps into the water with a big splash. Ruth Stork and Ralph Bartlett laughed and dived.
The Captain had a sore throat and was in bed, resting with a book.

Some yards away from Dorothy and me, two men played chess. It was Bernard Schoener, the cook, and Paul Contour, the author. They held a silent conversation on what seemed to be important matters while they played the party, rather fast and casual. However, they seemed to enjoy each other's company, serious and ambitious men as they both were and had also taken up a hobby of their own, to build a small car, a copy - a replica - of a Maserati sports car in full scale. Maybe they were talking about the details of this project with each other. They were all over the ship hunting for materials for this car, and using all sorts of leftover metals and crap, that Johansson had not been able to dispose of by throwing it overboard yet. We were almost laughing at them.
They had a garage for the car close to the quarter where the horses were, those who were left, in the lowest apartment of cargo hole No.1.

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“How is Wilma today?” I asked Dorothy.
“As terrible as ever! She is just angry, insults, and poses hard questions all the time. When is this over? When can I go home? And stuff like that. Pure nastiness. Real shit!” Dorothy said, and she danged her hand in the side of her wooden chair, so the book she was reading fell out of her hand and down on the blue deck.
It was an old classic she was reading by Carson McCullers about reflections in someone´s eye.
My own book about Gauguin was just something I caught from a bookshelf in the Captain´s library without thinking of anything. It turned out Gauguin made his own paint and was very economical with it, only painting as thick as one millimeter.
The Captain had been not only sick in his throat but very depressed lately, and he had told me that he felt like a complete failure for not having been able to arrange better for the people on Punjab. I had, in turn, said that I thought the contrary, that he had done the best thing. My idea of drowning the animals was silly, I told him.
Sometimes I thought of the Captain as a giant, and in a dream, he was like Gulliver, in Swift´s Gulliver´s travels. When I woke up, I thought of Jonathan Swift, who went mad and ended up in an asylum.
Wilma now, all of a sudden, appeared on deck from the main deckbuilding, the door on the port side. She was wearing a red dress, and carried her black mask, arranged askew in such a manner that it only covered her left eye. Any of the sick had discovered that it was mentally easier to handle the flip-flap vision by covering up

one eye. It still was a flip-flap vision, but you did not become so extraordinary dizzy and tired in your brain if you had one eye at rest.
She started singing in a loud voice:
"A long and winding road; Lala-lala-laaaaa…"
Dorothy, who had lifted up her book, now threw the book at once and in such a way and direction that it seemed as if she was aiming for Wilma's head.
"You are just AWFUL!" she screamed, and Bartlett then had to catch the girls by their arms before they tore one another to pieces.
I sighed and looked at Ruth, who came up to the surface, looked at the girl, and dived to the bottom of the pool again. When she reappeared and had gotten up, sitting on the poolside, she was a feast for the eye, so thrilled with her soft ebony skin, gleaming in the sunlight of the tropical paysage.
Derek Holtz, the banker, oversaw the spectacle from a safe distance, seated on the upper balcony, just below the bridge of Punjab, where Sully was in command. On the sideboard, he had his Scotch and his small notebook. Today he was in a much better mood than he used to be, which was not much to brag about. Generally, he kept a solemn distance, checking on his iPhone his fortune on all the bourses of the world, using probability calculus, derived from the works of John Maynard Keynes. The great economist, the saviour of the World Economy during Franklin Roosevelt, had during his entire life spent the first halves of the days of the week laying put in bed, buying and selling stocks, using his mathematical skills, which were displayed in his doctoral thesis. This book by Keynes, On probability, now lay by the half-empty glass of Scotch on the sideboard close to Derek´s chair.
.
He had lost a fortune during this period of waiting for the solution to the lion´s dilemma. But he was not prone to give in. His eyes rested on Dorothy, then on Paul Contour, who was looking for help and then … on me. When he saw my blue eyes, his own dark greyish ones narrowed, and his upper lip curled in dismay. Derek Schultz did not like me for five cents.
I took off my green shirt and jumped in the pool without further ado.
I did not intend to let a banker ruin my day. I did personally not care a straw for how much or how little money I had on the bank. I was more interested in the present and in trying to help the Captain out in this dreadful grip of pandemic chaos. I was hired by Rattner&Rattner, as a 3rd officer, and I simply intended to do my job. My job was to serve the Captain.

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Ruth and Bartlett…

*3rd of December*. The number of persons who had contracted Lion´s disease on the Punjab had risen to five. This was less than expected though, since it now was a whole week since Mrs. Williamson had revealed her sickness to us on that horrible ominous day.

The sick ones were Tonya Williamson, Wilma, Oscar Petersen, Alfonso Ruiz, and one boy serving under Harmenz in the machine room, by the name of Martin Hollingsworth.

For both Alfonso and Hollingsworth, the situation was not good at all. They both lay in bed, and both had been so severely impacted that they were almost delirious. This was kept a secret, though, to most of us by the Williamsons, who still was in charge of the hospital department in Punjab.

Even the persons that were not sick with the traffic light disease, or the lion´s disease, or what we called it ( which was many names, some of which I will not mention here ) soon were in a bad state.

The perspective of being a captive on the Sea, on a ship, for an unforeseeable future, was not something that promoted a good night´s sleep.

I looked up the Captain – who was visited by many of us, always questioning him for advice in the most peculiar matters.

“I do find it very hard to get a full night´s sleep.”, I said on this day, “I know that this is a relatively small matter. I just wish there was something I could do about it, other

than eating those pills that I got from Nicholas and that almost every man and woman on-board takes every night. I am sick of those pills; They take away my dreams. And, in my opinion, what takes away dreams, robs you also, as a consequence of your life."
I was smiling while giving this speech since it had grown a habit between the captain and me to be rallying and joking even about serious matters.
Stork appreciated my visit to his cabin since he knew that I did expect nothing else from him than he being himself.
Our relation had rapidly become one of the most important relations in my life and was maybe the best relationship I have ever had with another grown man.

"Sleep is important.", Stork said while dressed in his blue uniform, as always, walking up and down a small green carpet in his private saloon.
"I will tell you something about sleep and insomnia and sleeplessness that you do not know. I don´t know how I invented my method, but I think it is entirely my own, and I have thought that if I ever quit this job of being a Captain, I would start a sleep clinic and make a fortune because I think the method is so good. I also have thought I could write a book about this method or sell the idea and make a fortune. Anyway, I will tell you and teach you this infallible method that will bring you to sleep anytime within five minutes!"
"Suppose I will sell the method then? After I woke up, that is." I asked him.
"I take the risk. Do like this!
Lie down.
Shut your eyes.
See to that it is dark.
In this darkness, fix your eyes, behind your eyelids on an imaginary spot, right in front of you, in the absolute middle of the field of vision, behind closed eyelids.
Then with a movement of your eyes, DRAW an imaginary line to the left from the central point—just a short line. Then draw a line to the right from the central point.
You now have two imaginary lines from the central point—one to the left and one to the right.
Now, draw a line up from the point. Then one down.
Then draw a line FROM the line towards an imaginary horizon way back, just a short line. It is the direction that matters. Then draw a line that runs towards you. Just a short line again. You now have six lines: forming, some to say, some dimensions.
THEN, you should try to draw the FINAL line. Try to draw a line that neither runs to the left, to the right, up or down, away or towards you, from the central point!

In realizing that this is impossible, but while your eye is prepared to wander away on this line, you will feel numbness or dizziness and just go to sleep. You cannot fail. Try it!"
I thanked him, and later in the evening, I did what the Captain said I should do, and I fell asleep immediately. It turned out - if not before, so now - that Captain Stork was not an ordinary man.

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The general advice from the medical community and from Johns Hopkins, people specialized on the disease, about which was very little known, was for everyone to try to keep their distance. It was quite like the advice that was given during the Covid19 period. But on Punjab, we seemed to think that we were all in it together, and only Derek Schultz seemed to try to follow the scientist's orders. The rest of us consequently hugged and kissed as usual. So to say.
I sat by Ruiz´s side, trying to comfort him and reading his favorite books to him. He lay on his back with a scarf folded over his eyes.
"Shit.", he said. "I don´t know what I would have done if it weren't for Charles Dickens. I would have jumped into the Sea."
I continued reading Martin Chuzzlewitz to him.
He also liked to listen to Verdi, crazy as he was about opera. He could talk at length about Maria Callas, and he seemed to know everything about her and about her love affairs and relentless quest for fame and glory and decency.

---

The Captain also called for me. He had finally recovered from his sore throat and sat in his armchair with a smile on his face.
"I guess there are lots of people that are having it worse than at least some of us. One should not act like a spoilt child. I have my beautiful wife with me."
Ruth was, of course, down by the pool, but what the Captain said was true.
The President of the United States also had given him, in a digital ceremony that was broadcasted all over the globe, the Freedom Medal. I thought this was hasty.
We had a game of chess, and he laughed.
"Soon, the scientists will have found a remedy. Then Wilma and Tonya will transform into the loveliest of creatures, Both of them.", Stork said and told me I was check mate. And I was.

---

In the evening, I sat with Dorothy on the forecastle deck, beneath the fore mast, watching the stars. In the pool, Ruth and Bartlett were swimming in circles while the

moon was mirrored in the deep blue water that was shone upon with two giant searchlights.
Ruth laughed.
Dorothy looked out in the black night. At the horizon, the long line of military vessels was seen, with all their small tiny lights, blinking. I looked at Dorothy.
Her profile was the most marvellous thing in the world.
---
Later I went to the Captain's quarter again, though, and I found him in a quite philosophical mood. He bade me stay for some time while he rearranged some stuff in his two rooms. I noticed that he had two portraits of his beautiful wife standing on his writing desk, one showing her face, one her whole figure when she was photographed after a swim on a shore on Bermuda.
We then sat down for a long drink, and Stork said when he had thanked the steward, who had brought the seltzer water, that he was happy to be a captain, although it was a lonely job.
“I often thought of certain leaders as great men. I very often think of Winston Churchill. Nowadays, I am almost always thinking of Churchill, a man of crisis. And he thought he was an astonishing fellow.
But the more I think of such things – you know I am earnest with you. In fact, you are the man I can be totally earnest with since you always are earnest with me – like in the suggestion to drown all the animals.
Yers, so I think of important men – and women. And I have come to a kind of conclusion.”
“So?” I said, comfortably seated, lent backward in an awkward pose, because the chair did not exactly fit me, because it was to ground. I dusted off my jacket a little too, where some hay and barley had stuck on my three golden ribbons on my sleeve, marking my rank as the 3rd officer.
“Yes, you know, there are people who think that there are interesting people in the world, who crave biographies and such. I mean, I really hate the idea that there are certain people that are looked upon as more interesting than others.
According to my humble opinion, this is not at all true. Those folks that I am thus distancing myself spiritually and in opinion from are those who think that, for instance, the aforementioned Mr. Churchill is more INTERESTING than my old aunt Alberta of Hawkesbury, no schools, no husband, no children and could haply read or write.
Why should Mr. Churchill – eh, Sir Winston, I mean – be more INTERESTING than Alberta Johnson?

You are thinking, of course, that I am delirious or that I am pulling your leg? Don't you?"
"No, of course not.", I answered. "You are always serious, and I respect you too much to think you just are ranting, sir."
"Thank you. You see, it is not sir Winston himself that is so interesting, but the circumstances, which happened to be historical, that make us think that it is more worth reading a book on him than a book, a non-existing, but anyway – on my blessed aunt.
There are no "great men" or "great women." I am perfectly sure that this is a misunderstanding. There are people of talent. And the strangest thing with people of talent is that they are just people to who Mother Nature has lent a talent. Or, more accurately: they are in service of pure talent. Talent is always pure, by the way. Nothing is purer than talent. And in fact, this service really is making them all rather odd people. Because a man or woman with talent tends to be EXTREMELY BORING PEOPLE, in general terms, you cannot find a more boring conversations partner than a musician, or a painter, or an opera singer. Their minds have, through all the years of cultivation of their spirits, become so narrow, to the brink of RIGOR. Their talents almost sucked the life out of them. If there are people that tend to be worthy of LESS INTEREST from the general public, artists, musicians, and authors are among those. They are pure REMAINS of what is left when talent has been consuming them. They are those who have the most devastating service for mankind. To be the reflectors of our inner yearning for something that outshines time and stays when death has taken us all."
"But sir …..", I objected, quite taken aback by the pure force of his words, as I also felt I was, by the very character of his rhetoric, force … obliged to do. I have always sensed – myself – that life itself is a rhetorical masterpiece, but sometimes human rhetoric can outshine even Mother Nature. This is the strange thing with rhetoric.
"What I am getting at is, and I will jump to this part, since I have noticed your impatience and that you are not in agreeance with me at all … well, what I am getting at is this:
We are all humans, and there is not such a thing as a complicated person. I know that some books, some novels, for instance, are sold and advertised as bringing for the complexness of a manifold human soul.
No such things are true. There are no such beings as "complex people" or people with several agendas, or people with a deep structure, or vast depths. This is a pure myth, and like all myths produced by those in power, for them to stay in power. Myths never just appear. They are always created.

My aunt Alberta is just as complex and with exactly the same "depth" as – for instance – our sir Winston, only that she is different and lived under different circumstances than Churchill.
They are both excellent species of the human race. Period. None are worthy of more attention than the other. The life of Churchill just is of more INTEREST to us, because he was a big chief in an important war. This war is of interest. These decisions are of interest. Not Churchill. Not for a minute.
Churchill did not even understand music. He thought it was a pleasant noise. The most pleasant noise among ordinary noises, he thought."
I raised my finger:
"I understand your point, sir. But what about you being a captain. Isn´t this, you being a captain, something that MAKES YOU more interesting? Perhaps the position has transmogrified you into a person that IS more complicated than the rest of us?"
"I have said it before. You ARE clever. You are very clever. You and Dorothy are the cleverest people I have met during my whole time on earth.", he smiled and looked as if he had been given a sack of gold.
"Don´t…"
Stork interrupted me:
"I will answer, I will answer"
Now, all of a sudden, there was a commotion on deck. We heard a crash, like that of broken glass. We both rushed out of the cabin and out on the balcony outside of the captain's quarters, a balcony that oversaw the main deck, with the pool and everything.
We found out that it was Wilma, who had thrown a whole crystal bowl with moist strawberries right in the face of Schultz, the banker, who just by accident had passed her, on his way to the door from the main deck to the dining room. The baker now stood in his white tropical suit, donated to him by the ICC, which was all littered with red sauce, trembling with rage.
"I will see you dead.", he said to Wilma, who just laughed in her shrill voice and disappeared to her own quarters.
Life on the ship had been arranged so that everyone on-board had two whole rooms to themselves, with their saloon and small library and television set, laptop and all.
The Captain decided to check on the other passengers on deck, of which many had reacted to the conflict with dismay and almost horror.
"Let us not be negatively affected by this!" the Captain said, addressing all of us. "Wilma is sick. We all have to take care of her the best we can."
The Captain sometimes could be moralistic.

I did not on this day get any explicit answer to my question about human complexity and captainship.
Maybe Stork was not serious.

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## Science arriving

*4th of December*. In the international press, the subject was raised, that it was a hysterical reaction regarding what took place on the Punjab.
In THE EVENING STANDARD, the leading article had the headline:
IT IS JUST AN EYE CONDITION!
WHY THIS PANIC?

I could see what they meant. But it would still be troublesome for the world if each and everyone got the disease. It would be hard to run a newspaper deck and to sail a ship, not to mention to build ships.
In fact – IF YOU WERE A CYNIC - you might say that the worst thing with this disease, if it grew to a pandemic, was just the fact THAT NOBODY DIED from it. If just each and every human being was deprived of normal eyesight, were impaired, then the world would be a paradise no more! And we would all end up in poverty and misery.
---
There was a telephone call to the Captain, by noon on the next day from WHO, where a high representative asked him if he should allow a specialist in virus disease to come on-board. It was a very famous scientist, Doctor Ruben Leopold, from MIT.

He was a volunteer. Nobody had in any way forced this man to ask permission to visit us.
The Secretary-General, who was an Icelander by the name of Hafstein Eskilsson, asked the Captain for permission to send this man on-board and his research assistant, a Miss Cumberstreet too.
“Okay, if they volunteer, they volunteer,” Stork said,” but they will have no authority here. I am the one who makes all decisions here.”
“You are the one who makes all decisions there.”, the Secretary-General echoed in his funny dialect, who sounded just like his face was wrong.
“Yes.”
---
Ruben and Liza came by helicopter on a Wednesday.
They were heavily saluted by the small ship band, which consisted of three of the sailors handling two trumpets and a tuba.
Everyone knows that marching bands are pathetic. But the pathetic is the large horn, in which humanity blows its jolly and sad tunes so that it can rejoice freely and breathe more lightly when pressed by heavy emotions. How silly a band, it still fulfils its mission, completes its function, and nobody ever gets real mad at marching bands, even if they are not much highly regarded in terms of artistic value. In fact: the worse they sound, the better!
Both the crew and the passengers on m/s Punjab were scrutinizing the newcomers from top to toe:
Ruben Leopold looked like every short, Jewish, bald medical doctor did and seemed a very friendly guy, blinking behind steel spectacles, always close to a laugh, while Liza Cumberstreet looked more like the young, tall wife of Humphrey Bogart and flirted a little with each and every one of us. She was so sure of herself and charming and forthcoming that, when she asked for a cabin of her own, everyone offered her their own.
She had giant eyes, green ones, and they looked as if they absorbed absolutely everything.
They started to work immediately, dressed in green plastic suits, and took blood samples in order to repeat what the Williamsons already had undertaken, but now in a much more professional way, as it seemed
They brought with them several heavy apparatuses, which were put up in a separate room close to the kitchen area.
The Captain was in a hurry, though. Summoned again by messages from the UN and the British Health Department, he was now told to participate in a conference with

several ministers. After a conversation by video link that lasted for hours, it was clear that we, all the men of women on the Punjab, had been offered by the British State an entire island where we could live if we wanted to.
The Captain told everybody to come to a meeting at noon in the dining room, where chairs had been ordered into rows, and a podium set up by the carpenter and an assistant.
The meeting began with the captain telling us about the offer to embark on an island. He said he knew the name of the island himself but that he wanted us to reflect on the general subject, the offer in its general structure.
The banker was the first to have his say:
"We are being offered to create for ourselves a hefty prison."
An applause of a significant magnitude was heard. Almost everyone agreed with the banker.
"I want those of you who are hit by the disease to bring your chairs and to come up and sit here next to me on the podium," Stork then said.
There was a lot of commotion when everyone obeyed, and those of the sick who were able to orient themselves moved first, while the others, like Wilma and Petersen who had chosen to wear eyepatches, were led to their chairs, which some of us brought on the podium.
"It is a matter of justice to first and foremost see to those who have been hit the hardest," the Captain said.
"Please, will you have your say now, after you heard the view of Mr. Schultz?"
"Dr. Schultz.", the banker corrected from his place down in the aisle.
"Dr. Schultz," the Captain corrected himself.
"Well," Tonya Williamson said, wiping her eyes that were red, " I am – at least right now - of the opinion that it would be nice to go ashore."
Geronimo Weichsel, the pale-faced clerk from Rattner & Rattner was worried sick. The circumstances took on him, and he barely ever said a word. I saw on him that he wanted to say something, but he did not. This repeated itself during the whole journey.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## Monkey business

9th of December. Among all the different animals under the deck, the Punjab also brought, somewhat like on the arch of Noah, four monkeys – Gibbon type – in a cage. During a walking tour, which the Captain without exception took every day, to the animal´s quarters, Stork pointed at the four staring primates, with their expressionless faces, and said to Dorothy, who was his steady company on these occasions, which always took place in the morning by 10.00 am:

"These are I think quite like humans, Dorothy. I´d like them to be placed on deck during the daytime! They have a bad time, being here down in a hold all day."

Thus the monkeys were brought up in their wooden cage and placed so that they could see the horizon.

Everybody on board thought that this was a very humane gesture. A matter of justice. For this act of humanity, Stork was highly admired by the bander, Derek, who soon developed a new habit and an interest in the animals.

As if there really was not much of interest going on on-board otherwise, Schultz brought one of the bolstered fauteuils on deck and placed it a couple of meters from the cage with the monkeys, and he could sit for hours, studying them while he sipped on a long drink.

The monkeys detested him.

When Derek noticed the innate hate towards him, which the monkeys so clearly expressed by throwing things in his direction and aiming at him when they peed, he was delighted and thought that this was the highest proof of intelligence that anyone could ask for.

What maybe was more surprising was that the hairy primates quickly became interested in the weather and in the movements of the ship. They could watch the movements of the yellow flag on the foremast, feel the vibrations from the motor, and seem ted to be calculating the speed of the vessel by comparing the distance of the vessel to clouds and to the naval fleet that on two miles (nm ) distance always were shadowing us, on our way to Indonesia.

The monkeys seemed, Derek claimed, to know that once they arrived at Surabaya, they would have at least a much better chance of getting a better life and maybe even have the opportunity of reaching freedom. Freedom to them was living in a city among garbage cans and tourists. What they saw as a jungle were the fruits of capitalist tourism. They thus had developed a taste for people who carried bags with them and were occupied, holding strange gleamy apparatuses in their hands. And,

master thieves as they were, from the birth, they now, in their cage, practiced violently by all day trying to steal things from each other.
Sometimes they laughed at this. Then they also might exert a huge scream, and thus there was nothing on the deck of Punjab that had so much entertainment value as the monkeys.
For a reason, they had no names. Dorothy, who was in charge of them, had always thought it was a stupid thing to call animals by European names and deemed that ignorant and rude.
Thus each and every ape just were summoned for as "Apee!"
I often approached the cage with a banana or two. The monkeys then showed their interest by sitting completely still until the moment when they thought I was close enough for some of them to be able to grab a banana.
I held the bananas a couple of feet apart so that they would not all of them reach for the same banana.
Now, I then let the bananas dance in front of the cage. The faces of the monkeys grew tense.
"That is called torture," Derek said.
"I am playing with them," I said.
"They do not think it is funny."
"They know that I think it is funny, and they know that when they get hold of the banana, they are having fun, while I am the one who´s just standing there. That is a game. That is the rules of the play." I said.
/ I secretly thought of Eric Berne´s book Games people play, where Berne displays the idea of people, by playing which each other, give one another "strokes" on the back, like when one is caressing a cat…./
"You are acting as if you are mean. Why play with evil?" Derek said.
"I think the monkeys do understand. What they do not understand," I told Derek, in a scientific tone," is when people are treating them friendly when they are locked up in a cage."
"I am," I added," kind of making the cage understandable to them. They cannot have their freedom, and they cannot have the bananas easily either. I am supporting their dream of one day being able to get out. They don´t hate me. They ate you, who they just think is enjoying their hell. I am training them, and by teasing them, I am talking in a language that they understand. They do not understand somebody who is just sitting and watching them."

The monkeys seemed very healthy, anyway - no eye conditions or anything. Both Thelma and Louise, Tom and Jerry, seemed perfectly okay, as far as I could judge, I silently thought.
Derek watched me.
“You ARE mean.” The stockbroker eventually said and took out a pulp fiction book, betitled Murder in Polish blood, from his side pocket and looked for a mark showing where he latest left off.
“I bet,” he added,” that when you grow old, you will evolve into a full-fledged moralist.”
Dorothy stood at the railing, smiling at this nonsense conversation that offered a break in our all too severe handling of all the troubles connected to the situation with the epidemic on our ship.
She smiled at me and said:
“The monkeys are playing with you.”
Alfonso Ruiz, who had come by, clad in his white suit, said:
“The whole world is playing with us.”
Geronimo Weichsel, slim in a white suit and with a faint smile, stood in the background and filmed with his iPhone.
I blinked at him. Weichsel never seemed to participate in anything at all.
Endless is the play of the world, I thought dimly, as I let the monkeys have the bananas. Two of the apes turned to get hold of the precious fruits when the other two, letting the curtains go down for this very act, were glaring in contempt at the full mouths of the other two.
Thus, all reflection on monkey behavior is incomplete and just an inadequate footnote of vanity and triviality of the spectator. Most reflection is.

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My mother and my sister rang me a couple of times a week. My mother, Elsa, told me she loved me and that they were having just a smack Christmas party this year. Energy prices were soaring, and papa had a bad hip.
Gwendoline had gotten a new job at a news agency and was going to buy a small cottage in Brighton. She also had plans to get a dog.

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# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## “Try me, Samuel!”

“Life for him is a drama, and what
engrosses him is the ingenious unfolding
of the drama. He himself is a spectator,
even when performing an act.”
( Kierkegaard,
The Concept of Irony. P. 300.)

11th of December. An older vessel one morning caught my eye as we slowly continued our journey. This other ship was no schooner but a black general cargo vessel, named, I think: ”Saga,” and it looked like it was built in the 1980ies or something around that. It was very beautiful. Just the way cargo ships used to look like in the olden days.
I wondered where you should draw the line between ugly and beautiful ships. Ours were not a beauty in the conventional meaning of the word, while the Saga most certainly was. I thought it was certainly sailing as if she knew it. She was slow and not even tidy, and she had patches by the side of the anchor hole, and the anchor with small flukes, two tons, also hung a little loose.
Beauty is a strange thing.

“Saga,” I thought. I remembered R.L. Stevenson's claim, that the name of something is not at all insignificant. Sometimes a name could win a battle. In a novel, the title is a hugely important, very small detail.

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Days went by on the Punjab, one after another. The Captain had defied the authorities in London and given strange orders. Sully set a zigzag route down the whole Atlantic coast to pass the entire coast of France, Portugal, and Morocco and go further south. We were not going into the Mediterranean, he said, but we would go by Cape Town. The whole world got stunned by the Captains actions. The Evening Standard even called him “the pirate captain.” At the conference that day, I had told him in the saloon, as always was the case with meetings, that he probably would face difficulties in doing this. We would run out of fuel and food, I said. But Captain Stork just laughed and said he thought I was too clever to presume things like that. We would most certainly be supported by, if not everybody, so by some nations, and they would give us fuel and food because we posed no threat to anybody, as long as we were out at Sea.

Thus we were now outside of Casablanca, heading south, and it was a beautiful morning, at 05.00 am.

I woke up early. The Captain´s Million Dollar Method to get rid of insomnia had worked. I was not entirely delighted because I thought I dreamed very little and like to have a rich dream life, but almost every sleeping method has its disadvantages.

After shaving and dressed in a white uniform, I put my cap on and went out on deck. It was not yet hot, and I silently whistled as I took the usual round from stem to stern to confirm that the ship's state was okay.

The Sea was stunningly blue and was rolling in the soft breeze. Our engines worked silently, and from the bridge, midshipman Abubakar saluted me with a large grin.

We were not alone up from the world of sleep, Abu and me. In the mast, top young Richard Olsen sat with his rifle, as we had been accustomed to lately. Following the Captain´s orders, there always was one man on the look for birds in the mast top, day and night. The Captain had thought it wise not to allow any birds to land on the ship or leave it, for that matter.

Any bird might carry the virus from our ship and ashore, and thus nobody, not a pigeon, or pigeons, in particular, were allowed to even approach the Punjab. They all were shot, point-blank. Now the rumor seemed to have spread, and birds seldom thus came to the ship´s side or followed her stern.

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In a deck-chair on sun-deck near the stem, the Captain´s wife sat reading a novel.

I walked up to her, and since I had completed almost the entire round, I took another chair and asked her if I might join her for a while to enjoy the weather as well as her company.
“Of course, I´d be glad to,” She said and immediately disposed of the book under the chair.
She stretched and smiled. She was clad in a red sports dress and had white strand shoes.
“Lovely.”, I said. I, of course, had my usual thoughts regarding Ruth as I sat down and drew my chair closer to hers. She was nearly always by herself. It seemed as if she had grown tired not only of her husband, Daniel but of the communications officer as well.
Who as she? What was the secret of Ruth Stork? I was determined to find that out.
I at first asked her, since I thought she was well-read if she had by chance read Richard Dana´s Two years before the mast. She had not, she said and glanced at me, implicitly questioning me why she should.
“It is a great book about a boy, sailing as a teenager, during harsh circumstances, and learning everything about life, the hard way….”
“Well, I hope we are not going to spend two years on this ship.”, she said, looking out on the Sea, as a stunningly beautiful albatross approached from the west.
“DO NOT SHOOOOOT!” she cried up at Olsen, who shouted back that he just should scare the bird away.
Since it was so early, he was not keen on launching any real shot. ( He might wake up the rest of the people on-board, who might still be deep asleep.) So he took up bow and arrows and now shot arrow after arrow out towards the bird, who, quite stunned at this peculiar act, seemed almost to scratch its head and then, after a couple of minutes, just left and flew towards Casablanca instead.
I praised the wisdom of Olsen and said to Ruth:
“I think we have a great crew!”
“Yes, indeed - including our Captain.” Ruth smiled and winked her left eye.
“You are yourself an early bird.”, I commented.
Nothing beats sitting in a sun chair on the deck of a large vessel in the morning, by the side of a beautiful black woman in her late twenties, looking out at the flight of an albatross, heading for Casablanca.
I thought I was very happy.
The large black and yellow “QQ” quarantine flag flew in the wind. Olsen climbed down from the mast and left the rifle to Witherspoon, who was next on this turn. Olsen saluted me when passing. I waved back.

I, however, then again glanced at Ruth, who now had reached in order to take up her book again from under the chair. She had unbuttoned a little her white dress, and her shining, smooth skin was gleaming by the first rays of the sun. ----. I will never find out who she is if I don´t ask her about who she thinks she is first, I thought and ventured:
“Excuse me for saying so, but you seem to be an extraordinarily strong person. Are you?”
She – with her stunning beauty – naturally was used to hearing the most awkward picking up phrases and smiled, but only modestly. She probably had had higher thoughts of me and was greatly disappointed:
“Try me, Samuel!”
Everybody on the Punjab just called me Sam. I thought she was really good. I thought that she would now – after this heavy irony - add something about my hands being beautiful. To evade this, I said:
“It was probably you who convinced the Captain to just continue our journey to Surabaya?”
“He cannot be affected that easy.” She said. “God, I am tired of how perfect everybody thinks he is.”, she added, thus contradicting herself in an interesting manner. I guess she was the kind of complicated person that her husband did not think existed.
”He is both clever and an excellent man.” I said. ”But of course, he is not perfect.”
“Why, if nobody is perfect, I don´t have to be either?” she smiled and reached to touch my hand.
As I – by having seen her flirtatious side being so openly displayed so many times already on the ship, I was prepared, and, as if in a hurry, I rose from my position and standing before her, I said:
“I think most of us, like Richard Dana of that book I mentioned, will be different persons from the ones we were when this one started when we arrive at Surabaya.”
“Sure,” Ruth answered, letting her hand – without revealing if she had read Dana or not - glide back in her lap,” most certainly, because we will probably not at all be alive.”
She did not smile, and I did not either but simply said:
“We´ll see about that.”
I was in a rage and ran back to my quarters to calm down. I asked her if she was strong. And she immediately proved that she was. I regretted my stupidity. Why start playing with the Captain´s wife? Why do such a stupid thing? What about Bartlett? Where was he now? Was she tired of him, ultimately? And, did that matter to me?

Ruth´s attraction was of an extraordinary kind. One ordinarily just had nothing to set against here wizardry. You just melted by the sight of her and then were sucked up by her willpower. She was, in short, the kind of woman who inevitably made a fool of every grown man.
It sounds like a cliché from an Elisabeth Boatwright Coker book, but it is not less accurate because of that. The truth is simple. Even Wittgenstein knew that.
I panted, sat down, and looked down on my hands. How silly I was!

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Standing on deck on one of these enormous vessels, looking out at the bulging surface of the enormous Sea often creates a special feeling. The power of the ship is massive, but the Sea outside is a million times stronger. This is the condition upon which this feeling stays. Nothing can change that condition.
I now noticed that the Captain was awake. It was 0700 am, and he had withdrawn the curtains from his ship porthole. It was a rectangular one since this was a modern ship, and since the Captain´s cabin was rather significant, as I ale ready mentioned. I thus strolled towards the door who, from the deck, led to his quarters to recommend myself and ask for news and today´s program. This had become somewhat of a habit, and I. However, I was his 3rd officer, almost felt as if I was his 1st officer since the sinister Sully and the rather childish Ruiz did not quite reach the standard of being competitive enough for the Captain when it came to discussing matters regarding the tactics of meeting the ongoing catastrophic epidemic.
Neither Sully nor Ruiz did show any embarrassment at this situation, though. They were pretty secure in themselves and did not have to look out for who was who´s favourite.
I had – after all – attended Columbia University before getting my nautical education, and they had not.
Another ex-student of Columbia - he claimed he was. People always do. Every writer in New York wants to be the next Cornell Woolrich … - was Paul Contour. I bumped into him when I was on my way to the Captain. Talking about sleeping trouble, he certainly looked as if he had a lot. Under his eyes dwelled heavy brownish sacks of extreme fatigue.
“You understand,” he flustered as he passed me,” that there isn´t a single one of us that knows what is going on.” I didn´t. He looked miserable, and it was a great contrast to the almost jolly young man I first met when I came on board the Punjab.
The Captain was welcoming me with a grunt.
“How are you, Sam?” he shouted though.
“I am fine, sir. What are your adventurous plans for today, sir?” I asked.

“Mm, I think we are just going to continue to keep everyone distraught.”
“You are a great tactic, sir.”
“I am a realist.”, he answered. “I just listened to the news on the radio, by the way.”
It turned out that he had heard experts say that the longer the ship continued its journey, and nothing was changed concerning the epidemic and all the contagious people on board, the more likely it was that contagion would, in some way or another, reach the mainland. It could happen through infected water, they said.
Once a virus is born, it is not easy to erase it from the surface of the Earth. This was the message as well as r the assumption from the scientist. There was, in short, a danger with letting our journey proceed.
“I don´t think fish can get the disease.”, I said, trying to comfort him, but I had honestly no idea.
I realized that the whole world had begun to wish THAT WE DID NOT EXIST. They wanted us to dissolve into molecules.
On our way to the dining room for breakfast, I again tried to come up with a good idea. I used to be good at least bringing some new perspectives. But this time, my mind was blank. We should have breakfast together with Dr. Ruben and Miss Cumberstreet, the Captain said.
This I looked forward to, anyway.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## Herrnhutians and YouTube

15th of December. Four men of the crew were Herrnhutians, i.e., protestant Christians, who had reacted radically to the sickness, the lion´s disease, the … epidemic on-board. To come in closer contact with Christ, they had since several nights arranged midnight masses on deck, when they, I a tent, they had been allowed to erect between Hatch 3 and 4.

The leader of their small congregation, who called himself a Pastor, was a young, heavily bearded man from Connecticut by the name of Rodney Small. The sermon was held in front of a crucifix. They sang for an hour, and strange were their songs. It turned out that they were translations of 18th Century German hymns. The melodies were relatively simple, and the hoarse voices were accompanied by a single small Spanish light yellow flamenco guitar with pearl inlays. If the music itself was negligible, the lyrics were the more imaginative.

I created access for myself to the small tent and sat down on a folding path at the back during two entire midnight masses by referring to security reasons. While they had a slight pause, I took a stroll to inspect the vessel, and I saw the man in the mast with the rifle. I also went down in the holds, and I saw lights on in the lower hold of No.2, and there Paul Contour and Bernard Schoener - who had a bare hairy chest - were working, in the middle of the night, on their Maserati build. The car gleamed red, and the chrome was bright. They just were busy with putting pieces of the engine together.

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The four New England young men – two from the engine crew and two from the deck crew - hollered their Christocentric songs this night, looking tenderly at their crucifix, which stood in the foreground. This was a wooden meter about a meter high, which seemed to have been taken from a country church or something like that. It was heavily painted and overlaid with red. The red color indicated that Christ had been beaten, stabbed, and scratched by knives, thorns, and lances and that his death was not easy. The face testified to immeasurable suffering, and the mouth was wide open and like a round hole.

In short, it was - seen from my standpoint, as a critical humanist and an agnostic - almost horrible.

I knew some about Herrnhutism from my studies at Columbia, which had been not only busy years when I had read almost everything about Western culture and history but a very formative period of my life. I still remembered, of course, a lot of it. Herrnhutism was an extreme in its view of Christ as a victim of all kinds of evil and looked upon as the LAMB scarifying itself for our sins. The whole idea with Herrnhutism was the worship of the heroic of Christ. The theology was in such a way almost horrendous, according to my humble senses, as to – in some Herrnhutians, the most extreme Herrnhutian congregations, at times regard even GOD AS A CRIMINAL, in the sense that the Almighty had subjected his only son to these horrors, that even led to the death of this completely innocent young man of 32.

The four religious boys, in their white shirts, the Pastor, Rodney, with his bright blue eyes, his zeal, and enthusiasm, presented a fright to me. I – like I was forced to by an

inner force, like my Unconscious, or something - clutched my fists when I listened to the songs:
“Christ oh, lovely Christ, my Lover, ye poor Lamb covered in blood. Ye limbs are covered in holy blood……! Let us go to the feast, like innocent Lambs, and marry in heaven!” I then – all of a sudden - felt a small hand on my shoulder.
It was Ruth.
In the middle of the night, she, as well as Dorothy Carson, had ventured to seek entrance to the holy mass.
The ship sailed on under the stars and was somewhere outside of Lagos now.
Ruth leaned forward, and I felt the warmth of her breath towards my left ear when she whispered:
“They are CRAZY.”
Dorothy was standing on my other side, and she also put her hand on my shoulder, the other shoulder, and now she also bent forward, to my other ear, and she whispered:
“Isn´t this so very strange?”
( I thought if this wasn´t too “fear of darkness”.)
In the middle of a song, when I was listening, trying to discern the meaning of the texts while feeling the pressure of the hands of the two women on my shoulders, my small wooden chair, from some inconceivable reason, broke down.
It was a small scream from Dorothy, and the whole sermon stopped.
Rodney came up to me and asked if I was hurt. I had fallen quite severely and hurt my hand on the edge of a small steel gear that was there to spread the tar fabric of the tent, and the index finger of my left hand was bleeding.
Geronimo stood ready with his handkerchief but noticed that it was not very clean.
Dorothy took out a clean handkerchief from one of the breast pockets of her shirt and wrapped it around my hand, but it all went all red by the intense blood flow. We all had to go over to Nick Williamson so that he – in the middle of the night – could mend my finger with a few stitches, under sedation with toxics.
Ruth almost laughed at me.
“Holy Christ!” she said.
Dorothy looked at her with critical scorn. Nick Williamson did not understand the irony since he hadn´t attended the sermon.
“You must not use this hand violently,” he said, and utterly sleepy was he.
I did not speak much since I was worried about my finger. I looked at the women and thanked both of them for escorting me to the doctor. I was grateful for the company of both of them, the cynic on the one hand and the passionate on the other. I then, like

all the rest, protestants as well as non-protestants, went to my quarters to go to sleep. Only the Maserati men continued their work. They seemed inexhaustible.

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An Engineer´s Apprentice, Toby Panetta, had a YouTube channel of his own called Panettonia, where he broadcasted in a live stream from the "Punjab."

Since he, from the start, only was equipped with a few cameras, The London Gazette had contacted him and offered him a contract of collaboration. The London Gazette was the biggest threat, news-wise, to The Evening Standard.

They dropped a package from a helicopter on-board to Mike, containing more camera and microphone technology. Now, a few days into the third week, when the Punjab was outside of Cape Town, Panetta had top technology surveillance of the entire ship on deck and had a live stream going on for a couple of hours a day. He had not the permission by Stork to broadcast more than four hours a day. At a dining room meeting, there was a democratic decision taken by crew and passengers to let Toby give the world a view of life on the unlucky cargo Londoner vessel.

Nobody wanted to be on camera the whole day, though. And Toby had his ordinary work to do, too, in the engine room.

The Panettonia soon had 700 million viewers.

The London Gazette, however, took much pride in distorting the news provided by the cameras that were put up by Toby.

Thus, when he broadcasted the Midnight mass of the Herrnhutians, the boulevard paper had on the next evening the headline:

HERRNHUTIAN CAPTAIN STORK CLAIMS AT MIDNIGHT GOD WILL KILL THEM ALL THE WAY HE KILLED CHRIST

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## Outside of the coast of Namibia

“There is no ´Why?`, because
there is an infinite ´Why?`”
( S. Kierkegaard, Education
into Christianity.)

18th of December, we were just outside of Walvis Bay, Namibia, West Africa. I reckoned this as a poor, battered and undeveloped country. I got a glimpse of the town through my binoculars, and it seemed to be 90% sand. I, however, spotted a small green field, maybe two. Were they playing soccer there? A long pier stretched out from the center of the town, which was not much larger than a British village.
Watching the fishermen outside the coast, some of them were approaching us, despite our flag, trying to sell goods; I had a sailor take some blankets, put the word “PEST” on them, using black paint, and hang them on the sides of our ship. I myself also made one, but on this one, I wrote the word “ACHTUNG” since I knew that Namibia is partly still German-speaking.
Two men, one of them by the name of Oliver Haskett and the other one, much younger, Leo Hart, were often seen together on deck and in the small pub – by the name of Betty´s Inn” - set up by the Captain. It soon became apparent that they were gay and very fond of each other. We called them Oliver and Hardy - Oliver being quite a large chap and older, hired as an Oiler, while Hart was just a young boy of 22, who worked as a steward´s assistant.
On-board the Punjab, during this first month of our naval epidemic, it was not an uncommon thing that people paired up, maybe in the act of despair, in a try to get both understanding of the situation as well as the comfort of the acute existence of another person in the same situation, and just as subject to the whims of the virus.
On one night, at 02.30 am, though, the two of them escaped on our smallest and fastest lifeboat. It was a small motorboat, just meant to carry four people and assist in managing wires and fixing minor practical issues. The small orange-colored boat disappeared in the light breeze on the Sea.
We always had a whole fleet of Navy Vessels around us, from all diverse kinds and proprietors. An Australian Aircraft Carrier launched a small bomber.
Everybody was alerted to the deck, all of us in the crew, by the emergency signal, and we all stood by the railing, shouting in the dusk. Searchlights from everywhere were cast over the smooth sea, and the boat was seen very fast – propelled by a Johnson 40 hp motor - narrowing in on the coast.

It was known that the international response to anybody who was trying to leave the Punjab would be brutal. But we still did not think it would be quite as relentless as the Australian now showed us.
One bomb was sufficient.
The small boat disappeared in a vast cloud of water and haze, and after the bomb had hit it, 500 yards from the shore, it was never seen again. Only a few remains of the boat and its passengers were retrieved. One cap was sold at the market some days afterward.
The captain was furious. His face was green, and he locked himself up for two entire days and told everybody that he must not be disturbed unless extraordinary matters.
These were our first casualties.

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Among those who were the most deeply affected by this event seemed Bartlett the most pitiful.
He – the man who apparently had been completely let down and ridiculed by Ruth - strove on deck, tearing his hair, yelling: ”I will KILL YOU! Bastards! Australian SWINE!
He also had shaved off his moustache, something that made him look quite like a child. Male beauty often draws upon very peculiar traits, and what one day might be looked upon as highly sensitive parts of one´s face may be seen as a pure childish expression or feature in another second.
His behavior created a lot of commotion.
However, two days after the boat bombing, he was found in a lower hold No three corridor with a knife in his stomach. Some said it was suicide. Others claimed that Bartlett was a man who no way was able to stick a knife in his own belly. Some people even doubted that anybody could do such a thing. It was, according to Derek Schultz, even physically impossible, like it was holding your breath until you died.
Another theory was, subsequently, that it was murder.
Now the third victim of the virus had been put on the sinister register. But the virus itself had not put anybody to eternal rest. The funeral itself of Bartlett was a miserable story. After a small ceremony, he was lumped overboard in the usual way. The Punjab more and more turned out to be, for many of us, a ghost ship.

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Everyone got eerie by what happened, and I tried to find those on board who seemed to have been the most affected.
Geronimo Weichsel, the lonely clerk one morning, approached me, which was an unusual thing.
“Mr. Diggerson,” he said,” shouldn´t we have a little ceremony for the dead?”
“Yeah, Mr. Weichsel, that is a good idea, maybe,” I answered. ”Have any more specific ideas?”
“Well, some music, perhaps? I can play the accordion.”
“Do you have an accordion? I haven´t seen ….”
“No,” Geronimo interrupted, ”but one of the sailors in the fore-cabins has. I heard him.”
“Of course,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder,” that is a nice thing to think of …. I´ll talk to the captain. I mean, I think it is awful, and that music is always good.”
Geronimo looked at me as if he wondered if I could not express myself in a more ordered and sensitive way.
I thought so too, myself. But I am not pretentious because I have chosen not to be.

In the evening, we had a small sermon. Rodney Small, the Herrnhutian pastor, said a short ( decent ) prayer. Then Geronimo played a tune that sounded Argentinian while the tropical night in its swiftness embraced us in a minute.
One sailor took out a signal horn and beat a tattoo.

We met a schooner which was on its way North. Some crew was standing on her deck, which was lit by a row of yellow-light glass bulbs, and they seemed to understand what we were doing because they signaled with their steamroller.

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# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## Hollingsworth´s wish

”Those who daydream
knows a lot of things
that are escaping those
who is only dreaming
at night.”
Edgar Allen Poe

*21st of December*. Martin Hollingsworth, the Oiler, who also had contracted the lion´s disease, was one of those who had chosen to wear a mask. He now liked to write a story about how he was experiencing this sickness for the world to now. And, since he had heard that I had read a lot, he wanted my advice.
But it soon dawned upon me that his case was much worse than, for instance, that of Wilma.
Wilma was in a rage and had just worsened in her mean attitudes that she since long had displayed.
With Martin, it was something else. He had gone delirious. He said to me while adjusting his face-mask, which was a black one:
“You know, the worst with this sickness are those hallucinations. But at the same time, they are the best. Because they actually reveal the TRUTH.
I'd rather be without the truth. But now, as I have it, I have to write it down. But ….”
We were sitting on his bed in his own cabin onboard. The small room was only sparsely lit and barely furniture. There was a bed and a chair and a cupboard. Nothing more.
“But are you sure you should not concentrate on trying to feel better before you start to think of a project like that? You know, we are in the middle of it.”, I said, in a friendly tone. Nick had warned me that the boy was very delicate, although he was rather muscular and had a strong voice. He was twenty-five years old and from Wales.
“It is a Sickness to Death.” He suddenly said.

I frowned, and I almost thought that the boy smelled strange and that he smelled awful, especially when he spoke. It was as if with every word, his pores opened a let a stench out in the cabin.
“This is not just a matter of how we feel. Sicknesses are a matter for science,” I said,” a matter of medical science.”
“I know we 'll be dead, all of us.”
I regrouped myself.
“Well, if you are going to write a book, how are you going to do that if you wear a mask? Are you going to dictate it?”´ ----. I was – all of a sudden – thinking of the English bard John Milton, author of Paradise Lost, who created this work by, being totally blind, having his two young domestic (!) daughters to write it all down after his dictate.
The boy nodded.
“I am looking for someone to write down what I say.”
“I see.”, I said, thinking of some good tactics to make him realize that this was a were pretentious idea.
I decided to ridicule him. It was the only way to stop him. I would turn into a real bastard.
“You can dictate it for me, buddy!” I said,” And then I´ll rewrite the whole thing and make a poem out of it! Eh, that sounds good, eh? You know, I am always able to rhyme on absolutely anything. Take the word “pandemic.” I could put “anemic” as the rhyming word, and it would be a fine poem….”
Now the boy went completely silent.
“I understand, sir.”
I immediately regretted my tactics.
“I was just joking! Martin! I was just joking! It is hard….”
“I won't bother you anymore,” he said, and he indicated that I should leave.
---
After having left Martin and gone up on deck again, which was kind of a home to me, I reflected on myself and what a person I was. Who was a man who started joking with a psychotic person? Who had I turned in to? Was I always this self-centered activist? What should I do with myself?
Was I ever serious? Was life theatre to me? Or a novel? Who wrote this novel that I was living in? Some poet – probably a French one -, once wrote:

“There is always a dream,
that keeps itself awake.”

I was standing at the bulwark, ransacking my soul when Ruth came up by my side. As always, she had a real knack for this, I thought.
“Now, you look happy!” she said.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY

The health Central

22nd of December. Ruben and Liza had been working for more than a week on-board. They had their quarters in the former small casino on the 1st floor of the main building. Captain Stork had ordered us to clear the room and throw the roulette in the sea.
I sometimes – as part of my duty - visited them and asked if they had made any progress.
Ruben and Liza had set out to test all humans and animals on the ship, and they also were checking for symptoms and helping the sick.
The virus eventually got isolated and showed itself as a tiny one, but tricky.
For some reason, the two scientists kept to themselves, possessed by their work, which presented a huge challenge and responsibility. As far as they knew, much of the ship's future depended on them rather than on anybody else, including the Captain.
It was apparent that they saw the Captain as something obsolete and unscientific.
The pure idea of a Captain, who was in charge of everybody´s destiny, and could do as he chose, presented to them – who were all rational – something not absurd but rather casual.
What WAS a captain? What extraordinary qualities did a captain possess? Who became a captain? What kind of knowledge was it that permitted anybody to have exclusive command of a giant vessel on the Atlantic?

Ruben L. Leopold and Liza Q. Cumberstreet, who had seven doctor titles together, sometimes could be seen as smiling at the poor, uneducated middle-class man, who was often seen on deck in his wooden deck chair, newly brought from the stokehold, silently watching the crew and the passengers, puffing a cigarillo. Why was THAT man in charge? The captain wasn´t even democratically elected. Everything in the modern world had evolved, but on the sea, the idea of a sovereign ruler lingered like a relic from the brutal past. They looked upon Captain Stork, not as somebody chosen by Rattner&Rattner to govern the ship, but as a pirate and a psychopath. I didn´t think the Captain was a psychopath at all.

That theirs was an unscientific view, they never understood. The mere fact that the Captain had ordered the Roulette table to be thrown into the Ocean somehow proved to them that the Captain was a psychopath. They even claimed that Roulette had a lot more to do with science than captaining a ship. ( Derek would certainly agree to that, I thought.)

I was one day sitting by the giant analyze machine that processed data relentlessly 24-7 and asked them if the virus was mutating.

"Well, all viruses are."

"Why does it affect animals and people the way it is?"

"It simply tries confusion. Confusion is a rare method. Viruses generally do not try to confuse their victims, but nearly always hit more directly."

"So?"

"Confused people tend to look for help from other people. In this way, the virus can spread more easily."

"Viruses are smart," I said with a faint smile.

"Yes, they are laughing at us right now," Dr. Leopold said, with a burst of roaring laughter.

I asked them if they thought that Mrs. Williamson and the others might recover from their illness.

"We actually don´t know."

I can accept that, I thought. Their job was no easy job.

But I was – like everybody on the Punjab – more or less confused.

I knew that the concept of authority is not much revered by those who indulge in scientific research. But everything isn´t science, I thought.

---

Every morning, I also checked upon the animals together with the Captain. We always checked upon Betty, the lion, first. She almost always was asleep. The horses were not. I looked into their eyes, and I am rarely more at ease as when I am doing that.

They are in no hurry, and they read my mind. Sometimes when I am worried, they frown a bit. The monkeys are more easy-going. Selfish they are, and they want to drag our noses and ears.
The Captain never stops speculating on the relationship between man and animal.
"Why is it," he asked now, as we looked at two mongooses, who pressed against each other were staring at us," that people are interested so profoundly in animals?"
"Profoundly it is," I said.
"Yes," Stork said," … and as in so many cases of human passions, the passion for animals is purely founded in the deepest fear of death. Man is searching for someone or something to save him. In the animal, there is a soulless mind troubled by the thought of death. But there still – of course – is some awareness of extinction by animals too, or else they would not survive. Man is looking for this immediate sense of death, unconsciously speculating that this immediate sense of death by animals might be of a size a little handier than the very complex fear which is bestowed upon humans. The consciousness of the Animal is looked upon as immediate wisdom, on a supreme level.
But now comes the interesting part, where we, as always with humans, can spur self-deception. While we are looking upon the death-consciousness of the Horse as immediate, and in this immediacy in a sense GRATER, we also look upon the horse as inferior. The horse is just an animal. Thus we are at THE SAME time worshipping the Horse, as we are discriminating it as a soulless animal.
We, when occupying us with the death of the horse, at the same time, look upon their death-awareness as something more profound, and at the same times, totally trivial. In this very OSCILLATION, we find our peace of mind. And it is as always, through music, poetry, irony, and love, that we do find peace in oscillating, in a dance to and fro, in the rhythmic lullaby. The only thing that can soothe us is the lullaby of mind and the lullaby of body. Love is oscillation: to women, men are boys and heroes; to men, women are whores and saints. We often find the lullaby of mind in reflecting over the Animal, which is the perfect object for the general psychopath mind of Man, the ultimate fetch and throws away toy, the "Hie und Da," and this – the lullaby – worthy-unworthy, is the highest amoral comfort, the most effective consolation that is bestowed upon us by the Gods."
"Cross my heart! You are quite a philosopher", I said, watching the sleeping lioness, upon which a couple of dozens of flies were sitting waiting for something to happen. Life´s greatest moments are the tick-tock of a metronome, I thought. My father had one of those on the Bechstein at home.

Among the animals, those who were sick and with impaired eye-sight, no improvement was seen. But no animal, except one horse, was yet dead.
Happiest were the monkeys, and certainly when they, as usual, by nine o'clock were brought up in their large cage upon deck, in the warm sunlight. It was summer because it was Southern hemisphere December. They were not exactly supremely happy, but happy enough.
The ship was just passing a small floating mess of rubbish, plastic, paper, and oil of unknown origin. The waveson of civilization. All the way from London, we had many times spotted those smelly waste messes, and we never commented upon them. I was looking at the monkeys in the cage. They now suddenly looked sleepy in the half-shadow of their cage, nibbling a little with their fingers on each other's backs while extorting minor chirping sounds.
I thought of ancient tribes somewhere who had monkey-gods.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## The Maserati…

*24th of December*. Paul Contour came by on deck, his hair in disorder, looking at a small piece of paper in his hand. It turned out that the Maserati should be baptized tonight, at the midnight party.
Schoener and Contour had built up a row of benches – covered with a small wooden roof - for the show tonight, which was set to start by midnight. Since life on Punjab was not an ordinary life on an ordinary journey to Surabaya, or even a cruise ship, we had developed, just in two weeks, strange habits. We probably had done this to cope with the absurdness of the situation and the extreme languor. Contour was clad in a fancy suit, a striped one, and wore a bowler hat. Bernard Schoener – with his burning blue eyes - was not to be seen anywhere. He would drive the car on a large, red carpet that was rolled out between the bulwark and the line of cargo holes from a large shed, where they during the night before had hidden the car

I had gone up to the bridge and stood there chatting with the helmsman, puffing on a cigar given to me by the Captain.
I tried to smile but felt a sudden kind of dizziness right under my temple, and I could not see quite well because of a sensation of white before my eyes. I covered my eyes with my hand. Witherspoon looked at me and asked me if I was sick or something.
“Are you feeling well, Sam?”
I rarely had been sick before ever in my whole life. My health always had been excellent, and I used to even joke about it. I was, in fact, commonly sort of unjustly healthy; I used to say that, crossing my fingers superstitiously. Then I felt for the first time how something in my brain, behind the right-hand side temple, went kind of white. I got some sort o, but I did not feel any pain, just somewhat blotted out.
I looked at my wristwatch. It was soon time for the Maserati to be driven from the shed out on the carpet.
Later we would have a Christmas Party in the big Dining Room. Schoener had slaughtered a pig for this occasion. We were eagerly waiting to have a real Christmas luncheon.
What if I was going to fall ill, to get “the disease?” I was almost certain I would fall ill now. I felt as if I was going to throw up and took a few steps toward the side of the ship to be ready to excavate my stomach as discretely as possible over the wooden railing.
Time was ticking. It was now 23.59.
The car ought to appear now; everybody on the whole boat was present standing around on deck and on balconies and hanging in the masts. Most guests sat on the benches by the carpet, though. Even Derek was sitting in the crowd this day. He had all the time – as a capitalist – by the two Maserati builders, and he said that hadn´t he worried so much about contagion, he would have participated in the building of this classic, in a nautical transformational reprise, as he said. Wilma was attending too. Mrs. Williamson had smuggled some Chlorpromazine in her tea, and she was meek as a lamb.
Ruiz had come out from his cabin and was standing on a balcony.
The Captain also sat on the honorary bench that was to welcome the Maserati. He was there with Ruth by his right side. On the right side of Ruth, the Harmenz was sitting, with a straw hat, smoking a pipe. Dorothy saw that I had fallen ill upon the bridge, and their fore rose, run to the staircase that led to the bridge, and was well underway to give me a helping hand.
The car roared a little in the shed.

I stood by the railing and had just vomited quite severely, and I almost fell off the ship in doing so when I had a recollection. Often when you have cleared your stomach, your mind has changed as well.
I thought of strange things regarding the building of the Maserati.

---

I just suddenly felt like someone took my hands and dragged me from the railing and to the stairs. It was like someone, God or a wizard or the holy Lamb, told me:
“Stop that car! Don´t let them start that car!”
I at the same time rushed the fastest I could, down the stairs, through the crows before the benches, and in the shed and up to Contour and Schoener, who stood hugging each other in the corner of the shed, whole the red var was ready to be shown to the public was there beside them.
I opened up the motor cover, and there I saw the dynamite—hundreds of dynamite bars connected with tiny red and green wires. I turned to the two men, who now stood staring at me, looking like madmen.
Then I grabbed a crowbar with my right hand and yelled at the top of my voice:

“TERRORISTS! AHOY! TERRORISTS!”

In a minute, the two Maserati men were captured by strong sailors´ hands and put on the deck, wound up with ropes.
The Captain walked to and fro in front of them, wholly speechless and more furious than I have ever seen a human aver.
Lots of other people were just crying, hugging each other.
I tore down the shed and showed the dynamite to all assembled on deck, in expectance of a car show.
“How dreadful!” they said.
“Bastards!!”
“They wanted to kill us!”
“What a Christmas Eve!!”

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The detention trial…

12.00 pm. 25th of December. We held a detention hearing on board. Since the Captain still could not steer his ship to any harbor, but as we were stuck on the sea, there are naval laws that permit the Captain to take law in his hand, up to a certain point. Generally, it is the laws of the country where the owning Company resides that counts in these cases.
Contour and Schoener were held in custody in a room close to the refrigeration room. There were double locks on the door and a guard with a rifle outside.
International law says a Maritime Nation extends outward several miles from shore. The most recent United Nations Convention on the Maritime Law of the Sea, decided upon at Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1982, was largely successful, and about 160 countries had signed the agreement by 2017. United States, Colombia, Venezuela, and others did not sign the agreement. Maritime nations generally control their territorial waters from the shore out a distance of 12 miles; within this zone, all laws of that country apply, countries are as well given an exclusive economic zone made up of a water column and the sea-bed, 200 miles outside of a country. Outside of these zones, everything is everybody´s property. Concerning crimes committed in these areas, the country's laws owning the vessel or structure upon which the crime has been committed are applicable. This may seem simple, but vessels in the sea are mobile, creating jurisdictional headaches for investigators and officials since the laws of every country and intern. All countries do not recognize courts; however, there is often no evident accepted referee. Government officials in one country might choose not to recognize suggested judges.
All ships have an International Maritime Organizations - IMO - number. No vessel can leave or enter any harbor legally without an IMO number. Police at the next port of call will be notified if there is a suspicion of a severe crime onboard a ship.

I have dwelt so extensively on this because the most troubles this unclear state of law carries with it is the chaos it causes when two ships of different nations collide. Now, we did not collide with anything but with a virus. The virus was of a completely unknown nation.
In the case of Punjab, British Law should be applied, and British Police contacted.
This Stork immediately did, but since the police could not come to the ship, Stork got authority from the Headquarters of Scotland Yard to perform a criminal investigation, and to question any suspect, and to hold a suspect in custody, was the suspicions reasonably strong.
Stork was told to use his three mates as a kind of Jury. Stork would be the temporary judge, deciding about taking into custody.
However, Stork decided that everyone on board should be present also during the proceedings and the decisions. For the time being, Contour and Schoener were – as we heard – locked up and heavily guarded. Despite Stork himself being a suspect of a minor crime ( not to hold explosives onboard under sufficient surveillance ), the special conditions were such that Scotland Yard thought it wise to let the Captain of the ship be the man in charge of the whole temporary trial.
I had disliked Contour from the moment I first lay my eyes on him. He was a slippery type. Everything he said was sort of floating around. His words were like butter in a hot frying pan. I agreed with R. L. Stevenson that the name says it all. Only in the case of Paul Contour, its meaning was the other way around ... The man had …. no contours at all!
Schoener I had never spoken a word with. Bernard was a much taller man than Paul and a blond, muscular, virile man, slightly bald with Nordic features. He had been the drummer in a punk rock band but was a good cook.
Apparently, they had their idea that they saved the world.
The idea was Schoener´s. Or he had read about it on the internet. An entire secret Facebook group was supporting them with advice. And he easily talked Paul into the whole thing. It was so obvious, from all we had learned about viruses during recent years, that you had to hit hard, lest the virus would sure as hell get the upper hand. Who wanted to be a true hero?
---
But now, as I saw them sitting together, in their deep despair, I – all of a sudden – got one of my strange ideas. I was reflecting upon how long they must have been at work with this dynamite device and the car and all. And how strange it was that nobody had come across them when they were carrying dynamite from hold to hold and so on! Then I thought of the curious and restless communications Officer Bartlett. Who

always had errands all over the Punjab, and that Bartlett now was, inexplicably, dead. He was, as we know, found with a knife in his stomach.
Perhaps the two gentlemen now detained for a crime they never got the opportunity to commit, in reality, were guilty of murder?
My limbs – when I sat there upon the podium together with Stork, Sully, Ruiz, and the Chief - trembled when this thought dawned on me. I said nothing about my suspicions, though, and it was simply decided that during the rest of the journey, both Schoener and Contour were going to be locked up under deck and well-guarded. We would under no circumstances let them slip away.
We did not continue with any interrogation because the two suspects were not willing to provide any details. Their temporary defense assistant, Derek Schultz ( who gruntingly had accepted this task ), told the jury that they had decided to comment upon nothing. But at the same time, Schoener had not been able to refrain from adding that it would have been best if the whole ship had blown up for the sake of humanity. The two of them seemed drugged, and it was later to be found that they were both on crystal meth.
Neither Sully nor the Chief believed, though, that the dynamite would have managed to cause damage of the scale that would have sunk the ship right away.
But it would certainly have caused many deaths on deck among those who were standing or sitting closest to the car.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The referendum

Noon. 5th of January. As we now were outside of Cape Town, South Africa, we were to finally decide if we should proceed to Indonesia or if we should accept the offer of the Queen´s Government to land on Tristan da Cunha.
Cape of Good Hope is situated on the 33rd South Parallel, while Tristan da Cunha and its sister islands Nameless Island and Nightingale Island lie at the 37th, a bit SW of our position. We heaved to drop our left anchor, which was an eight-tonner.
The whole decision was, of course, the Captain´s, but he still wanted the opinion of every soul on board. There was thus going to be an open referendum.
Toby Panetta, who, after the death of Communications Officer Bartlett, had become increasingly valuable to the rest of us since he was quite a data technician, had been told to organize information about the actual islands, which the Queen had given to us. The day before the referendum, he set up a movie saloon in the exercise room where several films from YouTube were displayed on a screen, showing Nightingale Island. By watching these views, many of us soon realized that the island was practically inhabitable but still possible to survive on for a short time.
We were on this referendum day, three and a half weeks after we left London Harbor, assembled, at 02.00 pm in the grand dining room for this solemn occasion. The weather was excellent, and we had had a light lunch with a fresh omelet because we, of course, since we had that many animals, also had brought a few hens. Although they were just twelve of them, they were a constant joy to us. ----. It takes 16 weeks to produce new layers. Dorothy, as well as Wilma ( who seemed to have straightened herself up a bit ) , had early on started this project, but the fruit of this work - i.e., more eggs - were not to be seen within any foreseeable future.
In the morning, Sully had refused to leave his cabin. He shouted that he was ill. After a while, the Captain managed to get entrance to him, and it was soon discovered that he had gotten the Disease.
Later that same day, the Midshipman, Abubakar ( the man with the big smile and no opinions at all ), admitted that he too was half-blind and had to stay in his quarters too, with the help of the Williamsons, try to adjust to his fate, as well as Sully´s. This was a huge setback, and it probably affected the big referendum. On this, we cannot be sure, though.
As for the general crew situation, it was evident by what had happened that Ruiz and I got a lot more work to do since Sully immediately got leave from his duties and was told by Captain Stork that he might do as he liked; if he wanted to help out on the bridge, he was allowed, but he was basically on sick-leave. It was the same with Abubakar.

We were – including Leopold and Cumberstreet – 30 voters. We had lost three members of the crew: Haskett, Hart, and Bartlett. Everyone had ( of course … ) one vote. Two persons were disqualified, though: Contour and Schoener, because they were subject to a major crime investigation. Due to the even number of voters, 28, it was decided that the Captain would, potentially, have an extra vote and thus a total of two voices.
The dining room was rather crowded, and the afternoon sun, which lit the floor and tables in the room, also brightened the faces of many a worried traveler and sailor. Everyone weighed in what were their worsts worries. Could they stand to live for years on a volcanic island without going mad?

---

Ruth and I sat by a small table and talked the situation over. We were, after all, on a ship, where I was an officer and Ruth was the Captain´s wife. Two sailors were also seated with coffee mugs and a biscuit, but they did not participate in the conversation but were just respectfully silent.
“Do you think we should sail to Surabaya, then?” I asked upfront. ”I guess it is an either-or? Either Surabaya or Nightingale Island by Tristan da Cunha.”
“Not exactly either-or.”, Ruth replied. ”Because we don´t know if we may land in Surabaya, they may not allow us to go to port.”
“You are right. But it is thus either we may go ashore and not go ashore. Either-Or? Isn´t it?”
“Well, if you put it that way, yes.”
I looked at her. She was looking out through the thick portholes at the waves of the sea.
“The Captain is very shrewd.”, I said. I often unconsciously alluded to him in this way before her, just to make her uncomfortable, I thought. It was a mean and subtle trick.
“Oh, yes, I know. But you are very important to him, you know. He is a tactic and a diplomat, but you are his Information’s Minister.” She said, still watching the horizon, where all the airplane carriers and patrol boats and destroyers formed a dotted line. I was increasingly impressed by her and thought that she showed to be not only bright but also very apt and cultivated, loaded with all kinds of exceptional information. She was well in my own class, I reckoned.
“Yes, certainly, I said. What would Churchill have been without his Information’s Ministers?”

“Nobody can live on Nightingale Island by Tristan da Cunha,” she said and turned her large brown eyes on me.” Living there is like living in Antarctica, only you are almost more isolated on Nightingale Island. If one gets sick on that island, well ….”
She met the eyes of the two sailors, who had listened to her words.
“I will vote “No” to Nightingale Island,” she concluded.
I reassured her that I would do the same.
The two sailors did not say anything, nor did they smile or show any signs of appreciation at what they had heard from us.
I guess they were doing what they were told. They did not look distraught either.
---
Generally speaking, the epidemic had been received by fatalism on the Punjab. This was, of course, strange. Nobody onboard was taking any rational attitude towards this sickness but Derek. It seemed like the rest of us indulged in “magical thinking.” Magical thinking is what it is. I think that response to sickness is a cultural thing, and culture is always a way of rhetoric. The rhetoric on-board has evolved due to the special personas on our ship and of the ones that first got sick, and there is another thing too. We have, since the start of the epidemic, all in deepest secrecy, have started to think of this Lion´s sickness as a personal thing that affects only people who are weak, hysterical, or has shown some signs of moral slackness. There was now some kind of “Medieval attitude” here on the Punjab. Wasn´t I actually looking upon Tonya, Wilma, and Sully as inferior people? And Hollingsworth? And Petersen? Now, what other explanation could there be to our fatalism or magical thinking?” Maybe I was not alone in this cynicism? We were maybe all of us silently, due to the circumstances, indulging in the most savage thinking and primitive response. As always, in times of crisis, there had been a deterioration of morals, without me being able to notice it. Was the referendum a tactic from the Captain´s side to get morale on its feet again? Because even Captain Stork was, of course, just like myself ( and many others ), aware of the fatalism onboard.
---
Now the referendum started. Small pieces of paper were administered to each and every one. We were told by Harmenz, who was administering the ceremony - which was broadcasted live by Toby on his YouTube channel - , to use a pencil and to write either “Yes” or “No.” The question was:” Should we accept the offer to go to Nightingale Island and to live there?” If we did not know what to vote for, we might leave the paper blank.
When all votes were placed in a paper box, monitored by Harmenz and Geronimo, we formed a committee on the podium and counted openly every vote.

It turned out thus:
Yes: 0.
No: 30.
This was solid rhetoric, I silently thought. Perhaps the Captain's tactics were to make everybody responsible. He was drawing the democratic card on-board his - according to naval tradition - “very own” ship. He must have been very sure. Yet nobody knew his tactics, really. He still had to be very sure. What awaited us on our journey across the Indian Ocean?

Toby later told me that there had been many a hurray for us from his viewers. Polls on the Internet supported our choice. Virtually nobody but natural “filth bags,” rambunctious suicidals and right extremists, wanted us to land on Nightingale Island.
The Evening Standard later wrote:
The Punjab chooses Flying Dutchman Path!
The London Gazette took it to another level:
The Queen´s proposal drenched. Punjab chooses Eternal Holiday!

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In a small conversation after the referendum that I had on deck with Derek, he said:
“Hey, Sam! You´re the Captain´s favorite and I am sure that you know exactly….”
“I don´t know neither his plans nor his motives, old chap!” I cut him short.
“But,” I added, with a smile,” my GUESS is that he is trying to wear everybody out. He will soon introduce a new hobby.”
“That´s not much of a plan….” he said.
Then we went silent, and I thought I could not really bring up my worries to him, so I said:
“Let´s try to have a good time on board and have faith…” ( I´ve always thought faith is underrated. )
“The Herrnhutians have it.” Derek finished the conversation off and decided - probably just as worn out as I felt at the time - it was time for him to have a siesta.
Now we were done!

---

I stayed where I was and looked around me. There were lots of people on deck after the referendum. It was 02.30 pm, and it was hot in the air.
Now we were heading for Indonesia, I thought, and I felt a chill up my spine.
The ship now was turned weatherly up against the wind and was heaving in the sea.

What would the Indian Ocean have to offer? I suddenly felt there was somebody behind me. I turned, and Linda, clad in her black face mask, covered both her eyes.
“Samuel?” she asked.
“Yes, Linda, … so nice to see you!”
She smiled at these words.
“I wanted to ask you something,” she said.
“Go ahead!”
She put her hand on my sleeve.
“Are we ever going to leave this ship?”
I looked down. This was a terrible question.
Nothing more was said on this subject. But I now, as I felt the big vessel shaking in its constant try to proceed through the giant waves of the Indian Ocean, decided to ask Linda to follow me to the flagpole on the forecastle of the ship, to watch the ocean roar.
“But I can´t see,” she said while I took her hand and dragged her with me along the starboard bulwark to the fore.
“I know,” I said.
When we had climbed up the small stairs to the forecastle and the bow of m/s Punjab and were standing by the flagpole, with its black and yellow flag waving in the half-gale, I was amazed by the beauty of the view. At a long distance, I could, apart from the usual row of warships, also spot the coastline of Southern Africa, with Cape Fold Mountains. I knew some of the Indian Ocean since I had been here before, but every time I was reentering here, it gave me the same thrill.
I felt born anew, and I wanted Wilma to feel the same.
“Please!” I said to her, ”just take a look at it with one eye! Just a short one! Please, for me!”
“It is no pleasure, you know, not really.”
But she loosened her black bandana and had a look with her “traffic light eye. She smiled, and after a minute or so, she put the patch back and leaned towards my shoulder, and sighed:
“Thanks, Sam, that was nice.”
The sea was greenish-grey. With white plumes, upon which hundreds of trouts was diving and sailing. Wind gusts tore the waves apart, and wave after wave encountered our massive ship, which with full motor power trembled against the tremendous forces of water.

When a vessel is sailing like that, I am the most delighted. I know nothing that delights me for than a ship when the summertime, and it goes straight against the wind.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## A Magical Contract

*Morning. 8th of January*. On this very calm and scorching day, we were continuing our journey with our large vessel towards the rising sun, heading eastwards.
The sun mercifully gazed on us, and the shadows were minimal. The ocean many days were blank, but small gales from the North-East every other day tore our salty and sundried hair.
Dorothy had arranged a shuffleboard game on deck and pulled out the roll-out plastic mats on the larboard side of the lazaret, and the eight disks were placed on them. We took our cue sticks and started out.
Some of us chose to fish instead. We had evolved the habit of fishing early in the morning.
Some sailors had earlier approached me, where I was standing, leaning against the fiddley, and had questioned me about the Captain. What was the Captain up to?

Where were we going? Had the Captain talked to the Prime Minister? Was the virus going away? Many onboard were thus highly critical regarding the Captain´s lack of providing information. But I just told them that if they had any better idea than just continuing our journey the way the Captain had decided to do, they were free to suggest an alternative, either to me or directly to the Captain. They at the moment had none, they said.
I had new sunglasses on, pilot style, that I had bought from the steward for five quid.
---
Stork walked around on "his" ship in a white light sun-hat with small brims.
On this morning, he had taken his usual animal round and visited the lion, the horses, swine, papagallos, hens, mongooses, and monkeys. Not many of them had turned sick, but those who had were miserable. Among us now Mts. Williamson, Wilma, Sully, Oscar Petersen, Hollingsworth, and Abubakar were infected and in somewhat bad shape.
Ruben and Liza had concluded that the disease made the victims not only impaired by loss of reasonable eyer-sight but that the psychic strain on them had a severe impact. The risk of severe mental illness to them was substantial, they said.
As for the virus itself, it stayed as it was and did not seem eager to mutate. It seemed only to infect vertebrates.
---
In Plato´s large dialogue book The Republic, the old Athenian claims that the state is just like a person, a human being, like Man. And the government of a state he sees quite like the faculty of reason by Man. Now, I am not at all convinced by analogy. In fact, I agree entirely with Ezra Pound, who claims that analogies do not prove a thing.
Many people disapprove of the idea of a dictator, but they still can see the soundness in having a captain as sovereign on a ship. Some say it is not modern to have a captain. But there are captains both on airplanes and boats and vessels of all sorts. I approve of the idea of having a captain on a ship. The captain onboard a vessel has absolute power. He is not a ceremonial or symbolic character, like a King of Norway. The captain decides. But still, on a modern ship with today's communications, it is, of course, quite another thing than it used to be in Christopher Columbus´ days.
If a sailor disagrees with the captain, he might take up his mobile and phone his lawyer, who can call the owner of the Ship Company, to discuss the whole thing. Modern mutinies are fought not on deck but in courts. So today is another thing. But still, even today, the captain of a ship, way out on the ocean, is a person you do not easily challenge.

The more I thought of the captain – as a phenomenon – the more interesting it became. I recognized that a patroon on a ship was A.) not a person of hands, but a person of eyes. A captain seldom used his hands but kept them stuck in the side pockets of his uniform, which ether was a blue one, or – like now – a white one. A flying captain on an airplane frequently used his hands, and sometimes, when landing an aircraft in a storm, every millimeter´s change in the joystick position mattered to the secure landing.

On a ship, there were generally about four to eight people who had either the experience or education or both, which made them capable of handling every situation onboard the ship just as well as the captain. We were many who had our concerns about the shortest ways to get from point A. to B. and who could handle lousy weather, drunken sailors and lack of material, and whatever problem there was on a ship.

The captain – not being a man of hands – was B. ) a man of eyes. The captain was always watching. His eyes never slept, figuratively. Nothing escaped the eyes of the captain. Not a single expression on the men´s faces, not a bird, not a single change in the wind and the weather. Not a rumble, not a stir in the hull. Not a cough, not the slightest gleam from a cigarette. And cigarettes tended to be more dangerous than gales of the most severe kind.

The Patroon also was C.) a man of the Now. It was a scarce thing to hear a captain say:

"In twenty years, there will be no ships like these."

A captain would instead concentrate on getting the ship to the next port. He had no longer perspective than that. And if he commented on types of ships, he always referred to old ships.

"Those olden ships that had a stern like that …."

The captain was often a lousy communicator and no educator at all. He kept his knowledge to himself and never discussed anything with anybody. He did not even in retrospect give any information on his choices of route, speed, or selection of anchorage.

Ass for the relation to his crew, he did not – like an owner of a castell had a Master-Slave relation. He was set to lead them, and they knew that he was appointed to guide them and that he was assigned to lead them because somebody had to.

Then it was not a Social Contract of the Rousseau kind. Because they had not CHOSEN him as a leader. Nor had the Captain by force enslaved them. The crew did not want to get rid of him, like slaves of their Master. Hence the Captain was not a

Tragical Giant like the Master in Hegel´s Phänomenologie and Marx´s social analysis. The relation was more of a MAGICAL contract.
They allowed him to - in superiority - decide everything on the ship, and in doing so, they also assigned to him D.) a sort of superpower or a secret knowledge. The crew needed to do so because the sea, who was all the time letting them know that they were on its surface, was such a capricious giant that if the crew did not assign secret knowledge to the captain, they were all not able to sleep at night in their small cabins.
The secret knowledge of the Captain was acquired by a relation the Captain had with some unknown entity. He was turned into a Magical Giant. And it was this entity the Captain was in contact with when his eyes were not resting upon the crew but were lifted towards the sky and the horizon.
When the crew saw that the Captain sparingly was watching the gale, the clouds, and the birds, they assumed he was in contact with his secret friend. And this was good, and this was why they never questioned the captain, and this was the reason that there were captains on all the ships on all the oceans. The captain typically had no superpower or secret knowledge at all. And everybody knew that too. But he was ASSIGNED those qualities. Hence he had them. Magically.
This I thought.

---

This handless, all-eyes, futureless, omniscient beloved and feared monster in the shape of Captain Stork had ordered a casual style, and we were all soon, as we now were decidedly entering upon our final lap to Indonesia, crossing the Indian Ocean, behaving a little like we were on holiday. Our Captain wearing a sun hat indeed was taking the lead, and we all followed suit.
Mrs. Williamson was carrying just one patch, a red one, but her sundress, a yellow one, was gorgeous.
However, not many of us wanted to participate in the game led by Dorothy.
We strove on deck, sat in deckchairs, and were fishing along the sides of the vessel.

I took a tour to the fore-cabins to look after the youngest amongst the crew, which was used to take an hour's rest by this time, during the months at these latitudes. They either read books, listened to the radio, or surfed the internet.
In one of the cabins, which was not Hollingsworth's, I met Hollingsworth.
"What you doing, pal?"
"Hi, Mr. Sam!" he said,"Nae much, but I am still trying to write a story."
He pointed at a young boy, who sat in a chair by the scuttle.
"He is my secretary, Hobson. Erwin Hobson."

Hobson smiled, mumbled, and showed a small black notebook while wetting a small pen with his tongue.
“Aah!” I said, ”here comes the next No1 bestseller! I am glad to hear that!”
“You really provoked me, sir!” Hollingsworth smiled.
“Now, who´s your literary idol then?” I asked him.
“Edgar Wallace!” Hollingsworth promptly answered.”… and Stephen King.”
“You are a man of action?” I said and hated my way of trying to sound encouraging. I, of course, did not think Hollingsworth could produce anything readable at all.
And this Hollingsworth could hear by my voice.
“Is there anything wrong with Wallace - or King for that matter?” he asked me.
“No, no, but even Wallace himself always thought that his books had absolutely no literary value at all. As for…”
“Are you certain Wallace could judge that himself?”
“No, but just take up a book by Wallace and glance it over … You won’t see anything but dialogue. He is writing novels without any descriptions at all in them.”
“Maybe they are pure drama?” Hollingsworth suggested.
“Yes, maybe,” I finalized and left the small chamber, where Hobson just had lit a cigarette and loosened his shirt a little to come into a better mood. I thought that you might easily see that Hobson was a writer. He had that look in his eyes, was spurring and curious. Maybe he turned Hollingsworth´s words into gold; I fancied when I want up on deck again. “Good luck, Holly!”
I have always loved the books of Stephen King.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## A checking round

When I reentered up on deck, I thought the line of warships had drawn a little bit closer, so close that I almost could see their ensigns and thus might discern from what country they came.

My joy over the existence of somebody like Hobson was thus soon dissolved, but I tried to focus on my job. I was on my way to the two prisoners. After that, I planned to see Sully.
On my way on the gangway, I almost bumped into a conversation. Ruth and Derek were standing by starboard´s bulwark with glasses of bourbon in their hands.
"You know," I heard Ruth say, chuckling, "I love the shape of your skull. It is cute and picturesque. You know, I LOVE the picturesque. I think the picturesque is the very door to reality…."
"My skull, cute?" Derek laughed, but he, all the same, lay his hands on Ruth´s naked shoulder.
I hurried past them to get to the stairway down to the fridge room and the small cell where Contour and Schoener lived.
Outside the small door to the cell, I could hear the music from the radio inside. It was some classical music, modern, like Stravinsky or something. String quartets. The guard sitting outside, armored with a big bat, smiled at me.
"Strange music.!, he said.
"String music," I answered.
I banged at the door. Soon, two faces appeared in the door-hole without any glass in it.
"Hello!", Contour said in a low voice.
"How are you?" I asked politely.
"We are not infected, if that´s what you mean," the short man behind bars said.
"And what about Schoener? Is he alright?"
"I told you."
"Is there anything you want?"
"No, not really. Maybe a walk on the deck each day…."
"Nope, you can't have that," I said.
Then there was nothing more said.
I left them with their guardsman, who sat with knitting in his knee.
When arriving at Sully´s quarters, I was in a better mood. Sully was no jolly fellow, but he was very decent.
When he opened his cabin door, I saw that this sickness was taking a toll on him. He was meager, extremely thin, and pale. His lips were almost purple, and I saw that this man was on the verge of suicide in the only open eye.
"Holy shit!" I cried out, "Dear me, what´s the matter with you? What can I do?"
I rushed in, grabbed him by his clothes, and sat him on his bed.
"Please. Tell me!"

“I just lost hope….”
“Naer. Soon things will change….” I tried.
“How?” he asked and removed my hands with a gentle gesture from his collar and shirt.
“I don´t know. Do you need some pills? There are pills, you know….”
“Yes, maybe.”
As a good example, I sat down in a chair by the porthole and tried to look as relaxed as I could. ”I like you, Sam,” he said,” but I don´t think we have a chance….”
“I´ll fetch Nick,” I decided, “we’ll get you some benzos.”
“All right.”
There was no light in his eye. He grimaced twice per minute. Every time his field of vision changed, he grimaced.
---
When I was on my way to Nick, I suddenly heard a giant scream, a girl´s voice.
“What was that?” I cried up to poop deck, where I had caught a glimpse of the Captain’s trousers. He used to take a walk up there to get rid of his daemons.
“I don´t know,” I heard a voice behind me - Oscar Petersen, with his two eyepatches a little lopsided as always.
“It was a girl´s voice, though,” he said.
“I know, but was it, Linda or Dorry?”
It sounded as if it cane from the animal's hatch, and I consequently rushed down the ladder, to bars at the time, down to where the animal cages were kept.
I saw Linda at a distance. She stood by Betty´s cage, and now she was crying.
“Oh, no!” I thought, ”Not that….”
Then I saw Linda´s face. It was red from joy, and she had removed her bandana.
“She can see again! SHE CAN SEE AGAIN!”
And there the lion was, standing up in her cage, looking straight at us, unbothered as she had been two months ago by any sickness of any sorts.
She played with a small reddish toy monkey made of cloth that we had placed in her cage to make life a little lighter. She bounced at it with one of her front paws, then with the other, and kept playing with it. When she turned her eye towards me, I immediately saw that she was alright. Not a flicker in her eye. She was healthy again.
I rushed the two yards up to Linda and hugged her. She cried, and all her body shook, over and over again, as she said:
“It´s over. It´s over, Sam! It will all be over!”

My dear, she is jumping to conclusions, I thought. But Linda and I stepped into the cage and sat by the lion well over ten minutes before we decided to go up to the rest of the people onboard to tell the good news.
“What happened?” they shouted.
“The lion is okay,” I said.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## All blue

Morning. 9th of January. On the following day, when I had started my morning watch at the helm together with Midshipman Witherspoon and we were checking out our course together, using a whole set of instruments, Hollingsworth, without eye-patches, clad just in trousers, although it was rather windy and rain from the East that day, came running up the gangway and then the triple stairs up to the bridge, shouting:
“Put on the radio! You must hear about The Blue Sickness!”
“What?” I gasped, “what are you talking about?”
“It´s California, and …. Puh …. Mexico …. Pooh…. The blue sickness…….”
Eventually, it all became clear that a new sickness had come up from Mexico to California, and it caused people to have blue, a dark blue skin, just a couple of hours after infection. I called for the Captain, and we all went to the dining room to watch CNN.
The news presented by their new blushing News Anchor Trudy Reynolds was blunt and terrifying:
A fast-moving virus disease had swept through the desert and up into California Valley. Now several thousands of people already had contracted this plague and were walking around, feverish with their new skin, all blue. When interviewed, they were

all terrified, and said – showing their new legs and arms and faces, said that they would never get accustomed to looking like that.
Experts were, of course, called in by CNN to try to answer questions. Would the color disappear? But according to Medical expertise from California University, MIT, and John Hopkins, there was little chance that such a profound mutation would go away.
“But how could the virus get into our genes?” Trudy cried out.
“We simply don´t know. There are a lot of things we don´t know.”, they all answered.
---
It turned out that the reaction to Blue Skin was – as you all know - just as immediate as the one that the world had bestowed upon The Lion´s disease. States and Countries hastily closed their borders, and people who lived in California and in the nearby States fled North and West. Airplanes soon were grounded all over the world, and there was total panic. Images of Blue Skin disease ( Blue Skin ) were cabled out to Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia.
The world never saw anything more virulent than the Blue Skin sickness. It swept through the U.S.A. with the force of a deluge. Even old Noah would have been absolutely flabbergasted.
---
The Captain rose from the chair from which he had been watching the news from:
“Now they will forget about us at once! You´ll see!”
I rushed out on poop-deck to check upon the naval fleet. Only half of them were still there; some seven, eight of them had left.
I ran up to the young helmsman to ask him if he had seen them leave. He had not exactly, he said. Soon I was back with the others to report. Everybody was upset, and all of us were soon sitting by our telephones, and I silently wondered if our Wi-Fi would break down.
I tried to phone my mother, but since there was no answer, I hung up and left the others to go down to the animal hatch. We had not brought the monkeys on deck this morning because of our hurry with all other matters caused by the recovery from the sickness of our lion.
The monkeys were extremely irritated since they were used to being on deck in the daytime, and they shook the wooden bars of their small cage. To my great surprise, when I was walking up to the cage, one of the bars sprung loose, and at once, all four monkeys, like muskrats, escaped and flew up the stairs up on deck.
I followed suit, but only to be watching them leave for the top of the second crane, where they installed themselves, waving at me with one of Ruth´s parasols, which they had grabbed in passing.

“Damn!” I shouted.
The man on guard in the main mast grinned at me, waving his rifle.
Nearly everyone that used to be on deck now was in the deck building, either with the Captain or with the sailors, who had gathered in the sailor´s mass. I glanced up towards the helmsman on the bridge, but he seemed busy with his telephone.
“Do NOT shoot them,” I shouted at the man with the rifle.
I guessed that he was yearning to scare them but did not dare of fright for the Captain. Thus he did not shoot.
I waved at him again.
Then I saw that it was just three of them. Where was the third monkey?
I rose to be going down in the hatch again when I heard a big roar. It was the lion.
Up the stairs climbed furry Betty, followed by the smiling monkey, which had let the lion out of its cage.
I cursed again.
“OHOY!” I then shouted, ”ALL MEN ON BOARD!”
Betty was slowly walking the gangway up to the foredeck.
I never in my life saw anything like that. It was like in a Hollywood movie! Soon the lion was approaching the bow of m/s Punjab. When I suddenly got accompanied by the Captain, the officers, and several sailors, I realized that we must get either Dorothy or Wilma to calm Betty down.
Else something dreadful could happen.
“Where is Dorothy?” I cried out.
Nobody knew.
I felt a hand clutching my arm. It was Ruth in her red dress. She laughed at me.
“Poor boy!” she panted, ”Did you play with the tiger, and it came loose?”
Derek Schultz rushed by, carrying his favorite book under his arm, J. M. Keynes´ A Treatise on Probability. He did not care a straw whether the monkeys had come loose or not. He was more interested in the probability of two devastating epidemics on the verge of threatening the whole planet, AT ONCE. The likelihood for this was – according to the average man – of course, very small.

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After some time, both Dorothy and Wilma appeared. They ran up to the lion. The animal was wholeheartedly enjoying the fresh air and the view and had a stature and vigor that I had never seen by her before.

At last, we calmed the lion down, and after a long chat with the captain on the subject, I had the permission to have the Lion´s cage brought up on deck. Thus it was decided that the lion would be permitted to have its cage on deck at all times, lest there was a typhoon. However, the cage with the monkeys had to be moved every day up and down the animal´s hatch. Only when the weather was such that the hatch covers must be shut all day, the monkeys, of course, had to play all day under deck. But on these days, we would see to that they were not under-stimulated.
These were all Captain Stork´s orders.

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Later that evening, I went to Sully´s cabin - bringing two packages of Maryland Cookies - and I asked him what he actually knew about the lion. Sully, who had taken Benzodiazepine in a larger quantity than was agreed upon, was more than willing to share his knowledge:
Betty, who lived her adult life in the Netherlands, had been sold by a private, small zoological garden outside of Surabaya, Indonesia, many years ago to the millionaire Carson, who had stepped by and fallen deeply in love with the animal. Since he was very well off and had more than the financial resources needed, he bought the lion and took it home to his mansion outside Rotterdam in Europe.
Here it lived with his family, in their three-story home, until the death of Mr. Carson. It had had a jolly life, full of walks throughout Rotterdam, where Carson had let children ride on the lion.
In his will, Carson had set aside 2 Million British £ to Rattner&Rattner to take Betty, as they named the lion, back to her native zoo. Rattner&Rattner had, through Mr. Geronimo Weichsel, tried to contact this zoo but had not yet succeeded. Not to lose the money, the Rattners, though, let Mr. Weichsel take the lion on a vessel and then – when well in Surabaya - to sort the whole thing out, the best he could. In this way, the Rattners hoped to claim the money legally.
I thanked Sully for this new information, which neither Dorothy nor Wilma knew. I knew this because I had asked them about Betty, and they did not know a thing about her.
When I told her the new facts, Dorothy said that Geronimo did not dare to come close to the lion, which was completely harmless and quite like a little puppy.

---

In the U.S.A., the new plague soared. Cosmetic as the sickness seemed to be, it affected - for OBVIOUS reasons - more the white population than the black.

One might not think skin color should bother people as much as it did. A change from white to darkish blue seemed to 99% of the white population a severe blow to their whole existence. Not that 99% of the white people thought they were very handsome or anything like that; they simply did NOT WANT to be blue.

The virus seemed to be airborne and highly contagious. It could travel several yards in the air and still cause this disease.
Since people fled from it, some of those who fled were, without knowing it, contagious and thus carried with them the disease. Birds also transmitted it. All kinds of birds soon carried the illness without being sick themselves.
On the third day, the new news anchor at CNN, a black girl named Janelle Parsons, told the world that the disease now had traveled to all continents except Antarctica. ( Blue people tended not to publicly show their (new) faces more than necessary.)
Several ships were already heading for Antarctica and soon changed this fact.
Due to the panic created by the new plague, c:a 50% of the communities in the U.S.A., Canada, Latin America, and parts of Europe and Asia had collapsed. Food was not administered any longer; hence riots broke out, and entire towns were complete mayhem.
The World Economy in just a couple of days had declined ten years.
President Ellis, all blue in his face, in vain tried to calm people down
“It does not matter how you LOOK! It matters who you ARE!” he said.
Janelle reported that several analysts feared a breakdown of Western Civilization.
From the least affected continent, Africa, not many reactions were reported. An African president had made a fool of himself by the ironic remark, "Now they could use a white-face!” indicating that blue people could use makeup or something….

Onboard the Punjab, we were all stunned.
Captain Stork summoned us to a brief update on his thoughts. 29×2 ears were listening to his words on the morning of the 11th of January:
“Dear fellows!
It seems as if Mother Nature has now cured the lion of the Lion´s Disease. One of the horses, who also had contracted this disease, has recovered. We are currently only waiting for Mrs. Williamson to handle us the very same message.”
Stork here turned to Tonya and asked, in a suppressed voice:
“No sign of improvement yet, I suppose…?”
Tonya shook her head but still looked slightly optimistic, wearing her black eyepatches, decorated with yellow lion faces, sewn on upside down.

“Now,” the Captain continued,” to the situation with the new disease on land. The so called Blue Disease has the world in its tight grip, and it seems that this relatively benign disease yet has just as profound an impact on people as if they all were threatened to contract “our” disease.
As always, my understanding of the situation is that we should rather keep to concrete facts, keep calm and see how things evolve without making any hasty decisions based on any superstitious theory of any kind. We will continue our journey to Surabaya at a modest speed. We are in no hurry. I don´t think, now, as I have told the Prime Minister of the Lion, that they will send any bomber plane to finish us off.
Any questions?”
There, astonishingly enough, were none. This might prove the confidence and deep respect we all had in our Boss.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## Light Ahoy!

Noon. 19th of January. After a horrendous week, when civilization – as we know it … - almost was obliterated, it became clear that the skin disease, called the Blue Disease, only was a temporary defense reaction from the immune system. Everybody who had been infected soon got their skin color back and had no other symptoms of the disease either.
Thus the head News Anchor on CNN oftly was a white person again, and President Ellis could, extremely reproachful, with utter strength condemn the riots and burning and hijacking, and then with a smile on his white face finally, in complete thoughtlessness, tell the whole nation:

"Thank God, we are all white again!"

---
On m/s Punjab we also had a party. Mrs. Williamson was well again, and Oscar Petersen and Hollingsworth too.
The plague was soon to be over. And we might all be able to return to our families.
This was confirmed by Ruben and Liza, who both had the firm conviction that we all could be through a quarantine system possibly only weeks from this date be able to walk out into the harbor of Surabaya, as soon as the authorities there had been convinced that there was no worry anymore. Of course, parts of Surabaya were burned down like all other cities globally, and the town was all in disarray. So nobody thought there would be any significant problem for us.
Some of us thought it wise to remain onboard our vessel as long as possible and as long as we had food, water and fuel left.
Captain ordered a big party for all the thirty of us to be set up in the big saloon onboard. Of course, it would be a little crowdy, but Captain Stork thought that we badly needed a party. He even went up to his wife and kissed her on her cheek.
---
On the following day, which was a Saturday, the party was set for 05.00 pm, in the middle of the dogwatch. I volunteered for the watch since I never much liked parties.
The interest worldwide for our party was now almost non-existent due to the big crisis caused by the Fake Blue Disease, as it now was called. Thus Toby chose not to film the event. How it played out, I was later told by Dorothy.
The guys in the kitchen had served an excellent supper, consisting of salmon, potatoes, and mushrooms, and it was delicious. Two long tables were set up, and lots

of ale and whiskey were served. Red napkins, o the kind used for Christmas, lay beneath every plate. Wilma had decorated the table with shells she had found someplace.
Silent music emerged from a surround sound Hi-Fi Sony utility managed by a computer program designed by Toby. Voices of Donna Summer and Dionne Warwick, which were his favorites, were heard in the ship's saloon.
The Captain was knocking at the side of his wineglass with his fork and said:
“I am not much of a talker. Instead, I wish you all would like to say a couple of words of what has come out of this journey for every one of you! I think it would be a perfect final for the most exotic journey I have ever made. Do you want to do that for me … and all your comrades and friends on board here? Please! It does not matter if it is long or short. Just a few words would do just as fine. Thank You!”
All men ( and women ) assured the Captain that it had been a memorable journey and that they would never forget anything they had experienced. Many blessings were cast on the Captain.
The Herrnhutians had made a particular song to the Captain, and they showed everybody that they were not without self-irony at all.
“The sweet Captain will come to Heaven by the side of sweet Christ and the worthy Apostles, Hallelujah!”
Dorothy then also sang a little Welch song.
Toby brought greetings from the YouTube community.
They then danced in the evening, and the four women had to dance with everyone.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## Jesu bleibet …

3rd of February. Life on our m/s Punjab changed for the better in the months that followed. That is, for most of us.
We were now in the n middle of the Indian Ocean, enjoying the North-East Monsoon.

Unfortunately, I on this day had to conclude that Schoener and Contour had been found dead in their prison cabin one night. They were both hanged, and it seemed to me, as well as to Big Nick (Nicholas Williamson), that Schoener first hanged Contour by the porthole handle and then hanged himself by the hook for the lamp in the ceiling. Hence, we had another burial on the same night when the two terrorists were dumped in the sea in two tarp sacks. Geronimo played a tune by Bach ( Jesu bleibet meine Freude… ) on the accordion, and we said a short prayer. Geronimo accidentally smuggled some tritone-chords into the short hymn, which was not found in the original sheet music. But I immediately forgave him in my mind, and I don´t think anybody else noticed this subtle "finger" from Mr. Weichsel. But I don´t know.
I think Schoener tricked Contour into crime, and tricked him out of life too.

All who had been affected by the Lion´s Disease now very healthy again, and nobody had suffered any lasting trouble from it, other than mild hysteria with Linda, Petersen, and Hollingsworth. Sully and Mrs. Williamson seemed healthier than before.
Sully had a smile on his face, and he whispered to me that he intended to go back to horseracing, buy a horse, and hire a jockey back in Liverpool.
He was sure we would all get back to Great Britain again.

---

I had this morning, like many mornings before, checked upon the animals in the hatches and the sailors in the forecastle and was on my way to the Captain´s cabin when I heard a rare sound. I had just passed Toby´s cabin and realized the sound had emerged from there. When I pushed my ear to his door, I heard that he practiced Indonesian. I smiled at his perseverance and continued to the Captain´s quarters.

"So nice to see you!" Captain Stork greeted," I just had a talk
With the PM. He said he was very proud of me, and I told him that I was proud of HIM. Then I asked if he was blue. He was, he said. But, according to his doctor, it would go away until Midsummer. He would be alright. We agreed upon taking a beer sometime when I got back to Great Britain."
I was stunned by the complacent attitude of Captain, but I slowly had adjusted myself to surprise.
Then the Captain said:
"Seriously speaking: I don´t know how I would have managed without you, Sam! I will NEVER be able to thank you enough."

This was another surprise, and I excused myself and went back on deck.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Outside of SURABAYA; INDONESIA

Morning. 16th May. Surabaya is the third-largest city in Indonesia. Greater Surabaya has about nine and a half million inhabitants, that is over a giant area.
The weather was a dream. We had been sailing for a long time now, but now we were all here - outside S., our original destination. And this was the strange fruit of the Captain´s thinking – combined with the "thinking" of the viruses. Everybody else on board had questioned the peculiar decision. "Why sail to Surabaya when we are not anyway let into any port at all, on the entire globe?"
They were saying this in response to the Captain´s stubborn decision to go to Surabaya, motivating this by his quest just to fulfill orders. If he had an order and a mandate to take the cargo to Surabaya, lion and all, he was going to do that, epidemic or no epidemic! We did not know, any of us, on what calculus our Captain had made his choice. Was it a kind of fatalism? Nobody had ever questioned his judgment openly. The ones who had come closest to do so were the two late-comers on board, the scientists, Dr. Leopold and Dr. Cumberstreet.
Ruth, as well as Liza Cumberstreet, the Lauren Bacall-alike on m/s Punjab, was standing by the Captain's side as we narrowed in onto the harbor in the gentle breeze. Thin, black smoke rose from burnt buildings, and the whole town seemed badly

rampaged from riots. There was a harbormaster, though, and he allowed anybody who could show a doctor´s proof of health status to come ashore.
Tonya and Big Nick arranged with a sluice system and provided the health passports. The shipping company talked with its captain, and Stork said that he should see that at least the lion was brought to its home zoo again if it was all right again. Dorothy and I were chosen to complete this last part of its journey.
"Don´t be gone for more than a week!" the captain said to me, reminding me that I still had my duties on the ship.
The rest of the passengers and crew on the Punjab hugged us and told us to take care of ourselves. We all exchanged telephone numbers, and some of us even cried a bit. Harmenz, the Chief, even hugged the lion and kissed it on its brow.
We secured that the lion cage, made of cast iron, was in good shape, put it on a trailer, and lifted the cage ashore with our most giant crane. On a rented lorry, we soon sat driving on the road outside Surabaya with a local driver at the wheel. It was a roasting day, and both Dorry and I were wearing airy white clothes. We had big smiles on our faces. Never a second had we thought everything would end this peacefully.
The longer from Surabaya we came, the more exotic the landscape turned out to be. Large volcanoes hovered over us, and people lived off small farms with hens and cows.
Before we left the ship, Hobson had asked me what we should do if we found out that there was no zoo to be found. We could not just leave the lion in the countryside, could we? This was - as they say - a good question…
I certainly was unwilling to give Betty up to an ordinary zoological garden.
The lion itself showed no particular sign of appreciation over being at home again. It looked at the trees, the mountains, and the small brooks that we passed and seemed totally indifferent. Towards us, she was very friendly, though, and if we told her to balance a yardstick on her nose, she did so.
The lorry driver, Sitompul, who made some *roti pangang* for us on a small portable stove, said that zoos in Indonesia were commonplace but could be as short-lived as the animals in them.
Both Dorry and I loved the exotic landscape, with its rich colors. The sun and the moon painted the Indonesian countryside just like Burne Hogarth would have done. The lion was on the go and kept an eye on everything. When she was hungry, she walked right up to me and opened up her mouth in a funny way, indicating her need to be fed. We bought a piglet from a farmer. As we drove past a volcano, the lion growled with joy. I felt like Tarzan, and the lion was my Devil.

*23rd of May*. We drove on red roads, made from hard clay, past small scooters with two people on one. The lorry drove on the left side, which I was used to. Some houses here were light blue, and others were pink. There were small brooks and canals everywhere, and in the lowland, lots of small rice fields. We spotted dogs all day, medium-sized dogs in all colors and shapes. Nobody seemed to own them, and they all were very respectable and looked as if they were unemployed and looking for a job.

Of course, we got much attention because of beautiful Betty, and we soon found out that we could set up a small show with her performing tricks. We bought a small black-and-white Tibetan ape in a store – its name was Gonzales ( or we thought the Chinese vendor said something like that ) – and Betty immediately took a liking to him. In a day or two, they learned to make tricks and dances together, and our revenue from the shows increased by 1000%.

We met through our driver with a family, who lived on the edge by a mountainside outside a small village the family Wonopati, ( Abraham and Emmy and little Mahdi ) we stayed for a couple of days, as paying guests, while we were looking for our small zoo, that was to found in this very village, whose name I forgot.

One night, we all enjoyed a movie on the telly. It was a film noir, a Hollywood classic with Dan Duryea.

We all thoroughly enjoyed it. Nothing is like film noir! After the movie, Abraham and I would check the animals out in the backyard, but then it was found that no animals were there. Both the monkey and the lioness had disappeared. We were looking for a tracking dog and could then, for an hour, follow the tracks along paths, which ran along with the small fields to the mountain foot, where the tracks disappeared in a stream. In the shadow of the volcano, we finally had to give up.

The lion had been released from its wooden cage by the monkey, and then the lion had lured this peaceful creature with her back to nature.

Dorry and I had to give up. We returned to Surabaya town on the 1st of June with mixed feelings, looking for an airplane to take Dorothy back to Europe. I had to go back to m/s Punjab to see that she and the captain did not get stuck in Indonesia.

Nothing was ever heard again from neither Betty nor Gonzales.

FINIS

# DEAR ARMAMENTE

- a novel

# Chapter One

It all happened in Baltimore. David West, a lonely, white boy of twenty-five, shared an apartment with nurse student Elsa in the center of the town at Upper Fell's Point.

In Baltimore, the global competition in trade had since long closed down its steel plants and shipyards. The COVID-19 epidemic had done away with a hell of a lot of other jobs. People were, of course, still thriving with their lives, inventing new jobs and careers. Despite climate change, summer had arrived, birds had started singing, and coyotes were hunting rats and weasels as usual. And then autumn came, surprised at the trees dropping their leaves. Baltimore, a predominantly black city, has a recent, troubling history of crime. Nowadays, the city is in much better shape, and some say it is even growing slightly popular among young folks as a cultural hub. David himself, who had vivid cultural interests, was currently on social security and did not know what to do with his life. David was an outsider, a goof, and a real sissy. He was, not surprisingly to anyone, thus full of despair. And he had, unfortunately, no real family to turn to either. Despite all his oddities, many regarded him as a decent fellow who was not unpleasant to converse with. Allt hände i Baltimore.

Young West was blond and had smooth North European features, and his pale face was broad with marked eyebrows and his eyes deeply set and dark blue. There ran a peculiar furrow between the small eyebrows. Most of the time, he, therefore, unfortunately, had an angry or dissatisfied look. The tiny, red mouth was also open all the time. Maybe there was something wrong with the ventilator function of his small nose. He wore what once had been a postmodern, neat, worn jeans dress but now looked like rags. Mahogany-colored boots with high heels made him look slightly taller, just like middle height. David´s movements were quite irregular and insecure and had no musicality in them or any timing at all. As a whole, his walk was just some sort of combined jerking and swaying. Some people seemed to think that David was soulless. However, David was no junkie. Last summer, he had been using cocaine for a short period. That was it. David promised himself not to use any stimulants, ever. He had begun experiencing abnormal things and having visual hallucinations. These were unpleasant experiences, and David had interpreted it as a result of drug use. Because of this, he had decided that – at least – he intended not to perish because of drugs. In August last year, he made that decision on the 23rd, and he was determined never to go back to cocaine or any other medication, come what may! This decision was so damned steadfast for an apparent and distinct reason. The hallucinations hadn't ceased to haunt him.

He knew of those few people who had learned to live a whole and social life, hallucinating. Within the cultural realm, there were many examples. David always

had an enormous appetite for books. Writers like Baudelaire, de Quincey, and Coleridge had learned to live a life, including daily visions. But he, he simply didn't want to. He wanted to be sound, unaffected by substances from bright-colored mushrooms, striped snakes, and blossoms, so red that no cameras could grasp their redness. He just didn't want to live a life like that, torn away from himself!

David was downhearted, almost continuously, because of these experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Nobody suspected the real reason for his murky features. He had not told anybody.

It never occurred to David that most of these other people could, in theory have hallucinations. However, David simply did not believe that was the case. He would have heard them complain, and they did not. Many kids in Baltimore were on drugs, though. It was a common habit. Widely known was that many kids, mostly black, even earned their living in selling drugs. Maybe a few of those kids had hallucinations and did not tell anybody but just continued to take their dope because they were ashamed. They doped themselves then to try to get rid of the hallucinations and doped themselves into eternity. David, though, wanted to return to square one.

David was not only experiencing hallucinations in the evenings and the mornings like it had been in the beginning. He was also having delusions during the day. David wondered if the experiences of the unreal ever would vanish. Either, he thought, they would stay, and he would never be able to be as fast in his head as he had been before, or they would, right out of the blue, simply stop. It was also possible that the future would present a middle way: He would perhaps suffer mild aberrations from the saneness he so dearly worshiped. No doctor, psychologist, or even magician or spiritualist could tell anybody the long-term result of abstinence. He could just hope that he one day would get rid of all this tumultuous suffering. He thought about it repeatedly and continuously. It was to him a mixture of deep sorrow and faint hope.

As a small comfort, he also often carried a small bottle of reddish Baltimore beet extract he got from a friend with him and a Glock pistol as well.

He in his twenty-five years long life had had one single sexual experience, and it had not turned out well.

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This Sunday afternoon he was, like he most of the time was, alone. It was a grey day and looked as if it was going to rain. Despite this, David decided to take a short walk in the yards close to where he lived, at St. Vincent's Cemetery, which was almost as snug and flowery as the famous gardens at Cylburn Mansion a bit further inland. A small white-breasted nuthatch sat picking on a branch in an elm tree that stood by a grave a few yards from him. It sat upside down, which David had never saw before.

"Perhaps that bird is crazy," he thought. He knew that his thoughts used to be "all over the place." It was long since he could concentrate upon anything at all.
The nuthatch in the tree looked at him. Its small black eye fixated him in a way that was not crazy at all. The bird looked friendly and a little begging. David often thought about the psyche of animals. It was almost magic to try to understand their urge and their simple doings. Sometimes, David used to feed the ravens, crows, and magpies in town. He knew that many crows in the harbor remembered him. They sometimes followed him around at the piers and even in the allays close to the harbor.

He had no money, but still decided to stroll away from the churchyard to walk down to the drugstore close to where he lived to buy some milk.
Politically he regarded himself as an anarchist. Perhaps they would let him have some milk for free. They knew him. At least they did so by his utter features.

# Chapter Two

"If there is one thing I would like to know
about a person, I would chose
to know what made him serious."
( S. Kierkegaard.)

Eric Goldkettel, an elderly Connecticut medical doctor originally from Tidwell, Maine, was since many years tormented by a memory of the most unhappy love. Once a day, in the morning hours, in half slumber, Eric's memories of the beautiful, voluptuous, fanciful, unreliable Martha appeared from the forgotten. It only glimpsed by in the after dreams visual realm. These were thus memories of unhappy love but unhappy love is love too. Eric had never been married, but had dedicated his life – as the saying is – to his medical profession. His increasingly inconceivable loneliness followed him unconsciously like a shadow in the Connecticut countryside. His life had turned wrong in these later years. Goldkettel had lived a rich life, social and a very caring person as he was, but, in these last years, melancholy had crept up upon him inexplicably.
The pine forests where he used to take his daily walks almost constantly refused to solace his mourning. The silence of the landscape brought "a month of Mondays…." to his soul.

The doctor from harsh Maine had early on taken a fancy in western Connecticut's very gentle rural landscape. His home, Reader's mansion, was situated, embedded in

the most enchanting greenery, on a small slope by a lake. The house itself was an adventurous wooden castle, and it had a small guesthouse built of yellow brick nearby. The closest village, Bloomside Grove, which was situated southwards by the lake's outflow, by the old brick mill ruin, had a shrinking population. The church of the parish, which was a Quaker one, was but a tiny reddish shed and the vicar, Dr. Sonderham, was not popular. He was busy writing theological treaties.

The landscape tried to market itself as a recreation ground for youngsters, fishing and riding as main attractions. But mostly retired people populated the houses; many had moved back from Florida or Georgia not long ago. In Bloomside Grove itself, some IT-entrepreneurs had tried to build a small Silicon Valley. Still, the houses now – after a global depression - were deserted and torn. Even a theatre had been built, but it was used as an inline skating rink. The local Quakers were fervent though in their religious tremor. The assistant parson of the small congregation, Jansen, summoned it to service every Sunday. Jansen held, especially for children, adorable predictions, which all contradicted science, of which he was incredibly proud.
Sonderham didn´t care.
Bloomside grove was a calm place on earth. Most people here did not even own a car but drove around on bicycles or small motorcycles. Goldkettel had a car, an old white Buick. No electric vehicle had ever been spotted in Bloomside Grove. A conservative area as it was most people wanted to hear the small pangs from the motorcycles and fell the smell of old honest gasoline.

Burg Lake in front of Eric´s mansion was always black – and the saying was that there was a monster in it certainly had an air of romance and autism over it. The lake had its name after a ancient local tyrant. Around 1720, Mr. Burg had built his house near the lake, on an aboriginal graveyard. He had been killed soon after by an Mohegan arrow. His name had been Burg the Porcelain Potter.
The hills around Burg lake, of moderate height as they were, stretched their heads. The mountains seemed as uninterested in the small pond as in the pastures and the waterways.
Two swans, a couple, swam in the middle of the lake, rushingly chasing brown ducks along the dark surface. Paper signs on neat posts around the lake were informing people of climate change and the necessity to keep nature clean and free from drugs. The pine forest had a sad look, and some people had heard the trees whisper ominously in the night:" Everything is long gone. Long gone. Long gone. The ravens

are gone. The ravens are gone. It is way too late." Or this Poeian lines was at least what Eric thought people had heard.

A Cessna airplane suddenly flew by, and the swans on the lake then rapidly hurried ashore. One might frequently see the doctor walking the small paths around the lake, with an improvised stick in hand. Goldkettel was old, and he was antique, bucktoothed, and outdated.
Today, an ordinary September Sunday, it looked like it was going to rain. Goldkettel's open eyes narrowed, and he took out a small foldable cap from his waist pocket and put on his grey hair.

Soon the rain splattered down on the remote landscape by the Burg Lake. Close to Reading's, there was another property owned by the Delmonte's. The houses of Goldkettel and Delmonte lay in a suite by the lakeshore. Goldkettel's was the one westward, more toward the deep forest and the stuck-up mountains. Behind Delmonte's, there was more mixed vegetation and finally, to the east on bushy meadows lonely, utterly small cows of foreign breed were straying around looking for fresh grass and snails. Paul Delmonte was a well-to-do old author of colorful bird books. He lived alone together with a young, dark-haired philosophy student from NY. She served as a temporary housekeeper. Aged 23, this eager student, who had taken up this job as a pleasant variation, went by the name of Armamente Dulcinea. I think her real name was Amy Potts.

When Eric Goldkettel arrived at his house again, he glanced in the direction of his closest neighbor's house, at the Palace, Delmonte's mansion. So he caught a glimpse of young Armamente on Delmonte´s veranda, how she, dressed in a simple short black dress, stretched out to clean a windowpane with a cleaning broom. The girl had dark hair, greyish eyes, and pale but healthy skin. Even from afar one could see that she was an intelligent young woman. One can often see such a thing by the way somebody moves.
Adorned by a red rosette in her shortcut raven hair she - with an elegant but practical gesture - threw out some small decorative mats from a balcony. She simultaneously waved at Goldkettel and whistled. She did not now notice the rain, and feeding the cat, which, striped and small, gently stroked her leg, she tried to push it out of the rainfall. Armamente seemed just a kid, a schoolgirl. But she had this air of intelligence and awareness about her that put Eric in almost a good mood. He forgot about Martha and about his arthritis’s.

"What a beautiful day!" she yelled, not too high.

The slender, athletic girl in her small black dress on a small blue t-shirt suddenly rushed down the stairs and came out on the porch while the rain now took a pause. In September rain can be awfully intermittent. She swiftly ran down the small lane, past a dead crow which was half consumed by some seabirds, towards the old doctor, who stood by the gate of Delmonte's elegant wooden fence. She finally reached the gate and said, pulling aside some locks of her raven hair, which had fallen in her one blue eye:

"Hello, Doctor! I heard you are going to have a visit today?"

"Oh, yeah, Armamente, I sure will."

"But who is she then?" The girl with the small stick panted a breathed rather heavily, as if she liked to breathe that way. She had an exciting pair of shades below her blue eyes, greyish and purple. Her expression was of one that enjoys life to the fullest, and there was a determination in it that said that she did not intend to let anybody ruin her enjoyment.

The doctor's heart leaped, and then he said:

"It is a friend of Martha's, my former love, Inga. My friend's name is Inga," he clarified," Inga North."

All of a sudden, Paul Delmonte - very fit and agile - appeared like from behind. He had come from the forest and was walking his dog, a bloodhound named Oscar. Delmonte – a man in his sixties - had lived on his farm for eternity. The prominent author was tall and energetic and had an all-consuming interest in animals, especially birds. He was freckled and red-haired. From his shoulder dangled a small old-fashioned Winchester rifle. Eric thought Delmonte was pretentious. To make things worse, - and pretentiousness was, according to Goldkettel – worse enough, Delmonte was in the process of building a large guesthouse close to Eric's property.

Goldkettel seemed an old, goat, while Delmonte flourished and was with excellent health, a happy chap with a big red nose. Some natural scientists are thriving and keep themselves in excellent health by their work. Delmonte perhaps wanted to impress Armamente, who was brand new as his servant, because he lifted his left hand, smacked his upper leg and shouted:

"Oscar! JUMP! JUMP!"

Oscar did not move though, but sullenly instead stared at Armamente.

Delmonte was busy writing a book on trained birds but also had an interest in sheep and dogs. Goldkettel was not impressed by the actual books fabricated by Delmonte,

but Delmonte's book sold. Goldkettel himself planned to take up painting or archeology or something.

Paul Delmonte's latest wife had died just half a year ago. Her name was Swanee. She had drowned herself in the Burg Lake.
The beautiful and active Armamente, who, in her paleness, seemed to suffer from a lack of some special vitamin but still seemed full of youthful energy, had been hired just a month ago. The agency who had brought her had told Delmonte that she was a real treat. She was a philosophy student but had taken courses in cooking, they had said.

"Oh," said Armamente all of a sudden, and she reached for her foot." My poor foot, I think I have wrenched it."

"Here." her master with the rifle said, and he handled to her a red scarf that he had worn around his neck. She took it and put it around her neck, instead of around her ankle, and laughed and smiled at the same time. She then hit him playfully with the back of her hand.

“Don´t try to hit on me!” she said, ”You know I am really a boy.”

The doctor - not at all grasping the meaning of what Armamente just said - looked from the irritating Delmonte to the enchanting philosophy student and then to Oscar. Oscar had, you see, let out a loud barking.
They then all started to laugh.

"You look a little pale," Delmonte broke off and took Armamente's hand and subsequently tried to kiss it. The girl however took off and ran away across the grass, and as if her foot was okay, she soon disappeared to the backside of the mansion, where they kept the hens. Armamente, although she probably was not used to living in the countryside, had no trouble adjusting herself to any condition, so it seemed.
She then appeared from behind the corner of the house and cried out:
“There´s nothing wrong with me!”
The doctor and the author of books on birds stood left alone at the gravel by the gate.

"It looks like it is drying up." Eric finally said and felt uplifted. Maybe life was not over after all.
Oscar Bloodhound then appeared sniffed for something in the doctor's pocket. The doctor always brought medicines of all kinds in his pockets, in case of emergency. He glanced at Delmonte. Although Eric neither liked Delmonte nor his books, he was fascinated by the man and his knowledge of Biology and nature. Eric, who was well educated, and a double-doctor, had great respect for facts and knowledge.

"Certainly, I will send her for a health examination.", Delmonte said, in a serious tone, "After all, you have to have a sound housekeeper," Delmonte said.

"She is a real beauty." the doctor said without noticing that he did so.

"I think she is a police undercover. They do not send out girls like that sometimes," Delmonte said, ignoring Goldkettel´s remark on her features. Delmonte was referring to the housemaid agencies. Armamente, all the same, happily shouted from a window:

"Mister Delmonte! Breakfast is ready!"

"Police?" Eric cried out. "Do you have anything to hide?"

"Oh, no… But it could possibly be connected to my activities in Africa. I have had some business with buying and selling animals there."

The pair of swans, lying quietly on the lakeshore, suddenly came flowing up to the grass plane in front of Delmonte's mansion.

"Does she feed the swans?" Goldkettel asked, all red in his face. He often went all red. Goldkettel was greatly respected for his kindness and generous attitude, and for his respect for other people and their sufferings and he had a vivid soul.

"No way." said the author of bird books, with inexplicable certainty..

The doctor also felt a little smell of whisky from the big man. That might explain the absentmindedness and oddly casual behavior of his neighbor. As for example his remarks abot Africa and the Police.

Suddenly there was a commotion out in the middle of the sea. Generally nothing interesting at all happened on the lake. One of the swans seemed to have trouble when it tried to lift off the lake's surface. One of its feet dragged a green plastic rope with it. The other swan looked extremely troubled and kept a few yards away, blasting out its anguish with impressive decibel.

Delmonte took steps nearer to the coastline, but at the same time, there was shouting from the balcony.

"I am coming!"

It was Armamente, who swiftly swung from the balcony, jumped onto the grass, and as soon as she started running, she took off her black dress and then, when she reached the shore, her leather boots. She took a small fabric bag that she saw lying on a bench by the little bridge, glided into the water, and swam out to the poor swan, which probably had a frantic look in its dark eyes.

Some people glide in the water like torpedoes, the sensitive doctor thought. Armamente did.

When Armamente had come close, she grabbed the swan by the head – like it was the most natural thing - and forced it into the woolen bag. Then, holding the swan between her legs, she freed the swan's foot from the awful plastic rope. Within minutes she was back ashore in company with the two men, who, perplexed, were standing by the bridge on the seaside, babbling from exaggeration and anguish.

"Pooh!", Armamente sighed while she slid out of her sweater and then, keeping her bra on, rubbed herself dry with a multicolored striped cloth, handed to her by the doctor, who happened to carry one in his bag.

The two men were profoundly admiring her.

"I never saw anything like that!" said the doctor in a very high voice." I thought you were a philosopher!"

"Ha ha," Armamente replied. "Practical Ethics…" She held out a piece of the rope, which glittered bright green in its polystyrene shape. She then simply gave the rope to Mr. Delmonte. After having given Eric a smile she then long-legged ran inside the Palace, after which Eric immediately congratulated Delmonte on his excellent housekeeper.

"She is definitely a police." Delmonte said, revealing a certain sense of humor.

The two men said goodbye and Eric – while he unbuttoned his shirt a little - turned to go to his place. Reading was situated just a hundred yards away from the Palace, which lay closer to the lake.

Delmonte looked after the doctor, and he muttered:

"Yeah, yeah, the old doctor is up over his ears."

Eric had a feeling that Delmonte was a psychopath. Through the years, we have found more and more reasons to classify people as psychopaths. Perhaps it is a good thing. Classification is important.

Delmonte had stayed on the porch and his face lit up since he saw how Oscar, with a leap, nearly caught the swan that had not been subjected to the rope. However, the swan, that probably was the male one, which had looked for a spectator's spot on the shore, took a jump and unfortunately ran right into the Delmonte mansion kitchen. After a few seconds, the winged beast came out again, carrying a piece of butter bread in its beak. It then disappeared far out over the woods, strongly as if it was revived and strengthened by the fate and happenings related to his swan wife, and with a great thunder moving its black wings. The female swan lay quite still by the side of the small bridge just looking in front of her, as if meditating.

Burg Lake now was deserted and the rain from up above was gone too. The old bloodhound had a sore look in its reddish eyes, as they often have. Armamente's laughter, however, bounced bright out over the surface of the dark lake.

The doctor soon slowly sat down in his office. After having refreshed himself with a glass of carbonated Vichy water, he took out his opium pipe. Nothing beats opium in its very softness, he sometimes thought. He was a late follower of the great De Quincey.

Delmonte, in turn, inside his house went to the kitchen to have another whisky on the rocks. Bell's it was. But Armamente also had called him a second time to bacon and eggs breakfast. She was now very fancifully dressed up in a red shirt and a matching semi-old black uniform jacket, which she had found in a cupboard in the basement. The smitten jacket had the name "Swanee" embroidered on its back. Certainly Delmonte had not told Armamente about the unfortunate happenings relating to his wife´s death.
In the early morning, Armamente Dulcinea had earlier this day been out in the woods and collected some chanterelles too. She was serving them, lightly fried, with Bacon, eggs, dill sauce, tea, marmalade, bread, and butter. She was a good cook.
Broad-shouldered and slim-hipped as she was, she really looked more like a boy. Her chin was of normal size to a woman, though.

# Chapter Three

"All that can be thought,
can be thought clearly."
( Wittgenstein )

David West was on his way from the cemetery to buy milk at the drugstore that resided on the corner between East Pratt Street and East Harvey Street.
A slight, lukewarm rain had like I said been falling now and then all day. More often than not, on evenings like these after the earliest autumn storm ever, small, friendly ponds appeared on the lonely streets of the flat picturesque city. Everybody hoped that there would not be another storm coming. Storms can do a lot of harm in Baltimore.
Lights from random street lamps glittered brightly. They were soon reflected by myriads or more wet surfaces outside the low, nondescript concrete buildings. Cars drove in all directions in the center of the city. Lukewarm water silently flooded in the gutters outside the six-story houses near Pratt Street. Three rugged young magpies fought over a filthy pizza slice thrown under the bus stop's worn wooden bench. By Patterson Park, the bus resided in the middle of the street; the engine turned off, taillights still blinking. It required repairing, some black men seemed to think, gathering around it, some of them busy with their phones.
Dusk was compact. It was almost a classic vampire night. The houses were void of any significant decorations and painted in dark sepia, and their eyes were closed. Some of them entirely lacked inhabitants. Baltimore was a town that did not grow anymore. The old rowhouses were beautiful, though. They were not like the new ones. Architecture, by the way, is an extraordinary form of art. Because it is, of course, not art at all, it is at least not entirely art. It has a major practical side, as far as houses actually are for living in them. Hence, we might conclude that the architect ought to have some rudimentary knowledge about both beauty and practicality; it is thus a two-sided business. In Baltimore, I say, the art aspect is very much pronounced.

People marveled at the strange nights because it was as if there was an extra shadow this year, or an additional light when shadows came. One cannot imagine shades without light, which is both a strange thing and not strange at all.
Some people think that life is a tale, some say there´s a difference between a tale and a myth, some say tales are necessary, and many people think politicians are telling tales. "You have to have the defining story.";" You have to own the story."; "Who has the story wins the election!" and the like. Now: a tale is never really just the course of events. No. The story that I am telling - I'll let you know… - is not about the facts themselves. Literature, in general, is not about the events that comprise the story. No course of events ever makes a story. The report or the source of a specified kind of report is not equal to what is happening. There is always something else that makes a story. Content is something infinitely small. Primarily one might assert that what makes the story is the underlying myth. Myth is the law and the conscience of a society, and of the times we live in. Myth is the condition. In precisely the same way, it is not bricks and layers that make houses, not in Baltimore's charming town anyway. It is something else. You have to understand the mystery of the "else" and of "something." Myth is something else, and you are never quite certain of what the myth is.
Hence: if you have a defining story, it is a story that is not about events but about something else and of the mystery of the Else you might be near to the truth about what is happening, and you might be very near the myth. If you have a defining story, that story defines the future of the Myth. If you happen to have a defining story ( I am not saying that THIS is a defining story ) you have laid the ground for the myth of the future, which is equal to the future of the myth. That is one of the strange things with myths, that this is the case. The reason for this peculiarity is that no one has ever been able to establish the nature of the nature of myth. Myth is so elusive that you can be certain that it is there, but you don´t have a clue to what it is. It effects everything, but you cannot ever catch it and nail the meaning of it. Myth defines, but it cannot be defined.
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On this Sunday morning David had been trying, in vain, to configure an entire web server onto his laptop at home. Why he did this, he was not sure. He knew it was not very useful. But someday it might be useful to know how this was done, he thought. Like many youngsters in a Modern World he had rather advanced computer skills.

On his short evening errand walk to the drug store, he suddenly in the street corner ( the drugstore was situated in a street corner ) spotted an old skinny man, accompanied

by a black and white terrier. The dog seemed to be sick or something and it certainly looked very wretched. David approached the man, who seemed to be in his seventies, was rather tall, about 188 cm, had grey hair, and seemed more than skinny at this close range. He was thin, on the verge of being anorectic, but very energetic. The senior with the terrier had a dark blue striped costume on, 1949 Humphrey Bogart style, outdated but still stunning. The outfit was hanging around his body. He also had brought a light grey raincoat, pending on his arm.
David - who wore a yellow duffel coat - was an aesthete. He was susceptible to the striped suit's beauty. Nothing in the world was so beautiful as a striped suit, according to him. Perhaps the striped suit was an American Classic? He didn´t know. Hadn´t Marlon Brando had a striped suit in The Godfather?

"What´s the combo?" David West asked, referring to both to the man, the dog, and the entire situation and because it was his common greeting phrase these days. The dog seemed to be really out of its mind, and it rolled its eyes, dragging its cord in one direction after another, thus almost encircling its caretaker.
However, there was no reaction from the rather impressively dressed thin man on anything. The old man seemed sober and alert, though.

"Is anything wrong?" David reiterated with a wave of slight anger.
Then he suddenly remembered having seen the man before. Yes, at the jeweler's store. Oh, yes! He was the one who bought the $4000 necklace. David, in turn, on this sad day, had sold his mother´s wedding ring. His mother was since long deceased. The golden ring, the token, had for years been a dear memory to him.

"No, of course, I at least know what's ailing him." the man responded and in a low tone. "The dog is epileptic. He´ll be fine in a moment."
The man seemed on guard. David looked at the poor animal.

"Epileptic? Ah, I see." David said in a brighter tone, much to ease his confusion. The younger man, who ordinarily had a way with words, was easily disturbed by health and sickness matters, like the dog´s predicament, and could not this time grasp the situation. Could dogs have epilepsy? He took a step back and looked with curiosity at the dog and the man as if he did not believe what he just told him.
The dog suddenly fell on the ground and in massive seizures. The older man stood by him, just slowly waiting for the dog to get a hold of himself. It had a broad leather collar with some white stripes on it with text that said: "I am epileptic. Pills inside." If you zipped up the collar by the side, there would thus be some kind of medication there to help the dog out. But this time the dog got no pills or anything to help him

out. The thin man just waited for the seizures to pass. Maybe the seizures were not of a severe sort. The dog had his eyes eerily rolling, and the white saliva now and then was pumping out of his mouth. It could not keep its jerking head still. Eventually, it fell about after about three minutes and lay quite still, apart from violent panting.

David liked ogs and had a good hand with them, so he bent down over the creature. He grasped the dog's tiny neck firmly and almost professionally. The man in the Bogart suit still did not say a thing, though. His mouth was tight, and he breathed through his nostrils, which seemed all free from obstacles. His eyes were strangely widened as if he was perpetually astonished.

"Do you live around here?" the man suddenly asked.

The dog now had got hold of himself, seemed to be okay again, and lay still. The man did not seem worried.

There was also something odd with his way of expressing himself. Behind the word and the apparent meaning of those words, there was like a hidden meaning or a peculiar light shining. In a way, the words were said as if the transmitter hoped for some memory or a ghost would come forth and fill in the omitted part of the question. There was something Gothic about his speech. But this was not true either. He looked earnest and a skeptic, David thought, but his talk was at the same time rather pretentious, too pretentious.

"But…," David, who despite being a sissy, in various situations also had absolute compassion for the sick and the disabled, said in an aggregated tone:

"You cannot possibly have a dog with epilepsy!!"

With this, David apparently meant that the dog ought to be put to death.

"It´s not mine," the man answered rapidly as if someone had pressed a button. "I am just walking him. Why shouldn´t I take care of him, if I can?" The man said, whom we hitherto regarded as the dog-owner.

The man's energy again transformed his utterance. He did not seem to be talking, but kind of tryingly reciting something. The dog walker was not PRESENT. Maybe he was dead. His skepticism might have killed him?

"I see," David said.

The man in the striped suit, who was very earnest in his whole appearance, despite his ambiguousness, definitely seemed eager to defend neither his actions nor his standpoints but proposed his case was with calm and indifference. But, on the other hand, dead people seldom did protect themselves. Anyway, the Bogart man sure looked truthful, secure and reliable, David thought. He was a mystery.

David loved to speculate about people this way. He rather speculated than interacted, much less confronted.

When David had a closer look at the man´s wrinkled but anonymous face, marked by a small, stubborn nose in the middle of it, he noticed much to his surprise that the senior most certainly had had his face surgically modified around his eyes. David soon realized that since this face had so many wrinkles, it was probable that the wrinkles over his eyes had bothered the eye-sight. Thus the older man most likely had let a surgeon remove the skin above his eyes. The outcome, however, was this eerie, clown-like, astonished look.
One should not really have plastic surgery on faces.
He was also undoubtedly much more muscular built than David was. Maybe he was a former military or agent or something. A spy. An equalizer? He had large hands and still a strong neck under the grey hair, despite his age. The man seemed clearly past seventy years of age.
David had come to reflect on multiple matters. The man who had incited all this acted as if he was unaware of it, though. At least he ACTED that way. He blinked, changed the overcoat from one arm to another and took out an old-fashioned cigarette of some strange since long extinct brand, and lit it. Although they met outside on the street and on such a rainy night, he smelled grossly from tobacco. He nearly stunk tobacco.
Sometimes, when David met a person, who looked in a certain way, he thought that this person seemed to have dealt adequately with his terrible looks, or the opposite. Good or bad looks was a fate to be dealt with. David could distinguish between bad and good looks and bad and good energy. The man with the dog, for instance, had exciting natural features, but his face now stood out with complete irregularity and was disfigured by surgery. His mouth was rather wry, but he had a friendly look all the same aside from the clown eyes.
"You see …," the dead, or ironic, the man finally said, "the woman who owns him is sick. She is deadly sick."
That was at least something, David thought. The man wanted to clarify himself and was not any longer just reciting. Since David had interacted, now the thin man interacted too.
This was a meeting between two authentic people.
He sure would like to hear him talk at length, David thought. He then did not know that he would have lots of opportunities for that in the future.

West´s gaze focused on the old man, but his mind all of a sudden took a different turn. He had namely spotted an ostensive, golden tooth in the older man´s mouth. David realized that this man had a remarkable story. Everybody with a golden tooth had a story, according to David. Not only the man in the suit seemed awkwardly ambiguous but definitely more interesting than the general Baltimore resident. Thirdly, he must be rich too! Anyone with a golden tooth in the USA was rich.
The man with the dog had turned silent and was again generous with not being present. But he apparently wanted to share his absence with David because he gave no indication of leaving the street-corner.
The dog eventually had recovered fully and rose to indicate at least he was someone that wanted to leave. West decided that he did not need the milk he had set out to buy or lend from the drugstore but instead chose to accompany the man and the dog. They performed a circular walk around the children's playground and the nearby hideous old church, which was another church by another cemetery. Concerning the phenomenon of churches, the two newfound friends soon came together in a united deep despise.

"Strange things, churches." The man in the suit said in a very straightforward way. "I have never been able to understand religious people. It is not decent to be religious. I´d rather forgive a murderer than a person who is religious. Don´t you think so?"
Now finally the old man seemed to have come to life, David sensed. All of a sudden there was some kind of spark in his eyes!

"I don´t get who they are neither, those folks who go to church!" West agreed, now mumbling from surprise.

"I was married once to a woman whose closest friend frequently attended church," the niggard man said while he, at last, tended a little to the dog and tapped it on the head. It dawned upon David that the man in the striped suit appeared incredibly selfish. David noticed that this guy had not uttered a single positive thing for twenty minutes. He also had not asked David anything essential. Neither of these conclusions hurt, though, because he was such a formidable mystery.

"I see! Ah, you´ve were married? By the way, I mightn´t perchance get to know your name, sir?"

"My name is Longman. Reuben Longman."
This was positive, kind of, David reckoned. At the same time, he did not bother that Longman did not answer the first question. Thus this whole conversation seemed not very earnest. Apart from the thing

That Longman had said about priests and religion.

"Mm. You look like one who has traveled a lot." David continued.

"Mm, yeah," Reuben Longman said, now rolling bewtween his lips another sloppy cigarette.

Reuben looked, and his look was a kind of heavy, perpetrating one from light blue eyes, at the dog, which kept keen on leaving for home. When David patted the head of the little terrier, he calmed down, sat on his butt and lifted his paw.

"Perhaps he wants to be carried," David said in a neutral tone. "He just had a severe seizure…"

Longman did not seem to listen. Reuben looked like an old sailor. Again, he showed no gratitude towards David´s friendly approaches – but lifted the dog and took out his ancient, long-armed army gloves from a pocket inside the raincoat and put them around the poor dog.

"I have to go home," Reuben suddenly said. "Nice meeting you, pal."

"Nice, Mister!" David nodded with a smile," Hope to see you again! I guess you don't live far away, eh?"

David felt the Glock's presence in his pocket. The gun made him talk in a way he would not without it. Perhaps neither David nor Longman were authentic? Perhaps they were just acting, both of them.

But why?

"Well, not exactly close to where we are; I live on Thames Street, No 340."

"I see."

The young boy nodded again, happier now, stored that information, and put his hand again out to cuddle with the dog, but then in a whizzy Reuben, carrying the terrier, already was far away towards the harbor. David realized that Longman had not invited him to his place. But in a way he seemed to have done that. Or?

David – who continuously was in financial trouble – realized that Longman was wealthy. Anybody with a golden tooth and that could buy a necklace worth $4000 was wealthy. It would not hurt Longman to give David some, David thought. David looked upon every elderly, lonely person as a potential benefactor. Sure, enough, David realized that Longman might be a dangerous person. It seemed that he had been through a lot. Reuben was more likely an old sailor, David sensed, than a retired military or an agent or something like that.

Longman would not give away any money. David knew that.

But he certainly seemed to rich for his own needs. And now all he did was walking old ladies´ dogs.

When David – who did not exactly plan to rob Longman - strolled further on his walk, he thought that life and culture in the U.S.A., in a unique way, wholly revolved around the 2nd amendment. To David anarchism also presented many problems. But he put them aside for now. His personality was only in the midst of an enormous speculation very slowly evolving.
On his father´s side – people had told him – they had been very speculative, all of them.
David was all mesmerized by the blue, striped suit.
Longman had not given away much information, David thought. In fact, Longman had much more just been observing David. Chewing on his cigarettes, ogling at him with his clown eyes. It was almost as if he knew beforehand who David was.
So strange Reuben appeared to David that he took a pause on his way. Was Longman even there? Was he present? Was he alive? Maybe it was that strange surgery that had made him look so absent? But, no! It was something else. On the other hand: how present where people in general?
When it came to the face of Longman, David remembered an article he had read in some fancy cultural Journal about a philosopher who had a philosophy of the face. But when you read the article carefully, it was not the a real face that was the subject for Lévinas, but a figurative, a spiritual. David read a lot, yes, he was the most avid reader he knew, himself. He also knew French and had read Sartre, Camus and Merleau-Ponty. When it came to philosophy of the face, David thought Merleau-Ponty maybe dealt more with the accurate body, than did Sartre, Camus and Lévinas. Emmanuel Lévinas had too much of old Jewish philosophy in his luggage. And David, who had taken a stand against all religion, an talk about the Absolute, about Transcendence and Infinity, had no warmer feelings for Kabballah than he had for The Bible.

Baltimore is a small town.
This David thought when he once more changed his mind, looked at his watch which showed 09.00 PM, and decided to get the milk anyway…

# Chapter Four

"Property is theft." ( Proudhon )

The old convenient shop on the corner, owned by a certain Captain Georgie Butterfield, a local property broker, had two main entrances, one from East Pratt and another from Harvey Street. The one from Harvey Street was since long bolted up and sealed. In the doorway to East Pratt Street hovered a large bookstand, almost blocking the way. David however slid into the small shop to try to trick his milk bottle from Ethan, a tall, slender, black boy with soft, glowing, greyish skin and an enormous nose and large afro Rastafari hair. The colored guy seemed to almost be living at the store, most often reading on his tablet or in a pocketbook, and now and then obsessed with making small sketches on his iPad. David – being the customer and polite as was his habit – immediately showed his interest:

"Hi! What´s the combo? Sketching?"

"Just fine. And you, bro?"

Ethan put his iPad away under the desk.

"Fine. What cha´ sketching?" David asked.

The shop was scarcely lit, and it had a sweet smell as from some forgotten rotten bananas.

"It was nothing. I am actually reading a book." The young clerk laughed friendlily and looked at the same time powerful and very modest. He looked intelligent.

David saw that he had an open book on the counter as well. He could not spot the title. It looked a little torn and almost trashed though.

"What is it about?"

"About writing, it is about the poetics of the novel."

"Hah!" David retorted in a hollow tone. "Are you an aspiring author?"

"Who isn´t?" Ethan smiled.

Ethan´s answers, as well as all his ways, were all the time very swift. His laugh was extrovert, but David did not think that Ethan´s extrovertedness was of any ordinary kind. He had probably learned to be that way. He acted as if he wanted to be extrovert, but ws not. It was admirable though, according to David.

When Ethan revealed his plan to try to write a book, David immediately smiled. It was a friendly smile, but it was also half ironic.

Ethan, in turn, also smiled. This was a smile of accommodation and excuse.

Nevertheless, they both smiled.

David then smacked with his lips and looked around for the paper stand. After the pandemic, not many papers were traded off, and there were just a few left. The Baltimore Chronicle announced that there was going to be a small concert tonight in the town hall. Sunderland "Sleepy" Polly-Ann. David looked at yet some more papers and magazines. Papers and magazines were one of his passions. He did not know Ethan very well, but he had just, from a couple of short conversations with him, come to a rash conclusion that Ethan, although he had modest ways, was a bit aloof. Ethan was too sure of himself, even if he seemed humble, David thought. It was sometimes not comfortable to David how humble this competent young black man was. On the other hand, David thought that Ethan seemed very friendly and probably was a very warm-hearted young man. David had a history of being tricked and robbed by countless people, so he was lately set to be on guard against tricksters, psychopaths, and junkies.

A commotion was heard on top of the convenience store. David looked up at the ceiling:

"What´s all the noise about?"

"They are having a funeral. The old mama has died."

"Oh, I see."

They dropped the subject. Some people have parties at funerals, - others haven´t.

David these days felt extraordinarily insecure. He was at a turning point in his life. It may turn out either way for him, he felt. He might have great success, or he might on the other hand end up in the gutter. The 25-year-old was preposterously broke and haply had the money for the small rent. He had no one to borrow money from and actually no one except maybe Elsa, who would help him with anything. The only thing he had was his student loan for his studies in programming and his Glock pistol. Maybe he even had to sell his few books and the Glock too.

"You don´t happen to know anything about Mr. Longman, the old man with the dog, who was outside just a while ago?" David asked.
Ethan looked suspicious. David boldly went on with his ranting. This is the boldness that poverty and despair gives.

"I wonder if he is … rich?" David mumbled.
Ethan hastily looked down in his book again, reading. It seemed to be some sort of fact book, because Ethan now and then looked up in the index part, in the last pages of it.

"I don't know.", he mumbled monotonously and under strain. Ethan was very capable, but also very sensitive.
A bottle of Worchester Sauce or something else glassy suddenly fell off a shelf in a back room. Maybe the house cat had caused it to fall about.
David had caught a glimpse of the grey little striped cat when he entered.

"Hush!" David panted. "I cannot stand sudden noises. But hear me! Do you feel me?"

He actually could not stand anything sudden. It is a frequent remark in the literature on magic and the occult that Satan himself is as fond of the unexpected as of the sinister.
If you ever going to write a good book, just fill it with sudden events.

The two of them went silent again.
The two of them were not alone in the drugstore. In the shop's corner, a sturdy old man in his sixties in a beige coat and a blue hat was sitting, sipping on a cup of coffee. Perhaps he also was listening to the two youngsters.

"A book would be nice to write and it wouldn´t be too hard to write either." Ethan suddenly said in a casual voice.

"A book? About what?"

"About small things, or nothing at all. Or the incomprehensible."

"Why small?" David asked, mischievously, in a try to make friends. David had humor. That was maybe his greatest asset.

"It is always a good way to start with small things."

"Greater things come when the stage is set, eh?" David laughed, satisfied with his poetry. Nonsense made him relax. Absurdity seemed to him the perfect hallucination. Perhaps the two boys felt at ease with each other when it came to pure nonsense.

The difference between the two of them was that Ethan knew it was nonsense, while David did not.

”Now, I don´t know if the books I am going to write would be like porn for women or if they are going to be completely incomprehensive.”
Ethan, at the same time, laughed a little and almost tryingly at himself. His massive Rastafari-hair waved around his big head. David did not comment on what Ethan just said.
Ethan subsequently added while he stretched his long body:

“I don´t know if I will develop into a writer at all.”

Ethan, like David, was a very young man. In posing that question that way, he showed himself mature, David thought.

“I see,” David said, but he hadn´t many clues to the actual subject. Therefore, he again changed to his old topic, persistently:

“You don´t happen to know Mister Longman? Reuben Longman? Do you?”
Longman was rich. Maybe Longman was the last hope for David.

“Yes. I know him. He´s having The New York Times.”

“Yeah, I think he´s a democrat.”

“So what?” Ethan finally put down his book, The Writing of a book, David reckoned, and looked at David, who was a couple of years his senior, but seemed younger than Ethan, who only was nineteen:

“What do you want with him?”

“Rob him,” David suddenly said and put his fingers in a moving stand with umbrellas with funny logos on them that stood nearby, and swung the whole set of umbrellas full circle to the left. At the same time, he felt the weight of the Glock against his chest, almost in a hurtful way.

“Now, that´s not a sweet thing to say,” Ethan said. Ethan Bailey did not know if David was serious. It was impossible to tell, but if David´s words had been ironic, it certainly was covert irony.
Maybe David had wanted the man in the back of the shop to hear too. David sometimes liked to provoke. He was often not serious, but playful, as you already have noticed. Perhaps David wanted the man in the back to hear, because David thought he ressembled to an old teacher he had had. But David probably was sure it wasn´t the same man; it wasn´t the teacher.

“I can´t help it. I do not respect other people´s property. I think property itself is robbery. Just like Kropotkin thought. Besides, that Longman is old. He does not NEED the money. I do.”

As a matter of fact, it was not Kropotkin, but Proudhon, who thought that property was theft.

Perhaps David´s dissatisfaction with his own life was so immense that he simply wanted to ruin his chances. But of course, deep inside, he actually did not want to destroy them, but his talk of these criminal actions was a cry for help. David also thought that, since he was such an outsider and such a loser, common law did not apply.
He had an enormous desire to take up his Glock from his pocket and place it on the counter.

Ethan did not know if David meant what he said.

"Have you been to his place?" Ethan asked in a new tone while he rose and folded his book into a roll as much as it allowed with its 600 pages, and began piling chewing gums in a box under the counter nearer to the store window.

"No," David said and looked up, curiously: "have you?"

"Yes, I have. Strangely enough. The man has got porcelain, artwork, books, and oriental rugs, and dead animals at home. Horns from buffalos and skins from alligators, tigers, and snakes."

"Wait a minute! You don´t say!? I asked you about him, and you said he bought The New York Times! I told you he was also…."

"Let us go there tomorrow! Reuben likes to be with young folks…" Ethan tried to smile, although this conversation had nothing comical in it. "You might pick me up at six o´clock because Joshua has his shift from around then and until midnight on Mondays. I know where Reuben lives."

"Thames Street," David said, knowingly, looking at Ethan´s slender fingers piling chewing gum packages at an enormous pace. The Afro-American then returned to his stool behind the desk and picked up his rolled-up book about writing again to continue his studies.
Ethan´s phone rang. He picked out the Samsung Galaxay from his waist pocket and answered.

"Yes, hello. Of course… ----- Yes…. --------- Yes….----- Sure. Just come in… ----- We always do…---- Bye-bye."
Those black fingers shutting down the phone looked fiercely beautiful, the Euro-American thought.
Did Ethan know that David was out of a job since last year and that he had nothing to do but trying to learn to be a hacker and some History at the University at a course

he most likely never would complete? Did he know that he, David, was wearing a Glock pistol? The meeting between Ethan and David almost could serve as a prototype between a guy who has a job and hasn´t. David wished he was somebody else.

Suddenly a tall, bald man, in his seventies, dressed in a smug dark yellow suit, entered the shop. The old man in the back of the shop immediately called upon him with a hoarse "Hello Captain!".
The newcomer, David soon realized, turned out to be the shop-owner himself, Captain Butterfield.
He probably was no Captain at all but was a businessman. He looked like a small gangster of the salons. He was dominant in his gestures, skinny as he was. His voice was thunderous, though. His narrow, meticulously clean-shaven face was red or purple, and his minuscule hair was white. It was put tight to his skull by use of a fluid like Keratin or something.
The other man, in the blue suit, was more ragged.

"Howdy, Ethan!" Butterfield then said, glancing at his em-ployee, lifting his hat that had a sharp turn by his right eyebrow.

"Everything is fine, Mr. Butterfield," Ethan said.

"´It´s fine, Captain, is it?" the Captain retorted, with no irony. He early had found out that being dominant served his business.

"Yes, Captain," Ethan obeyed and now definitely put away his book under a small shelf under the counter.
Butterfield looked casually up at the cigar stand and the on the long row of liquors bottles up above it and then left for the man in the back of the shop, after giving David a quick look and also, much to David´s delight, touched the brim of his hat with a little smile.
Butterfield greeted his friend heartily with:

"Oh, Sammie!" and then they sat together and talked, and both of them lowered their voices to a minimum, decided to let nobody hear what they were talking about.

David nearly yawned and decided to leave. But before he left, he got an idea.

"See you tomorrow then at six o´clock. Will we go and see Longman then? But while we are talking: do you work the day after tomorrow, on Tuesday, Ethan?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I am free. Why?"

"Want to go fishing early? I have a small boat, just a small one, a dingy, by the bridge."

“Sure, but I really don’t know how to fish. Don´t know anything about boats either.”

“You´ll learn,” David said.

“I´ll pick you up at 4.30 AM, Tuesday morning.”

“4.30???”

“Yes. Do you have a car?”

“Yes. I can borrow one.”

“Well. What do you say?”

“It was a little sudden. But okay! It will be an experience.”

Ethan smiled, and they made a high five.

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When he got home, David still was so sore at the world that he threw out the pet raccoon, Niels, on the street yelling: ”Shitty, shitty cat!” although it was no cat at all. But he was happy that Ethan and he should go fishing together. It would be a real feast. He thought he would call upon somebody to tell about this upcoming event. While he made some tea, he took out his phone, laying on his bed, and swiped his contacts. David had got some friends, most of them through his apartment mate Elsa, others through the University. Elsa´s closest friend, Haylee, had a brother, Raymond, who had lots of friends. Sometimes, David used to hang with them, especially at concerts and dances. It was lucky that he had Elsa.

But soon, his thoughts were around Ethan again.

He guessed that as soon as Ethan understood, which he soon would, that they shared the same interest in literature, they would quickly be the best of pals. David West liked what he had heard Ethan say, that he did not know what novel it was going to be. The trouble was to define the concept of “incomprehensible,” he thought. David did not believe that the novel was just entertainment. The word “incomprehensible” could refer to utterly modern prose, or it might be something still more subtle.

He was happy that they would visit Reuben´s place, and he wondered much about it. But the vague prospect of robbing him had almost vanished. Longman appeared much too capable, in his relative wealth, for David to be able to take any advantage of him at all. David also had a feeling that Reuben, as well as Ethan, knew absolutely everything about him without him having to say anything. This, in turn, was incredibly depressing. David sometimes bordered on persecution mania.

David felt a little dizzy after pushing Ethan so hard, both on the subject of Reuben and on the fishing trip matter. He wished he had not suggested anything at all, and now he suddenly had two adventures planned just in two days! He had got a lump in his stomach.
Anxiety sure ruins everything.

David´s friend Elsa, a tall shorthaired black girl with large yellow spectacles, who rented the other half of the apartment where David lived, now, after having knocked twice, entered his room, looked at him in his misery. With a tiny, amiable grin on her narrow face, she flung out, after having seen the look on David´s face, her close to enormous chin protracted:

"Are you preparing to die or something, sweetie?"

Elsa herself, a girl of twenty-two, was, as indicated, no immediate beauty. She was flat-chested, slightly bent, and had that chin, under which one almost could hide a bus. She was a brave and clever girl, though. She studied to become an operating room nurse and worked as a help nurse at a nearby care home for older people. Elsa was an honest girl, though, a real diamond, and everybody liked her. David did not answer, but he was happy that she was around.

# Chapter Five

## David´s buddy dream.

This night, David had a dream. His dream, however, had the character of absolute reality.
He dreamt that he was thirteen years old. It was October, and the weather was cold and wet. Together with a friend of his, Cole "Coolie" Humphrey, David was embarking on an adventure. They were on their way to a small uninhabited wood outside town. The two comrades had - in this dream - arrived there by bicycle, and

with them, they brought a substantial golf bag. They had prepared the golf bag at Cole´s house in the evening before. Now, that was on a Saturday. They had rehearsed what they should tell curious people who might wonder why they were heading to a dense forest, carrying a golf-bag.

Back home, at David´s place, his parents probably were dealing with their respective miseries, mourning their lives, and trying to figure out why and how they should spend the coming years in the same loveless manner at the least financial cost. However, in Cole´s house, his parents spent their time watching the telly together, cuddling on the sofa, making up plans for their spare postal order business and their home. They often talked about how proud they were of their son, who spent a lot of time battling his dyslexia. His parents were convinced that this handicap would not hamper young Cole in his desire for a productive and prosperous life. David's parents, on the other hand, did expect nothing of their son and didn´t do anything to socialize him.

Cole, who was a boy, both longer and sturdier built than David, had a face with a reddish complexion. The always pale-faced, thin-haired David almost looked feminine by his side.

Coolie – who was not a "cool" person, but more of a very hearty, friendly, and boisterous youngster - owned a Ruger Blackhawk Combo air rifle and a small air gun, marked Stiga, as well. Those were the objects that he kept hidden away in the golf bag. David did not own any such playthings.

Their project for the day was to go hunting squirrels.

They had embarked on the subway train by 10.00 am, and nobody asked them about their luggage. They got old clothes on them as if they were going on a real dirty job or were going to jump in muddy waters. However, they were heading towards the woods.

The simplistic and thoroughly kind Cole was a real talker. He had emphasized to David that this was not only going to be fun but that it was an entirely profitable business too. They would not only shoot the squirrels. No, they were going to sell the furs also. About $10 apiece they would get, all in all, per coat.

"This is fun, isn´t it?"

Cole took care of everything. He was not at all afraid that they should meet someone. David was.

When they had been advancing a couple of miles from immediate nearness of the the railway, they also had a less habituated area around. The boys thought they had made it with their golf bag, and they felt safe to unpack the rifles and get them on their

backs. The wood was closing down upon them, and it was now a dense wood of firs and lots of bushes and weed around them.
They finally put the rifles in their hands. Cole gave David the ammo to the pistol, and the young hunters started to look out for the small tree-rats.

"Imagine when you are old, long time from now, thinking back on this moment, how we were hunting here today! That´s a memory in creation! Eh?" and Cole jolted his gun and lightly smashed David on the upper arm, trying to exert more enthusiasm. David got perplexed. He hadn´t thought in those lines before. Was it a sound idea, the setting up a memory? Imagine, David felt for himself if you had that kind of thinking all the time! Still, it was a cozy thought. But David decided he did not like it. Notwithstanding that, he intended to enjoy himself and took a shot on something high up a tree that looked like a squirrel.
The small leaden bullet smashed against the trunk of a tree, and then it blasted to other trees before it came back down and landed in front of David.

"You must do like this," Cole said, and he smelled from a cigarette that he just lit. And Cole was adjusting the barrel on David´s pistol, with a small black screw.

"Now," he said.
David nodded.
They proceeded through the dense and varied forest that contained many an unusual tree and brush. The many squirrels were not exactly afraid of the hunters, which bothered David.

"Stupid creatures!" he thought to himself, but to his friend, he just said:

"They ought to be easy to get."

They flashed smiles towards each other.

Later in the afternoon, when they walked back to the metro, carrying the golf bag between them, and Cole had a t-shirt, which he had knot to a small bag, in his free hand, they were both tired and happy. They had eight squirrels with them, shot dead, seven of them by Cole, and one by David. The one squirrel shot by David was regarded as "useless," though since it had been hit five or six times.
Suddenly, when they just had two miles left to the main road and the metro station, a man with a dog exerted from the dark of the forest - it was about 08.00 pm.
The dog immediately sniffed around Cole's t-shirt-bag, and the man heaved up his voice and cried out:

"What´d´u´ have there?"
Cole looked at David and David at Cole. Then they just ran.

Luckily the man withheld his dog, and so they escaped and got on the metro in one piece, each.

"Now," Cole panted, as they both sunk on a seat in the wagon. "You bet, this will be a beautiful memory!" He patted the t-shirt bag, from which a couple of drops of blood silently lukewarm were dripping onto his shoe.

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Then David woke up.

Oh, how he yearned that it had been real!

# Chapter Six

Ethan´s buddy dream.

Ethan dreamed ( at the same time ) :

He and Thomas, one of Ethan´s colored friends, who was an author of several horror stories in the Edgar Allen Poe style, were at Ethan´s place watching the news and having a chat at an evening at Dreamland, Baltimore.

The stormy weather had returned to Dreamland Baltimore and ravaged the roofs. Ethan and his friend sat in chairs opposite to each other, watching clouds assemble in the sky above through the window. Thomas smoked a cigar. He had also brought some fine cigarettes. Ethan enjoyed the evening fully and slowly combed his cat with his fingers. The furniture in this unfamiliar room was rather luxury.

Some ravens were sitting on the windowsill. Now and then, the rain broke loose, only to rapidly vanish again. The ravens also lifted off with much noise and were gone.

"Here!" Thomas said, put out his cigar in an old ashtray, marked "De Dion Bouton", and pulled out the cigarettes from a pocket. "These are particular joints. Take one, and you will see for yourself."

Ethan was usually very cautious and certainly not into smoking strange substances. Still, since Thomas was offering, and they both were in Dreamland, Ethan accepted, and they both lit a cigarette and took a deep inhalation.

Thomas, whose face was extremely black, intelligent looking, and with a marked nose, acted like he would make a speech. He had a blue cup full of coffee standing beside him.

"I got a thought," Thomas said," I just got it, actually, out of nowhere, and it has nothing to do with anything."

"Sounds interesting," Ethan said, half sarcastic. He wished that he and Thomas became friends but was not sure how this ever would happen. Thomas was advanced and had a contract with a New York publisher. The writer of horror fiction looked at Ethan with his sharp black eyes.

Outside, the ravens were back on the sill of the large window and pressed themselves towards the pane as if they wanted to hear what Thomas would say.

"Now, suppose," Thomas began, "it was, that some things existed, at least in part, in the enormous mischievousness, that they in an invisible DNA has engraved the ability entirely being able to avoid to be detected by the scientific method?"

"How?" Ethan said, just because he wanted to know.

"Well," Thomas said, excusing himself ( he always was very polite )," I mean, to be more exact, it is not entirely impossible, that it has been, in an evolutionary way in the infinite universe, since long favorable to some type of existence, in the meeting of countless civilizations that have come and gone, to evolve through the eons of time, the property of being unable to be detected by the scientific method. Maybe most civilizations that, this type of existence met with, were all concentrated upon what could be detected by the scientific method."

"Well, that sounds tricky."

The wind outside the windows kept soaring. The poor ravens that seemed to try to take shelter against the wind in the window corner and listen to Thomas drew closer to the window glass. In the wind gusts, their feathers rose above their heads.

Thomas glanced at Ethan.

"But, you know what that means, of course?"

"Oh yes, I think so," Ethan said, and he looked at the window and the darkening clouds, who had a purple tone. "But certainly, it would be a giant extra manœvre. An unlikely one, for someone to choose to create a shield against human knowledge, and the scientific method, to gain an evolutionary advantage, when there are so many …."

"Well, I agree. Highly unlikely. But certainly very smart. And highly unexpected. Don´t you think? Nobody would assume that?"

Outside Ethan´s window, which faced a street intersection, and therefore was more open to the wind, which arrived straight from the harbor, a bulky thug of wind came. The clouds in the sky now miraculously vanished.

” What you are saying is, that out there, something exists, that keeps dodging and laughing at the scientific method, something that thrives and might enjoy all sort of vain human commotion, just because we, in our civilization, are so prone to think that everything can be observed by the scientific method and controlled experiments?”
Thomas grasped his blue coffee cup and emptied it in one big sweep.

“Yes, indeed. It is incredible, isn´t it?”
His eyes shone.

“I just came up with it.” He smiled, ”I am surprised that I haven´t thought of it before.”

“Nothing strange with that,” Ethan tried to order his thoughts. The two ravens now knocked at the window pane with their hard beaks and wing pens.

“Nobody else has been thinking like that either,” Thomas said, and continued:

“It is creepy, though. Because what does it MEAN? Well, it means that right now, Invisible Existence is at your shoulder, in evolutionary superiority, sits there laughing at us, at how both of us are trying to come to grips with what governs our lives. And while we are doing that, brooding about OUR understanding of evolution, they have the keys in their invisible hands, walking around in their secret dimension. We are not able to hear the least ring from their keys and their other belongings.”
Now Ethan shuddered because a giant orange light shone across the sky, and it somehow wobbled out there. The two ravens had started to cry tears, and they hugged each other, and it almost looked as if they bade Ethan, through the pane, to save them.

“The wind is surging,” Ethan said, now letting the cat, which he had been holding in his lap, slip down on the floor. It stayed by his feet, though, and pressed his shaking body against his leg.
The wind was shaking the walls of the building.

“It is not supposed to be a wind like this in our area, is it?” Ethan shouted at Thomas. His Rasta hair waved around his head.
Loose furniture started to jump up and down. Even electricity suddenly vanished.

“Look, what you have done!!” Ethan suddenly shouted at Thomas since Ethan could no longer discern cosmological theory and a Baltimore storm.
In turn, Thomas had been hit by a flying object, a small tin box in his head, and bleeding from a scar.

“Yes,” he shouted, ”Invisible Existence is VERY SMART,” and he had grown furious. ” Look! IT IS TRYING TO KILL US!”

“Yes, certainly it will. Quite understandably, it will!” Ethan shouted back, rushed to the bed, and from under the pillow drew a Colt 1911s.

“Why the hell,” he simultaneously shouted at Thomas, ” did you have to dig into the secrets of existence, you vain absolute complete IDIOT?”
Thomas was rushing about in the room. Ethan shouted:

“Let´s go down in the cellar!”
Well out in the stairs, they saw broken windows and other ravens in the staircase. The raven´s eyes were quite mad too. The walls squeaked, but the doors to the other rowhouses, seen in the dark from Ethan´s front door, did not open.

“Terrible fuzz someone has ordained, just because one puts forth a theory!” Ethan shouted in a loud voice.

“Take the theory back then!” Ethan shouted to Thomas, in vain to open the door to the cellar. The door seemed stuck.

“You cannot take back a theory,” Thomas said, adjusting his collar.

“Of course you can. You can try.” Ethan claimed incoherently, hoping and praying that something would bring things back to normal.
Perhaps, Ethan suddenly thought, if he could get Thomas out of … existence, then these invisible powers of nature would calm down. It was Thomas’ fault. But then it struck him that it might not play such a significant role if Thomas actually should be dead and gone. Because he was himself consecrated. There was no hope, Ethan thought, now managing to get the cellar door open.

“What are you thinking?” Thomas asked, just as the wind took a small pause.

“You never know anything about the end, do you?” Ethan asked. He thought that if he took out the Colt and shot Thomas, maybe Existence would spare him just because he was not guilty at all.

“Ah, pfui, bring yourself together! You aren´t superstitious, are you??” Thomas said, raising his voice in almost anger.
When Ethan looked out through the window down versus the harbor, he saw that wind has calmed down. Suddenly it was all silent, and everything fell in its usual place, just like magic.

“Oh, my head,” Thomas said, and he held his hand to the bandage around his forehead.

“That was really bad,” he added, looking almost dizzy.

“I guess it´s climate change,” Ethan said with devastating irony. He went out on the front stairs, put the Volt back in his pocket, sat down on the wet white marble, massaging his Colt's hand.
The two ravens ruffled their wings and were soon walking down the lane, picking fallen chestnuts, and they seemed to chatter in a good mood.

Suddenly Ethan Bailey woke up in the middle of the night.

"Strangest dream!" he whispered to himself.

# Chapter Seven

On the following day, which was a Monday, Inga, Nord, Eric Goldkettel´s friend, arrived at Goldkettel´s house by an antique deep blue Mercedes SL. Eric was thrilled. Inga was an impressive woman, muscularly built, a former athlete and Boston marathon runner. She had a small head with red, shortcut, curly hair. She was a bit juvenile in her thought and adventurous, and now in her early sixties. Inga was also extraordinarily verbal and a clever woman, much into reading. They said she read

two books a day, readers of every sort imaginable. Eric and Inga had a long story together. Not the least, she had been the best friend of Martha, Eric´s former wife. Now, for a couple of months, Martha was dead, and this was the first time that Eric met Inga, or, for that matter, anybody who knew who Martha was since she died. Martha had been married many times, and the last one of her many husbands was a Baltimore sea-Captain, one Reuben Longman. Eric also knew that Reuben and Martha had been planning a divorce and that Martha´s death had been a mystery. She had been found dead in a deserted park, and no exact cause of death had ever been established. Partly to discuss the end of Martha and the mystery around it, Eric had invited Inga.

"Oh, Inga, Inga!" Eric cried out as they met on the small grassy knoll that severed Eric´s mansion from the small parking lot ( built for up to six cars ) between his and Delmonte´s estate, the Palace.

"Oh, Cedric!" it elapsed her, and she, also, cried out, "WOW!" as they hugged. "Cedric" was, curiously enough, Eric´s second name.

Inga had been to Eric´s house earlier, but it was ten years from now, and then she had had Martha as a company.

To make the relationship between Eric and Inga and the relationship between Inga and Marta more comprehensible, I will, myself, tell you in such an objective way, as is ever possible, a little of Martha.

Martha, born Stilton, of the Jewish Stiltons in Tampa, was an adventurous girl, youngest of four. Already as a First-grader, she had her own business in Tampa, where she sold candy.

Papa Stilton had died in a fire, being a firefighter, and Martha was raised - or not raised at all - by her maternal grandmother. Martha´s mother, Beatrice, you see, had disappeared to Africa with a Nigerian priest just after Martha was born.

Martha was not only an unusually bright and social creature. She was also awfully good-looking. Since the grandmother was poor, Martha did not for long attend any school, but she started to earn her living as a local waitress from the day she turned sixteen.

Early every morning at 06.00, she stood up, made her bed, and went swimming outside Tampa, 3 miles away. She went by bicycle. She loved swimming and dreamt of being an athlete, a gold-medalist at the Olympic Games. Soon the grandmother died. Her brother and two sisters left for different jobs ( they were substantially older than Martha and had other fathers). She never was to meet them ever.

Martha tried to reach out to her mother in Africa. Still, it turned out baboons in Uganda had eaten the neglecting adventurer. Thus poor Martha found herself all alone in the world. She then decided to go to Europe.
She sold her now-deceased grandmother´s house and bought a flight ticket for the money. She was sure she would succeed one way or the other in Paris. This was in 1978.
Martha Stilton swiftly got acquainted with a couple of other girls in Paris. They joined in a small flat at Montmartre, and she, almost a Marilyn Monroe copy, started to work as an art model for the painters. She not only looked good, but she also was amusing and friendly.
Soon a painter, living at Rue Bréa, took her home, and they married after a month. His name was Peterson, Robert Peterson.
Peterson originated from Cape Town in South Africa, and the two of them soon emigrated from Paris. Martha had barely caught a couple of French phrases when she found herself living in a Cape Town suburb in a family where Africaans was spoken. Martha took a fancy in learning Africaans and soon became a teacher for the small colored children. These immediately grew fond of their American mistress, and she was like a mother to them.
After a while, Peterson was unfaithful to Martha. It was decided that Martha should move out from the Peterson´s residence. She then got a flat on Regent Street in Johannesburg.
She started to work in an orphanage and took children to the zoo; she then met Abraham Girma. And after that, she went to Ethiopia, as Mrs. Girma. Girma was a banker, and Martha now learned fine fashion. She got pregnant, but the child, a small boy, died right after birth. She lived in Addis for three years, and a gang of servants escorted her wherever she went, for example, to the river to swim. Her favorite servant-boy, named Bennah, followed her into the water. He gave her such a good massage that she almost fainted from pleasure. Some natives of Ethiopia know how to provide a tender massage. Years later, she would describe the beauty of the limbs of Bennah, especially his muscular arms, to her female friends. The girls eventually grew so tired of hearing about them that they asked her to talk about her Jewish background instead. Martha was a Zionist and loved to indulge in the subject of the Jewish race's alleged superiority, which, of course, is neither a race nor superior in any way. But the beautiful Martha Girma always claimed it was both.
She divorced Girma since he got disappointed at her not wanting to have more children. The doctor, a Medical Professor at a nearby college, had advised her not to try. Together with young Bennah, Martha now returned to Florida. After ten years of

earning her living as an Antiquarian, while Bennah disappeared to Los Angeles to become a bar pianist, she finally met with the mysterious Captain Reuben Longman. She moved with him to Baltimore. There, they should have many years of a happy marriage, during which they respected each other's need for freedom and living space. Captain Longman dearly loved his blonde bombshell wife. They had assured each other that this was to be a free relation. And to Martha, who at last happily felt both free and secure, it was.

In Baltimore, she, at a fur shop, found her female mate, her best friend, Inga, who in every way seemed like a twin sister. Inga was her soul mate and an admirer as well. The first time they met, they immediately realized their kinship, embraced, and were going to be the best of friends until their last breath.

Inga, who today lived in Asheville, but earlier in Philadelphia, often earlier visited Reuben Longman´s home. She also escorted Martha on the many adventures Martha had with several men in and outside of Baltimore. They even took a trip to Europe together. Hence, Inga also had, together with Martha, visited Eric in Connecticut a couple of times. And now, although this time without dear Martha, she stood in the hallway of Eric´s Reading mansion.

"Lunch is ready," Eric said in his courteous manner.

He fumbled with his soft hands around plates and pots. The remarkable thing was that Eric had been an outstanding surgeon, even though his general manners were those of a man who will mess up any dinner and drive a car onto the wrong side of the road.

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After having the meal that Eric meticulously had prepared for lunch and clumsily served to his dear friend, the two of them, Inga and Eric, sat down in the library. Eric´s library was an old brown study. It was elegant and dark and had books up onto the ceiling. The windows were large and stretched widely across one wall and were slightly open so as for the smoke to be free to escape and fresh air to get in, to clear the brains and foment the discussion. Inga wanted to have a cigar, and she took out one from a box in her purse.

"Now, a cigar is always a cigar." Inga smiled, her still very muscular and fit body lustfully submerged into a large mahogany armchair. She was fully aware that she was paraphrasing Freud, who once claimed that "a cigar SOME-TIMES is just a cigar," in relation to his theory of dream symbols.

Eric laughed at this elegant joke.

"Let´s not waste time, Inga," Eric then said," I just want to know what happened to Martha, please!"

Inga stroked her red hair, wrinkled her forehead, and said:

"It is so sad! Poor Martha! But I guess she knew that being an adventurer has its risks."

"How do you mean?" The doctor now seemed controlled.

"She was found in a park in Baltimore. She had no obvious signs of how she had been brought to death. The coroner claimed she was not strangled or suffocated but might have had been stressed or scared to death. She had some scars from her nails in the weak of her palms and face as well as bruises on her arms and knees from falling on the lawn."

"I see. But when was this? And is her husband a suspect?"

"Yes, it was in July, during the heat, July the 23rd. Reuben, her husband, was brought in by detective Ludwig, the officer in charge of this case at the Baltimore Police Department. But Reuben claimed he knew nothing about her being in the park and that he had been home all night. He was alone, though, so nobody could corroborate his testimony. But they had nothing on him. There was no mud or grass on any shoe in Reuben´s house. Ludwig, whom I have spoken to, said that they simply had no clue what happened to Martha. As far as I know, nobody is a suspect at the moment. Reuben seemed not very bothered if you ask me. I talked to him as well, by the phone."

"But when did you last meet with Martha? Please give me the whole story, please. You know I loved Martha, and I have to know who took her away, no matter who it was!"

Then Inga told about the last meeting:

"It was in June," Inga said, "We had not met for a year. We went bathing together one day, out into the bay by a boat that we hired. I always like boating. Martha had a bright red swimsuit."

"Anyway, I had talked to her a couple of days before. She was a little tired of Reuben, who seemed lost in memories. He had started to talk about an old love, she said, way down in Mississippi, long ago. She told him that it was okay if he connected to any old flame, just claiming she did not want to listen to it. If he had grown tired of her, he should say so, she had said. He responded by telling her that he just felt low. He had a small lung condition, and he said that nothing is as terrible as a lung condition. Martha said to me that Reuben very seldom complained about anything at all and very seldom of his health."

"She had joined a course in writing last spring, and she met with some of the writers now and then. The aspiring writers met even during summer to be inspired and to exchange books and manuscripts."

Inga was a bright and conscientious woman, Eric thought:

"How would you best describe Captain Reuben?"

"He is economical," Inga said.

Eric looked up.

"How do you mean?"

"He´s a niggard," Inga clarified. "You know, Martha had brought a lot of money to their household, and she was collecting art, and my God, is there an art collection at Reuben´s place today! It is worth millions!"

Her face suddenly had gotten red with excitement.

"Why so? How had she been able to buy that much art? Is it precious art?"

"She used to beg her lovers for it or simply take it away from them."

Eric looked depressed.

"I know…" he stated, clumsily.

"We know. Both of us know. She was not always nice. She was not just adventurous, but sometimes a criminal. To be blunt about it."

Inga however wrenched her hands a little and looked down.

Both now seemed desolate, and they knew that whoever had brought death upon Martha, she probably had angered that person before.

"I am determined to find out who it was," Eric said in an anonymous tone.

"I cannot go on living if I don´t."

Then, from behind the window, that had been slightly open, a voice suddenly was heard. Yes, if there ever was anything sudden in this world, this was it.

"I might be of certain help."

It was a woman´s voice, and it belonged to no less than young Armamente Dulcinea, the housekeeper at the Palace. She now showed her head, and within a minute, she had unhooked the window, crawled in, and was soon seated in a chair next to the doctor.

"How?" Eric panted, almost fainting from consternation.

"We will ALL of us go to Baltimore to investigate Reuben´s place."

But how do you know….?"

"I always investigate people I live close to and come into contact with. In the night at the Palace, I have lots of time. I looked you up on the Internet. It was easy to see that you and Martha Stilton were a couple and that she is –inexplicably – dead."

“Good Lord,” Inga said, and her mouth was about to smile out of pure consternation.

“And I can assure you,” Armamente said, rubbing off some plaster she had got on her hand when climbing through the window, ”that this here Reuben is, just as you said, Inga, a real niggard.”

Inga was confused, and rightly so, because she, of course, had no idea who Armamente was. This she asked about now.

“Who are you then, darling?”

Armamente told Inga her story. As it turned out, Eric could also find out about the girl who so bravely and unexpectedly had lined up to offer to be a catcher in the rye.

Armamente was born in New York City, she told them, in a hotel, since both her parents, the Dulcineas, had been too lazy to move out of their favorite social spot and leave their friends, all of them being hotel people. So she was raised by some highly intellectual beatniks in a hotel. Her parents did not talk about anything else than Psychoanalysis, Quantum Physics, Marcel Proust, and Philip Grass' music. When she had graduated from high school and decided to become a policeman, they told her that this was alright, of course. They insisted, however, that she studied something else than Policing before that. So she took up philosophy before forensics and Dactylographic ( finger-print ) studies.

“But,” Inga said, a bit consternated,” what are you interested in regarding police work. I mean, this seems a bit strange to me, for a spoilt child to start with wanting to be a policewoman ….?”

“I guess I am a bit like Martha,” Armamente answered. ”Only that I might choose my men or women a bit more cautiously and don´t want to collect art. I am all for the experience.”

Eric looked baffled.

“Maybe, when you grow…”

“I assure you that I would not mess up anything,” Armamente said.

Inga looked at Eric, who nodded like there was nothing else to do other than letting the girl in on the case.

“I am sincere,” Armamente said. ”I would never mess up things for you. I just….”

“Then, off we go to Baltimore!” Eric said, and finally, all of them started to laugh.

( “We´re off, we´re off, we´re off, we´re off, to see the wizard of Oz,” Armamente thought, Martha maybe being the wizard. )

Soon after, Eric brought forth a photograph of Martha from his hidings and placed it on the mantelpiece.

“This is the woman whose reputation we will set out to save,” he said and added:

“Let us all drink a cup for Martha!”

He took out a bottle of whisky, and soon all of them were hailing Martha and greeting each other.

“I think that with a superpower like you on the boat, we cannot fail,” Eric said to Armamente, who looked very pleased. She looked around in the brown study and then raised and took a couple of steps to the room's freest space. She then buttoned up her short borrowed cheerleader coat, on the back of which it said “Swaanee” in red engraved letters, and she … made a … backflip.

Eric and Inga applauded this somersault and laughed in loud voices. Armamente bowed. She then looked a little more earnest and said:

“You have to remember that I was raised in a hotel! I really cannot help if I am not like others.”

The two adults did not comment upon that. Suddenly she looked at her wristwatch and screamed:

“My God, I have to make dinner for Mr. Paul!!”

Then she stopped, adding:

“Please, I have to arrange for a replacement woman for myself if I am going to Baltimore. Could you fix some money for that?”

“Of course,” Goldkettel answered. ”Money is no problem. I´ll see to that!”

As fast as she had entered the room, she disappeared. But this time through the door.

When Armamente had left, Eric and Inga started to plan for the trip on the following day. They arranged rooms in a hotel and then decided to call Reuben Longman up to ask for a chat and for permission to look at Martha's belongings.

“It was long since I was in Baltimore,” the doctor said,” by the way, where do you live now? I have forgotten…”

“Asheville. I have lived in Philadelphia for a long time; and then a while in Baltimore. I am a fur specialist as you might remember. But even if I have lived in Baltimore I don´t know a soul there..”

“What do you think, Inga, of the girl - of Armamente?”

“She has a cute name.” Inga blinked. Inga always was full of humor, even if there was no humor around. At worst she was at least happy.
Inga whistled, scrolling on her phone, murmuring:
”It is 19$ for a Greyhound ticket from Hartford to Baltimore, one way…”, and then she asked:
“Maybe it is better if I am the one calling upon Reuben and not you doing that?”
Eric nodded and then put his hand on her shoulder, saying:
“It is good to have you here, Inga. On this mission.”
Inga smiled.
The doctor was generous as a person, and he was forthright. Through his long practice as a doctor, he had learned that time seldom is on our side. You have to be generous while you can.
And what is the meaning of life other than being generous?

# Chapter Eight

To the South of Baltimore's center in the Fell´s Census, Reuben´s house on Thames Street was a well-attended rowhouse, and in every aspect gorgeous. It contained three rooms and a small kitchen on the bottom and three rooms on the top. All the rooms were worn and darkish but stuffed with wondrous furniture, expensive antiquities, and parts of dead animals, and beautiful art. Almost a hundred relatively small oil paintings hung on the walls, mostly landscapes, sea motifs, and harbor views, in an unorderly and abundant fashion.
Reuben had a high appreciation of his home, which had also been Martha´s. He showed every room of it with extreme proudness.
“Bourbon?” he asked, looking a bit like a byzantine warrior. For the first time, David saw a smile on his disfigured face. He was perhaps the kind of man who only smiled at his own words. David had thought he was above that.

From various photographs on the walls, especially in the hall, one could infer that Reuben had been a sailor who had sailed on many a foreign sea. Reuben had been far away from Baltimore Bay. The whole apartment had a curios smell of musk and vanilla. In the saloon, there was in the corner by the window a mahogany table set for a coffee-party. Three porcelain cups and ditto flowery plates in rose and purple, with small tarts and cookies, a few lumps of sugar, wrapped up in paper, and with logos from cafés on them and a tiny jug with a little milk in it adorned the table.

David and Ethan looked confused and uneasy, but the old sailor seemed in good spirits and bade them sit on the sofa. It was a vast, bolstered, greenish, majestic piece of furniture with curved legs. The couch shrieked and almost fell about when the boys sat down, and David startled because he – as we know – could not stand even modest surprise.

The scene stood under three ancient lamps, who resided by tripod feet on the wooden floor.

From the number of curtains and cushions, it was apparent that not long ago had there been a woman living in this house. In the corner by the sofa, the small epileptic terrier lay asleep. Surprisingly it did not wake by the entrance of perfect strangers. Maybe it was not conscious. It was breathing, though, and the sound of the dog´s snoring was to accompany the slightly tense conversation between the three males.

A newly shaven Reuben had on a brand new red shirt. His surgery-afflicted eyes shone from poorly disguised satisfaction when he glared at them and served the two youngsters strong coffee. He was discretely enjoying himself.

David directed his attention towards the walls again. There all the paintings and all the souvenirs from travels and possibly hunts in Africa were carefully displayed. David did not think, though, that Reuben himself had had any contact with live buffaloes or tigers, but he wasn´t exactly sure, so he asked about it:

"Did you shoot those animals yourself?"

Reuben smiled and said that he had traveled a lot, but he had never been hunting live animals. No.

Ethan said:

"But you have been a sailor, you told me before. Tell us more about that! Was it a long time ago?"

"Those odd things on the walls my wife bought. We liked auctions. She passed away three years ago. I miss all those travels around all along the coast. I miss that."

"That is bad," David said. "I am sorry."

"But you were a sailor?"

David had risen from the sofa and walked up to one of the larger paintings on the wall. It showed a waterfall and a barn, and a couple of horses. It was a typical North American 19th-century oil painting.

"This is nice," he exclaimed.

"As for my time as a sailor," Reuben recaptured," I was the 1st officer many years. I seldom, during my first twenty years, was hired as a Captain. And I mostly sailed on Australia and Indonesia."

"Ooh," said the boys.

"But when you are on those trades, you seldom get the opportunity to return home. You have to enlist in books pertaining to foreign companies. Not many U.S. vessels are trafficking in those waters. But I liked Indonesia. But of course, it did not take many years before I got homesick. When I arrived here in the United States again, I got a job, badly paid, but a job, on a steamship on the Mississippi River. And the years on that rotten ship, they were the best."

"How come? Not much happens on the Mississippi?" David said, but once he had left that remark, he wanted to take back his words. What did he ( himself ) know about Mississippi? He had never even seen it even from the landside.

"Well, it is a great difference. Of course, Mississippi is no ocean. However, I just liked it. And I fell in love."

"With the boat?" David cried out.

"No, with a woman."

"Ah, your wife?"

"Wrong again. With a lady. Just a lady. I married later but to another woman, the one who liked to collect these things. Well, that is it. That was about me. Let´s talk about you, or something else, eh?" he said, blinking with his clown eyes.

Reuben rose, collected the empty coffee cups, and took them out to the kitchen sink. Ethan and David also got up to inspect all the marvelous things along the walls. Ethan cried out with joy when he, behind some large bird beaks and a stuffed chimpanzee, found an old saxophone made of some bronze-like material. It was a "Dolnet," Ethan observed. Not the most exclusive of brands, but it looked all right, and it was an old brass beauty. Ethan was a true connoisseur in many areas. David could not understand where Ethan had gotten all his expertise. Maybe he was superhuman or was half robot.

"Heye, do you play the saxophone?" David shouted to Reuben, who was still in the kitchen or somewhere.

"No." was the prompt answer.

“In fact,” Reuben added, ”I don´t have a single talent. If I had had, I would probably just develop that talent.”

“You do have talents to kill tigers,” David said.

“It is not nice to mark words,” Reuben answered. Probably Reuben had not heard what David just said.

”Martha brought those.”

The dog now was awake, and it snuffed on David and Ethan. It was very polite and friendly and had an intelligent look in his sleepy eyes, half-hidden under sticky eyebrows. He didn´t look taken aback by epilepsy or anything. Reuben lifted him in his lap as he has sunk in his armchair.

“You are my boy.” The senior said, in a voice, slightly trembling.

“What are you two planning then?”

David began to feel bad about himself. He wondered how he could ever have thought of robbing this man. Reuben was very different from all the people that the boy had met. He was strange and represented some peculiar, seldom seen Otherness, he thought.

“Might I take a look upstairs?” Ethan asked, ignoring the question. ”This is such an exciting place.”

“Of course.”

Perhaps Reuben was on the look for heirs, David thought. Reuben Longman was old, and very soon, he would be gone. Possibly David and Ethan could inherit his house, all the paintings, and all the stuffed animals? They would get rich! David was sure that Ethan did not have any thought like that at all. Ethan – the bastard - wanted to succeed in life by his powers. That´s for sure, David thought.

Now the three of them walked up the quirking staircase to the second floor. It was, Ethan thought as if Reuben let them go on with their search, scrutinizing every move they made. But why?

A phone suddenly rang, and it was Reuben´s. He took the phone out of his pants pocket and answered. At the same time, he halted. While he continued his call, he waved at the two boys to continue with their sightseeing while returning to the first floor to concentrate on what was said.

“Of course,” Reuben said. ”You are welcome, Mrs. Nord!” Reuben wrinkled his brow and listened to Inga´s voice. Some seconds elapsed.

”Yes, Inga, but I don´t remember….”

Simultaneously, on the second floor, Ethan and David entered into what seemed to be a woman´s beauty parlor. Ethan and David were not aware of much about Martha. This was her room. On one of the walls, there was a giant mirror. That must be weighing a ton, David thought. On the small table in front of the mirror, there were several photos of the woman. She looked happy and proud. A little vain too. But beautiful. She had platinum hair.

David first blushed when he saw the photograph, and then he whitened.

"Sure, she was worth losing one´s mind for," Ethan said, but ashamed for having said so, he pointlessly added:

David felt dizzy and had to sit down.

"What is the matter?" Ethan asked.

"It is nothing," David said, holding on to the chair to which he had taken refuge.

This room was incredibly messy. There were packages on the bed and on the floor that looked as if they were going off somewhere. They only had temporary stickers on, though. "To the antiques.", "Antiquarian.", "Stored." And so on. The wrapping was. Reuben was in the process of selling goods that had belonged to his wife.

When they were back down in the living room again, Ethan pointed at a painting and, blinking with his right eye, he said:

"This must have cost a fortune."

"No, not really." Reuben said, "But I don´t quite remember. Be with it as it may. Now let us talk about you! I want to know what your plans are for the future? Both of you."

Reuben then pointed at a large painting of a naked cocotte:

"This is the famous Matisse. It has attracted attention from the galleries."

The Matisse painting was impressive. It was clear that this was a work of genius. The colors were sublime.

Ethan sat down on the quirking sofa next to David, who pondered over his future as a non-robber.

"He´s going to be a writer," David said, referring to Ethan while patting the dog's head. The handicapped terrier sat beside his knee.

"A writer?" Reuben got surprised.

David and Reuben looked at Ethan, who stared down at the worn carpet in a greenish color, with white-greyish flowers.

"It´s a dream," he said.

"What kind of books do you want to write."

"Just good books." Ethan smiled.

"But you, then, David? What are your plans?"

"I am studying programming. Java. And taking a course in History right now. Maybe I would like to become a teacher." David responded, displaying an innocent look. He was afraid of Reuben.

David thought that he wanted to leave. Why were they at this place? He thought.

"What was the name of your wife, sir?" David asked.

"Martha."

Ethan nodded. Reuben now suddenly got a stern look on his face.

"Now, what kind of folks are you?"

David was worried.

"I once was a Captain, you know. I have to know something about my crew."

David and Ethan looked at each other, not knowing what to think.

"Crew?" David said.

"Yes. I am planning to have a social club."

"A SOCIAL CLUB?" David echoed.

"Yes. A club. Why do you think I asked you to come if I had no errand?" Longman asked but blinked at the same time with his clown eyes. "I think it would be nice for a bunch of youngsters on the loose to gather here and for me too. We might talk about life and Baltimore, thus overcoming the generation gap. What do you think? Some eight or ten youngsters and me. I would tell you about life on the Seven Seas. And I would serve coffee and biscuits. Every Wednesday night."

David and Ethan looked at each other.

"That is a great idea!" Ethan said. I know some people, and David does. We´ll take care of that. When will be the first meeting?"

"We will sort that out. But on the coming Wednesday, probably. We are friends then?"

"Sure. Of course," the youngsters agreed, and they looked pleased about having got such an interesting person, an old Baltimore sailor, as a buddy.

"What is your phone number, then?" Reuben rapidly asked. Ethan gave Reuben his number, which the old man immediately put into his phone. To ease the tension, the old Captain now distributed a couple of old small red Chinese books, with plastic covers on them, from the time of Mao Tse Dong, among them, and then shoved them to the door. They all laughed, and David was truly baffled.

They left, and on the street, David called Elsa on his iPhone to ask her if she was going to the concert, which soon was about to begin at Marsden Palace. She did not answer.

Ethan and David strolled on Thames Avenue. Ethan showed David his favorite video-blog on YouTube. It was a bunch of videos with Young Pharaoh, a boxer and black intellectual, who had "a higher perspective" on race. They both laughed, watching videos as they uniformly strolled on. Avoiding a clash with a small ultra-juvenile street gang, they, by running, managed to get to Ethan´s place at nine o´clock. David had no Glock on him on this evening.

"Strange guy," Ethan said, referring to Reuben.

"Yeah!" David agreed.

"Let´s meet in a couple of hours then, to go catch some flounder !"

"Yes, four o´clock!" Ethan smiled. "Not much sleep tonight."

"You don´t have to if you want to sleep…"

"I am too curious," Ethan said.

# Chapter Nine

David had called Ethan late in the evening to confirm their agreement and had asked him if he had a car. Ethan said it was not so, but a friend of his, Dupree, had a vehicle that Ethan used to drive. Ethan promised to pick David up at 04.00 am, and David said he would provide them with everything they needed, fishing gear, clothing, and food. The only thing Ethan was required to bother about was gas for the car.
When arriving outside David´s place in the dark at 04.00 AM, Ethan had on him an oversized, green, checkered lumber jacket, old blue jeans, and massive winter shoes with thick soles. He wore a sizeable woolen cap on his head that made his head look like a large hay bundle with the Rasta hair all tucked inside. David kept the city-style, and he had a white shirt with a collar and a small vest.
Ethan very wisely still took a small backpack, a black and white, where he had another set of clothes.
"I have been on the Bay, of course," Ethan said, "but I actually never have been out fishing here."

They now had arrived at Annapolis, the capital of Maryland, the city where James Mc. Cain was born. They had arrived on Route 50 to the Pearl Harbor Bridge, as Severn River Bridge recently is called.

After having parked the car by the river's side, there was a short walk to David´s small boat shed. It was now awfully early in the morning, 04.35 AM, and it was a beautiful day, although it was a bit misty and slightly chilly. Some other boats were already out on the water. Fishing people are early ducks.
Marsh birds - like black duck and coot - had left the immediate neighborhood in the river and were now sitting on the water upstream. It was still very early in the morning, and next to the coastal banks, there was a mist. The greenery over the meadow was dense, slightly covered by milky-white haze. The insects had not yet been awakened by the sun. The sky not round but an oval, and it was of immense proportions and far away in the east. Thin clouds of greyish complexion tried to mask the big star.
The boat lay in still juicy cordgrass by the river, and the bright blue, small outboard motor was well hidden, not in the boatshed but a tree trunk nearby. David got out the engine from its hiding-place and heaved it upon the boat's stern plank, where he secured it with handy clamps while holding the whole apparatus by the tiller. Then both of them showed the entire Santa Maria afloat in the river. The boat, which was

relatively small and freshly painted, slid out through the grass onto the river. The air was fresh in the brisk of the morning.
Some birds that David did not recognize told the boys that they were a nuisance to birdlife and, in doing so, shrieked loudly.

It was going to be a continued splendid day, David could tell from the formations of the cloud down over Washington, as he started the engine. He had learned a lot about the language of the clouds. Because clouds can tell a lot, now they told David no more than there was a great day to be unraveled. Ecliptic latitude: -3 degrees, Ecliptic longitude: 46 degrees
The Chesapeake bay had been a place of wars over oysters. The Chesapeake Bay means "great shellfish bay." One may see turtles and dolphins surfacing nearby.

"I am often watching the seagulls here," David said, raising the speed carefully. One might catch fish around the bridge and off the bridge pilings this time of year, but autumn was the best time for flounders.

"We should use bloodworms, trout magents, and shrimps to get them," David said. "I used to fish a lot when I was a little boy."
David looked at the fishing gear on the floor of the boat.

"Is this boat safe?" Ethan asked. He looked a little uncomfortable.

"Of course. By the way, we are not going out at sea. We will stay just under the bridge."

"Where are the rods then?"

"I personally don´t use rods. I use my finger," David said.
It turned out that Ethan was not very used to any boats at all. His movements onboard were clumsy, and David wondered if Ethan was one of those people who were utterly unpractical. Maybe Ethan was pure theory, David thought.

It was still dark on the river. The moon was up, and thin clouds now and then covered its whiteness. Towards the bridge, there was a mist. The small outboard 5hp Suzuki motor now was coughing. The ship was initially a rowing boat, and it contained a couple of oars and necessary oarlocks. David sat at the tiller, both feet on deck-hooks. The motor worked fine. Little puffs of smoke came out of the water bubbles just above the exhaust. Slowly the boat, by its own motor power, got closer to its destination, the bridge bars to the River Bridge. It rippled in the water under the lining of the boat. A few small whitish-greyish seagulls flew up from an islet not far away and soon circled over the small vessel. They probably were used to small boats and had felt the smell of the bait David had picked up and put on the bottom boards in

front of him, mussels and shrimp. On the gunwale, he had fastened a couple of empty hooks.
Ethan, sitting on the center thwart, looked curiously and cautiously around. He had drawn his woolen cap down to his eyes. Having had a questioning mine, he now seemed more content, and he laughed, showing his big white teeth. His slender black hands rested on the knees of his jeans.
They had arrived at one of the mighty concrete pillars that bore straight down in the mud. A couple of other boats, slightly bigger, were assembled in the early hour, and with people that had expensive fishing rods were assembled close to other pillars by the New Severn Bay Bridge. The others were not after flounder, like David, but trout and Spanish mackerel.

There was a relatively strong undercurrent sweeping below. The eelgrass mysteriously seemed to feel with his tiny hands after everything that was not theirs for the taking.

"So, this is where you spend early mornings?" Ethan smiled, now better at easy, when he saw that they had company.

"Mm," David murmured, his foot on the side plank. He had let the small anchor go and secured the iron chain attached to it by the thwart, and now he distributed the fishing lines.

Soon they had two lines on each side of the boat. David had charge over the two in the front of the water car, Ethan over the two ones in the aft.
The wrinkle over the nose of David had flattened out a little, and he looked more half-satisfied now and not worried or half-discontented anymore. David was happy as he had made an effort, and it seemed as if it were going to work out well. At least they were actually fishing now.
Ethan´s expression, his left hand on the gunwale, was that of concentration. They were simple lines, knot to one oarlock each. With this fishing method, the very idea was that you would hold the rope with just your hand and so with your index finger feel the fluttering itself. When you felt the jerk, you would then leave the line that was not relevant tied to an oarlock and turn exclusively to the side, starboard or portside, of the boat where the pacifier came.

"The idea with my method is one when you might fasten the hook more secure by pulling it up in the upper cheek on the flounder. And then it is another thing too. You might perceive the weight and the power of the fish right in your finger. It is like having a battle between your hand and the in known fish down below. Often, very

often, the fish has a lot of mass and weight. It will eventually feel like you are having a finger battle with Nature, or with God himself," David said.
His eyes had an unusual glow. Not a big one, but still a very rare glow. Thus were his feelings and his thoughts about fishing this way.
Ethan just nodded and tried by way of experiment to put himself into David´s half-trance.
On the other boats, the rods did the job. After a while, they suddenly bent. The fishermen took the rod and carefully and, under stern concentration, winched the catch onboard.

"I like fishing. Fishing is a good idea."

"It is simple. I like it when it is not complex."

"Yes." Ethan took a deep breath, "so what do you want to do when you are through the university then?"
David was grossly disappointed that Ethan did not take time to enjoy the hunt for flounders but still answered the question:

"Well, travel, maybe."
David arranged his line carefully in his hand. He tested several times to catch the flounder by surprise, by a violent pull. Ethan – who revealed he never had in his life caught any fish of any kind - on the other hand, was silently waiting for the fish to act themselves.

"You said you had taken History? Can you tell me more about that?" Ethan said when in a boat thirty yards up the river, a man yelled out:

"There´s not a single fish here at all!"
David smiled at Ethan and then explained to his friend:

"This is the usual talk here. Everyone is giving misleading information about everything. About fish. And about the weather, and sand and gravel. And bait." David said he had to explain a little about this exceptional art of fishing.

"One cannot," he said, lecturing, "when flounder fishing, overestimate the importance of boat positioning. Flounder don't lie around just anywhere on the bottom, but they dwell near drop-offs. Only by the bridge here – a classic spot - there is a real steep drop, and the most likely catch is between at a depth of 10 to 30 feet. One never can set the hook on the initial nibble, though. Flatfish will almost always grab and check up on their prey before eating it. When fishing using bait, you'll practically always initially feel a small jiggle-jiggle in your finger. It is the flounder chomping down on the bait-fish or shrimp, shaking it. If you try to set the hook on the first jiggle, you'll miss the catch. A thump-thump-thump feeling, yes, it is quite like heartbeats. It is bizarre. When the flounder has taken the bait, then you shall make

a move. You just pull for all you are worth. Usually, you will then hook the fish somewhere near the mouth. Then haul it up to the boat."
Ethan smiled. It was a cozy day.
David decided not to answer. Too much talk might scare the fish off and also distract themselves.
Slowly the day became brighter. David took off his coat. A dragon-fly landed on the tiller with a small ticking sound. The morning mist now was gone, and all the fishermen enjoyed bright sunlight.

Nobody got any fish. There were four boats near the bridge and two upstream, fishing for trout. The boats had been out there, all of them for more than an hour.

"What did I say?" the upstream man shouted. He was alone, and he suddenly decided to haul aboard his anchor to move to another location on the river.
David and Ethan waved at him in a friendly manner.

"I like studying," David said. "Maybe I will study all my life." He did not know if this was true.
Ethan did not respond but more and more enjoyed the tranquility of being out on the river.

"Maybe I will take up some language after History. I think Italian would be nice to know."
Ethan nodded. The boy with the Rasta hair did not believe that his white friend was clear about anything at all.

"What do your parents do?"

"They are dead."

"Oh. I am sorry."

"I grew up with an aunt. In Texas. But now I live here, alone."

"I see."

"There is no fish today," David said.

"No, I have not seen any of the others getting any either," Ethan replied, nodding towards the boats to the south of their own, which lay closest to the shore, away from the town side.
Ethan shouted out:

"Fish!"
He bent to the left and grabbed his fishing line with both hands, leaving the other lose by the other bulwark.
It did not take long before Ethan had secured the first greyish-brownish spotted, slimy flounder aboard with no help from David.

There came applause from other boats around since this indeed was the first fish of the day.
After a couple of hours, they took a break, and David started the engine, and they took to the shore.
They had caught twenty-three fish, and it was almost 2.00 PM when they dragged the boat on land and took off the motor. David smiled, and Ethan nodded profusely.
They took the car and brought the fish back to Ethan´s apartment, wrapped up in a large plastic bag. It looked like they could have a fish party.

David called up Elsa and Odile.

# Chapter Ten

Ethan and David had decided to meet up at Ethan´s place at Pratt Street in the following evening. Like Reuben, Ethan lived in a characteristic Baltimore row-house of older origin. But Ethan hired a single room. It was a two-and-one-half-story, side-gabled, red brick building, where Ethan resided. He had access to a small kitchen on the second floor, but the building itself was two rooms deep, with a dormered attic, it had white marble steps and pressed-metal cornices. However – as I said – this very house was rather ancient and looked almost ready for some real thorough renovation.
Half of Ethan´s apartment was secluded and reserved as a supply of some sort. It was closed and locked up. What was left was this single room that had no lights. Ethan showed David how to light a candle and instructed him to sit on a kitchen stool by the window.
David was shocked at the extremely miserable conditions of Ethan´s earthly housing and home living. At least there was a fireplace. No wood or fire in it, though. No wood basket.

"You like it here?" David asked the Afro-American.

Ethan lit another candle and sat down on another chair.

"It was nice go fishing, David!"

It ought to be remembered that these two persons, both are very young and vulnerable people. Every action must be taken to safeguard them and forgive them for their peculiar manners and strange ways of expressing themselves and their ways of

thinking and feeling. Young folks are strange folks, and they often develop potent strategies to cope with the fact that they are mostly left alone with the problem of the future. It is not the case, as some people are saying, that the business of the future is to look after itself. It is neither the case that the business of the future is to wait for us. Actually future has no business at all! Young folks are those who have a business. Ethan´s greyish face under the Rasta hair was a face of a 1500-meter runner. It was healthy and fresh. The dark brown eyes were extremely observant but still shy, and eyelids slightly sunk. Shyness often comes with high intelligence.

"You have no electricity?" David asked. He was stunned because Ethan certainly had a steady job and income, so why this darkness in his home?

"I like it without light bulbs." Ethan responded." It is way calmer this way. I have electricity."

Fractions of light entered through the transom from the stairs outside the slab to the hallway. The hallway was very narrow, void of door-jams. The glazed panel of the door had been painted heavily with black tar.

When David's eyes had gotten used to the dusk, he saw the immense heaps of books that lay all over the apartment, along the walls, which in turn were covered with all kinds of photographs and posters and sketches. A door to a cupboard had not been able to close, and there were books in it piled up unto the ceiling.

"My God!" David exclaimed, awestruck.

"I have lots more in the garage," Ethan added, with modest modesty. His skin seemed to have an even stranger greyish-greenish color in the dark.

"Good griseous." David said, who perhaps thought that was an accurate expression.

Ethan pulled out a coffee can from under a small mahogany table.

"I want to write a book about Paris," he said as he strolled out to the small kitchen to make some new, fresh caffeine drink for the coffee party. He exerted the remains of his former session into the sink.

"Why is that? Why? Have you been to Paris?"

"Never," Ethan said, almost cutting David´s question.

David now began to look around more, and he saw that the muntins in the windows were broken. Why would Ethan have such a skunky home? It was a two-story, elementary building of the all too frequent sort in Baltimore, slightly older than the neighboring houses. Maybe this house was a remnant from an earlier period. Not Middle Ages, but almost. Ethan´s Fell´s Point house did not have striped mortar joints

but was looking like a backyard house on the very front façade. It was a pity. It is always a pity when things are worse than they have to be.

"You cannot write a book on Paris if you´ve never been there. It is just silly." David finally said.

"Not at all! Would you like to read a book about New York by some New Yorker? Isn´t that the dullest book you would come to think of?"

"Yes, but …."

"Surprisingly, the best book about America is written by Kafka. You bet Kafka never visited New York!"

"You are not Franz Kafka," David clumsily riposted. As he rose from his chair and walked up to one of the three windows, he broke loose a piece of rotten wood.

"I never thought people lived in rotten houses these days," he said. "Now I get why you don´t have on the light. I am rather stupid when it comes to wisdom."

"Not at all. I just like it the way it is. I don´t know why."

But David secretly thought that Ethan was very close to perfection. Like all boys that never had a father, David looked everywhere for father figures and autonomous and fabulous people. David felt that he would rather be with Ethan right now than anything else. He was happy, and he didn´t care about Reuben. Ethan Bailey was, in several ways, a surprise to David. He had never thought that people like Ethan that chose not to have light bulbs, existed in real life.

"Now," Ethan said when black coffee was served in the dark parlor, "what do we want with ol´ Reuben? You hope he will make you his heir?"
David did not respond. This was not going to be an easy thing to explain. Not easy at all.

David felt that Ethan was ahead of him. As soon as David arrived at a certain point in the discussion, it seemed that Ethan already had been at that very spot for a long time. When David, on arrival, looked for where he was heading next, Ethan was gone, waiting somewhere else. And this would, it seemed to David, go on and continue to repeat itself indefinitely. And if David had dared to ask Ethan about this, and asked him how it came about, then Ethan would have answered that this depended upon the simple case, that he, Ethan, had will-power, had a vision about what was right for him.
In contrast, David had no such power nor any such idea at all. And if David had agreed but asked Ethan about how will-power and visions could be got, Ethan would have told David that it merely was a matter of exercise. If you had no dreams, you

would have to imagine visions and train yourself to do things that seemed right to do. You would have to – all the time, 24-7 – indulge in putting goals ahead of you and then immediately try to reach them. To become a decent person, a person yourself could stand, was a matter of exercise, repetition, and practice. If you were able to construct goals and achieve those, you would be a decent human being. You would then eventually find that other people never were ahead of you in any conversation because you simply already knew what you wanted. If you knew what you wanted, you had almost every possible answer to everything.

"I guess I think he has more money than he can use," David admitted reluctantly and felt like trash.

David nowadays – ever since his dear Aunt Mary died, and Albert, his black friend – had fallen into nausea. Yes, nausea it was. There were many things that David simply couldn´t stand nowadays. Among those things, real objects, that were all of them very concrete and everyday things, we might – while only looking into David´s head - refer to striptease, newborn babies, and raw meat. David got into intense shivering when he thought about it. He was very sensitive to every smell too. He often thought it smelled of fire. When he woke up in the morning, he could wonder if he had gone mad, if he was psychotic, or just had depression. He did not know, and he did not dare to try to find out. Some days he didn´t even care if he was alive or dead. He also had lost the ability to smile. What he had told Ethan about his feelings about Reuben was, in fact, all true. He thought that it was no need for Reuben to own all those things, Matisse and all and probably being a millionaire too. David himself was broke.

"Crazy," Ethan said in a firmly decisive manner.

Then all of a sudden, Ethan´s phone rang.

It was Joshua, Ethan´s colleague at the drugstore. He was distraught, and he was talking in a loud voice. There had been robbers in the store, and he, in trying to escape the robbers, had tripped on a stone in the small alley and hurt himself. He was waiting for an ambulance.

Ethan and David immediately took a cab to the hospital and then spent sat all night in a corridor at the Johns Hopkins Emergency Hospital, waiting to get information about Joshua, who had hurt his foot.

Ethan in the cab told David about Joshua. David learned that he was a black youngster, with his parents coming from Trinidad and Tobago. Joshua was just 17 years old and worked spare time. He was a good guitar player, and Ethan often bade

him sing in the drugstore's backroom when they were both working and had not much to do with supplies or customers.
David thought that what had occurred was awful and wondered if there had been a fight.
The police came to the hospital, and Ethan and David talked to them, and they said that Joshua had tried to escape as soon as the robbers entered, armed with handguns, the two of them. But in the struggle to open the back door, he had caught himself in a mess of old bicycles that were stored in the backyard. When the robbers came after him, he had also fallen into the gutter and hurt his foot, which still was entangled in the remains of a wheel of a bicycle.
The robbers had gotten nothing but cigarettes and a handful of dollars. They were caught on the surveillance camera, and they would soon be apprehended, the officers assured Ethan and his comrade.

By 03.00 am, Joshua came out in the corridor at the hospital, supported by a nurse. He had gotten his foot in a bandage and had a couple of crutches. The doctor had offered him to stay the night, but he had declined, telling them that he had a dog waiting for him at home.
He was overwhelmed in meeting Ethan and David and surprised at how tender and sweet they were towards him, especially David, whom he had never met before. They almost carried him out to a taxicab and then took him home.

Joshua lived in Halethorpe on Ridge Avenue. They got into his house by 03.45 PM and helped Joshua find a small sofa. His parents were on vacation in Georgia, and he had but one brother, who was in the army. The only living thing in the small apartment was a golden retriever, called Bobby, who licked Ethan´s hands as he took him out for a short walk in the still of the September night. There was no rain now, the weather was pleasant, and you could almost see the stars.

David stayed with Joshua. The boy was rather shocked, continually repeating the eerie fact that he had been pointed at with a gun.

"I could have been shot," he said. "I just ran, you know."

"I am so sorry," David said, sitting on the edge of a wooden sofa, which stood by the fireplace in the parlor in Joshua´s home. Nearby there was an old piano, and on the wall hang several musical instruments, like Spanish guitars, trumpets, and clarinets. A large painting was dominating on the wall, showing a raccoon and a cat sitting on a rooftop.

"How is your foot?" David asked, rubbing his head.

"It is not broken. It is just bruised. I got penicillin."

"Why?"

"I don´t know. I just got penicillin."

"Yes. Well, they know what they are doing." David agreed.

"I could have been dead by now, easily," Joshua said.

David nodded silently, gasping for air. It was stuffy at Joshua´s place. His father must be a heavy smoker, David thought. They had terrible pictures on their walls too. Badly painted raccoons and racehorses.

Ethan finally came back. Bobby, the dog, wagged his tail, and all the time, was very observant at Ethan, especially his face and hands. David thought that Joshua had trained his dog Bobby into a state of sheer and absolute stupidity. However, he did not comment aloud on this.

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Later Joshua told his comrades that he would like to sleep, but of course, he was delighted if they would stay because he was afraid. They did not know if the robbers had been caught. Ethan called the police department, but they said they had five patrol cars looking for the culprits. They had an excellent identification of both of them. The police would call Ethan back as soon as the bandits were apprehended.

"They will call back as soon as they have got hold of them," Ethan said as he put back his phone into his breast pocket.

"Or when they are dead," David said, without really want to say anything at all.

Ethan and David decided to stay with Joshua. He went to sleep in his bedroom while the comrades from the Reuben meeting resided in the parlor, each in his separate uncomfortable sofa, glancing through old newspapers that lay about on cupboards. Joshua's father seemed to have a passion for newspapers. He read the Baltimore Sun, Washington Post, and The New Yorker.

"Now, about me wanting to rob Reuben," David slowly said, letting his newspaper drop onto his chest. At least this house was adequately equipped with lightbulbs. Still, Ethan immediately interrupted him, telling him that this was not the right time to talk about that.

"But do you think Joshua is afraid they might come here to get him …?" David changed the subject.

"Maybe, but I don´t think there is a real danger," Ethan answered after a moment´s deliberation.

"Look at that old cornet on the wall!" David said and pointed at an instrument right above his head.

"My uncle had one of these," Ethan answered.

"He, the mad one?" David smiled.

Ethan startled.

"Why are you so rude? You must sharpen up! I don´t like when you are so rude."

"I just try to be fun."

"Well, that you are not. Cut that out!"

"Tell me about your uncle anyways! Please!"

"Mm …. Yes. My uncle…."

There was a spectacular noise from the bedroom.

"Listen!" Ethan said and got up on his elbows, dropping the Baltimore Sun on the floor near the sofa on which he was residing, with a brown blanket on top of him.

"I think he is crying," David said.

Ethan got up, left David, and went into Joshua´s room. David meanwhile looked at Bobby. The dog was asleep in a remote corner of the living room on a green blanket.

Joshua and Ethan spoke silently, and David refrained from excessively bothering them. Ethan would undoubtedly be comforting Joshua better than any priest, psychologist, or shrink, David thought

"It certainly takes guts to cry aloud," David thought and suddenly felt how tired he was. It was 03.15 AM. He turned to the wall, and after a short minute, he was fast asleep on Joshua´s sofa.

After an hour, he was awake again, though.

Joshua sat by his kitchen table, and he looked like a mummy or at least semi-dead. David and Ethan looked at each other and shook their heads. Ethan told Joshua that it was terrible luck for Joshua since it might as well have been him that the robbers could have attacked. Ethan told Joshua that he must think that his swift actions had saved his own life.

Ethan and David then decided to leave. So they did, after giving Joshua leave to call them any time on the phone. They would be back as soon as he wished for it, they said.

On their way back to Ethan´s house, David was silent. He tried to digest what he was experiencing.

They were now on at Ethan´s place on Pratt Street at 05.00 am when Ethan turned to David:

"I have to get one hour´s sleep. Then I go on my shift."

"Good. See ya!"

David immediately took off towards his own house, and Ethan did not follow his departure.

Soon Ethan was at home again and swung the door open to his narrow hallway. There was a letter on the floor. He seldom got letters. In the last couple of years, postal handling of ordinary mail had decreased. The young Afro-American bent down and picked up the letter. It was from his uncle, his oldest uncle, William. Ethan decided to read it later in the day because he needed an hour´s rest before going to work.
The moment he laid his head on the pillow, he slept.

David hurried home to Beck Street, and on the way, he thought that his and Ethan´s relationship was a real uncomfortable relationship, if there ever was one. Even though they had gone fishing together, they had not come any closer. He also felt that it would be a terrible thing if he would spend the rest of his life in Baltimore. But, on the other hand, he knew Baltimore and loved the harbor.

# Chapter Eleven

Captain George Butterfield, the owner of the drugstore where Ethan worked, was a man in his sixties. He lived with his wife Griselda, who was slightly younger, at Fannershead, in a large white mansion with four round marble pillars and two broad front stairs. The house had three stories and a large roof compartment that hovered and swelled with a somber maternal grace over the rest of the house. It lay on a flowery slope, embedded in the most profuse greenery, huge lilacs covering some

areas of the front so that you could not be sure if the windows were open or not. Close to the house was a small lake called Lily´s Pond, to the south of Baltimore.
Butterfield, a republican, had a Lincoln convertible and a dog, a German Schaefer, called Hubert, and was a relatively wealthy man, having in his financial sphere some thirty of the one hundred small houses in the center of the town as well as contacts within the local Maryland administration. He was the closest friend to the brother of the governor. For some reason, however, this brother was a man who always wanted to act in the background. His preferred Nom de Guerre was Leclerc.
However, recently, Butterfield had been diagnosed with pancreas cancer, which had brought on him a giant depression. He was determined not to let this crush him, but he would now ramp up his efforts of securing his small fortune. He would do this at any cost.

Butterfield and his wife had had a daughter, aged 25, but she was away at a Glasgow university in Great Britain. Butterfield had planned for his daughter to inherit and overtake his business, including all the rental housings. But the daughter, whose name was Eliza, was not the slightest interested in the property business. She studied art and literature, played the bassoon and the alto saxophone, and was a prolific painter. She had her own art site on Facebook and had sold some works through Etsy and even on a large internet auction at Sotheby´s. To Eliza, literature was necessary. She also despised the fact that her father had supported such an illiterate president as the last one.

To try to console themselves for the absence of their only child, the Butterfields used to invite friends to stay for a week now and then. Right now, there was Mr. and Mrs. Buck Allen, who were distant friends of Mrs. Butterfield, who were visiting. The Allens were sitting in the garden together with Griselda, amusing themselves by playing with two dogs, poodles, Buster and Curt. They had a radio on, and on the table, there was coffee, tea, and sandwiches, which were brought to the small party by Evelyn, the maid, an Irish girl by the handy age of eighteen.

Griselda was a bitter woman. Her husband had since long been bored with her. He had several erotic ladies, which he both visited and supported, several times a week. Those ladies often were very young, not seldom quite the age of his own daughter or the maid. Since Griselda also was aware of this fact, her resentment, bitterness, and anger were second to no human feeling.

On this evening, Butterfield, completely ignoring his guests, sat in his back garden, talking to his simpleminded gardener, Mr. Joseph, a stunningly beautiful black man with bright eyes, in his early 40ies.

"You see, Joseph, I just spoke to a friend of mine, and I will have him on a visit in an hour. Please try to see to that my wife stays occupied with her guests. I don´t want to be disturbed. You might entertain them in any way you like. I know you have many talents, Joseph!"

"I could show those folks when I catch fish in the lake, sir. With my teeth. Then they are practically out of sight for almost an hour, sir."

He grinned. He thought much of Mr. Butterfield. To him, his master was equal to the president.

"You have such a great understanding," Butterfield said and clapped Joseph on the shoulder. He took out his phone and asked Joseph if $100 would be of any use to him. Joseph nodded and tried to clean his hands with his shirt. Butterfield asked for his number and then instantly wired the money.

Half an hour later, Joseph had brought Griselda and her guest down to Lily´s pond, where the Afro-American man sang and dived and brought the delighted guests fresh trout by the teeth.

Leclerc´s car, a small black Mercedes DL70, glided up on the front porch at Butterfield's residence. The brother of the governor escaped from the dark of the van, whose windows all were black. He drove himself and was all alone.

Richard Leclerc was a small, fat man with a bald head and thick glasses. He was profoundly nearsighted, almost blind in the left eye. On the sides of his round pale head, there hang a pair of bushy black whiskers. He was known for his immense memory and was also a wealthy man. A strange nervous condition caused him to always have some sort of tremble, or tremor, all over his body. Some thought it was just due to an overflow of energy; others meant that it was some odd disease. He had always been like that, and he was used to his condition and did not like to be notified about it.

Leclerc owned a couple of industries that dealt in cocoa. He also owned some ghost towns in Utah and a tourist boat on the Amazon River. He was not married and had never been.

Butterfield welcomed him and led him from the parking lot to the front of the house since he noticed that the talented Joseph had already started his show by the lake. Screams and laughter were heard as he caught fish with his teeth. Greenery and huge slurs prevented the party by the sea from seeing the mansion from there.

Butterfield led his guest to the backyard. He had lunch waiting on sideboards beside a small group of tables and resting chairs.

Leclerc was in a good mood, and the elegant host served him cigars and whiskey. During all the preparations for the small lunch meal, consisting of roasted deer steak, Captain Butterfield was talking:

"I have nothing to complain about, Richard," the Captain said to Leclerc, "but I want my sweet little daughter to be impressed enough by some thrilling news for me to be able to lure her back. She is right now dwelling in pure fantasies, and she can´t yet put into her head that her very bright future lies here, with a business right here and not in London Soho."

Leclerc was a kind, apt and eager listener. He had been a friend of the Captain for a considerable time, and so far, it seemed to be a perfect companionship. The Captain had his Real Estate Company, called GEBB Properties, where Leclerc owned about 22% of the active stock. In return for the revenues from the housing business, Leclerc, through the years, had, through different connections, led state officials to make economic and political decisions that favored the Captain´s Company. Leclerc was, as we already know, also related to the governor.

Leclerc swept a glass of wine. From a distance, there was a peal of rising laughter. It seemed as if not only was Joseph catching fish, but both the Allens and the Captain´s wife, the relatively massive Griselda, had taken a bath together with the athletic black gardener on this beautiful hot day in August. Maybe they even got out of their clothes altogether.

"Now, let us turn to my actual errand, which has nothing to do with Eliza." Butterfield said, glancing at the trembling man, "I have to tell you some about Martha. Because you never knew her, did you?" Captain Butterfield said as he pushed away his plate and dried his fingers on the tablecloth.

Leclerc said he did not think he knew who that woman was.

"You are familiar with the museums here," Butterfield continued, "… and all the famous art collectors that this town has produced. Yes, We all know. Anyway, this Martha had no education, no money, and nothing but her matchless beauty and conversation skill. She happened to know all the families with cultural interests in our town during a couple of decades, and she also was kind enough o offer her amorous services to some wealthy collectors of art too."

"I still don´t know who that woman was." said the man who was known for his immense memory.

"I am telling you right now. Some coffee?"

"Certainly," Leclerc said in a neutral voice.

Captain Butterfield lifted a small golden bell placed on the table and rang for the young Irish girl, who immediately appeared carrying a tray with the desired fluid in a small, blue pot.

"Excellent! Thank you so much!" Leclerc said and smiled at the young girl, who appeared very modest and shy in the presence of the shaking Leclerc. She was not an American girl, and it is, of course, a certain flair to have a European maid. Captain Butterfield just seemed to have realized that he wanted so much more excitement in his life since he was about to lose his only daughter to London and jazz music. The future looked anything but bright to him. And he had grown deeply irritated with his wife. He barely could stand to have her company at all.

"You know the type, I am sure," Butterfield said," She came from a simple background, but energetic and beautiful. She had a significant handicap, though, because she was excessively dominant. She simply could not be handled by any man at all. Not during her heydays, anyway. It was not until she was about sixty years old that she could be tamed, and then it was by a strange, reliable Sea Captain."

Leclerc nodded and glanced around him the loggias and the garden flowers, the plume trees, and the small lamp cherubs made of porcelain that enlightened the railing to the back garden.

Screams were still heard from the small pond on the other side of the house.

"Well, what business was she into?" Leclerc asked.

"She had small gift shops and such. She was no businesswoman."

"She just was attractive?"

"Well, she was educated, well self-educated, and she could carry a conversation. She traveled around the world, accompanying people. Marrying. And then she was mistress to many men."

Leclerc nodded, and he seemed a little puzzled. What would eventually be revealed about this woman that possibly could be of any interest to him? He had known many women like Martha. They were nothing to him since Leclerc was exclusively into men, or, more exact, boys. And of this, he knew that Captain Butterfield was well aware.

"She had a hobby."

"So?"

"She was an art collector, and she managed to swindle off art from the men that she seduced."

"Is that possible?" Leclerc said, raising his eyebrows to his skull, where some thin straws of hair crossed each other.

"Well, you just have to visit the home of Mr. Reuben Longman, her very last husband, to get a clear opinion about that. But I would say that Martha when she died of a stroke or something in the middle of Riverside Park on a summer's day some months ago, she left to her husband many million dollars worth of art on his walls. And in fact, and this is the exciting thing, I don't think he is, to this day, aware of it at all. He is not aware of how she got these paintings, and – pro secundo – he is not aware of their immense worth. There are Modigliani's, Mattisses, and Rubenses in long rows on his walls. And he does not know it. She did not steal these paintings. SHE GOT THEM FOR FAVOURS."

Leclerc sat still, puffing at a small cigar that he just had managed to get out of his summer coat.

"You bet," he said.

"Yes honestly," Butterfield tried to smile and added:

"But, Richard, now comes the horrendous part."

Leclerc looked at Butterfield. "Soo?" he asked and raised his massive eyebrows.

"Yes." Butterfield said, "She blackmailed me."

"She blackmailed you?" Leclerc asked, now a bit more concerned.

"Yes. She found out certain things about my business that could be held against me. Nothing serious. You know, even some figures, calculations, and prognoses might be of danger to oneself if they fall into the wrong hands…."

"Sure, it is understandable," Leclerc said, and he nodded.

"And since Martha now is dead but died in such a sudden and unexpected manner, I fear that the papers which she stole from me – because they are missing – might be in Longman´s house. And I have to get hold of them."

"And you haven´t informed the police?"

"No, actually not."

"So what are you going to do?"

"That was what I would like to ask you. It is hard to figure out which steps are the best ones to take….."

"I see."

"I have to emphasize that I don´t want to cause harm to Mr. Longman. He certainly has nothing to do with this. He is just an innocent bystander whose wife just was a bit extravagant, or more exactly a criminal. You know, the poor man had a wife, who not only betrayed him but also was a thief."

“Anyway,” Butterfield continued, ”what I have thought of is to lure Longman away for a couple of days, somehow, so that I could send my men in to take a thorough look at the entire building because SOMEWHERE inside those papers must be kept. I don´t think Martha kept them in the safe at the bank. That was not how she was. She kept the paintings in Longman´s home, where she lived on the upper floor, in some sort of marriage. And I think she kept my documents there too. But I don´t think Longman knows of any documents.”

“Well, it can be tough.”

“It is only one more thing.” Butterfield added and continued:

“A murder inquiry is ongoing. I mean an investigation. Some think that Martha was murdered in the park and that she did not die from heart failure or something.”

“I have to ask you,” Leclerc, who suddenly had stopped shaking, began, but Butterfield interrupted him.

“No, no, nothing of the kind! I had ABSOLUTELY NOTHING to do with her death. I swear.”

He held up two fingers.

Leclerc nodded.

“So, you will be absolutely sure that whoever lures Mr. Longman away, while you are searching the house, that this could not be linked to you. Am I right?”

“Spot on.”

“Aaah. Let me think. Give me a day or two?”

“Oh, yes. I have a man on watch outside Longman's house, and today Longman was carrying lots of boxes out to the backyard. Of course, I will try to get hold of these, but I certainly do not think that the documents are there. Longman is a conscientious fellow, a former Kofferdist Captain.”

“You will hear from me,” Leclerc said, now rather tired. He probably had wanted to discuss the art collection more than some Butterfield documents.

Butterfield escorted him past the hedge, behind which Griselda was heard to sing together with her friends.

“I am so thankful to share my problems with you, Mr. Leclerc. That Martha was a real ... I hope there is something I can do for you in the future.”

“It´s all right,” Leclerc said and drove away in his Mercedes, which ran perfectly noiseless. It seemed as if it instead absorbed noise than emitted any. Butterfield shrugged. He did not like to have to ask for help.

Now he heard Griselda shouting in a shrill voice:

“Geordie boy! Come over here!”

# Chapter Twelve

To reach another place, geographically, taking the bus is often a good solution. The storm was waiting out on the Atlantic Ocean. All the east coast birds of the U.S.A. took shelter between houses, in alleys, forests, or holes in the ground. So they did in Connecticut and at Fell´s Point. On CNN, the male meteorologist in charge was dressed in black and stammered. At the same time, his arm repeatedly wavered up and down in front of his map, showing the area outside of New York.
Life was full of storms.

Eric, Inga, and Armamente had on this Tuesday embarked on the six o´clock Greyhound bus from Bloomside bus station to Baltimore. It was an eight-hour ride. They showed their luggage in the outside box compartment and entered the streamlined bus, half full of people.
It was decided that Inga, who wanted to sleep, should sit alone, while Eric and Armamente, who wanted to chat and watch the road, sat together on the left side of the bus. As soon as they had gotten on the highway, where the traffic was at least somewhat less heavy, Armamente took out a book and placed it in her lap.
Inga told the two of them that she had dialed up Reuben, who had told her they were welcome tomorrow Tuesday at 01.00 PM. Eric nodded, and Armamente smiled. Her face shone young and bright. Her nose was curved and her eyes clever. She took out a small notebook where she scribbled down the information received with a little pencil that she had kept hanging in a string around her slender neck. Tiny straws of hair caressed the tanned skin on that neck.
Eric tried to make the journey comfortable by removing his small Mocka shoes and putting them in his coat pockets.

"Now, let us start fresh. Have you ever been to Baltimore?" the doctor asked.

"I told you," Armamente said.

"Let me ask you." Eric continued, unobservant to her remark," What do you think of today´s America?"
Armamente sat silent for a while.
"I cannot answer a question like that."
She tried to modify her bra, which seemed to be itching.
Suddenly, a hand came through the small raft between their chairs, and it was Inga´s. In it were a couple of almost crumbled envelopes.
"Here! Take a look at these. They are the three letters I got from Martha before what happened. I think they might tell a lot of her situation…."
Eric and Armamente took hold of the letters. They decided not to read them separately but out loud and right away so that they both could be judges of their content.
"Who´s going to read them?" Eric Goldkettel asked.
"I´ll read," Armamente said.
Martha´s handwriting in these letters was clear, round, and easy to read. She misspelled some words but was, on the whole, a decent writer of letters.

"Dear Inga!

Baltimore on the 6th of January of 2xxx.

I am so tired of the life I have right now. Ah, Inga, if we could do something funny! Reuben is genuinely dull, which he certainly was not before. He has lost hope in some way.
I am trying to cultivate myself and find new things to do. I have taken up writing. At the moment, I am on a course with wonderfully artistic people in a writing circle. I am writing a novel too. Do you hear it? I AM WRITING A NOVEL.
Please write soon and tell me what you are doing yourself, my little sweetie tartie!

Martha (P.S. Looooooove! )"

"And then we have letter No.2."Armamente continued. It goes like this:

"
Dear Inga!
Thank you for your letter. You seem to do alright. I know you have a talent for that. I wish I were more like you. I have always hoped for that.
Reuben seems depressed. I don´t know what is wrong.

I have met a beautiful gang with writers, though. Yesterday we were at a restaurant. Some are from Africa. You know how I love Africa!
Please write soon
to

Martha."

"She is not happy," Eric remarked. He looked at the hands of Armamente, which so swiftly and graciously dealt with the letters and envelopes that seemed terribly torn and shabby. He was almost fascinated by her hands.

"You´ve got very boyish hands." He said.

"Well, I am not exactly a girl," Armamente said in a light tone as she flattened the last letter against her Levi Strauss knee.

"What do you mean??" the doctor mumbled, and his mouth went dry.

"I am a transsexual. A transgender person. I am not a girl." Armamente insisted.

"What?" The doctor had to grip hold of his bus seat because the bus now swung in the heavy breeze on the highway.

"But…." he said. "Oh, I did not know….."

"No, of course, how could you? I should have told you."
Eric was shocked. He had to loosen his seat belt and turn for a glass of water. Eric kept a bottle on the holder in front of him, water provided by the bus company.

"Confusing, isn´t it?" Armamente added in the same light tone. "If it is to you, imagine what it is for me!"

"Ha, yes, you´re right," Eric said, and he wondered what it would be like to take Armamente´s hand. Immediately he decided that that was what he would do. So he grabbed her left hand, thus made her drop the letter, and he said:

"It perfectly fine with me. I like you, no matter what."

"I think so. And thank you!" Armamente said, smiling, and picked up the letter.

She started reading it while the doctor loosened his grip on her hand and took out a handkerchief to wipe his face.

"Dear Inga!

Thank you for your letter. It must be great to be in control of your future.
I am having trouble with everything. Reuben merely is sarcastic.
I don´t know what to do.

Kisses

Martha."

"What a strange letter!" Armamente added.
Eric nodded and looked out the bus window. Now it was night, and all the electrical lights were just flaring by in the wind, just like in some unreal, cosmic dream.

# Chapter Thirteen

When David woke up in the morning from his deep sleep, he did so very slowly. Still, when he finally regained full consciousness, he checked on his mobile phone, especially the news. There had been more shootings during the night, CBS reported.

The record from 2019 of 57 dead by gun violence per 100000 inhabitants would probably be broken this year. It was ten o´clock. He rang little Elsa. She immediately answered while attending an old lady in the care home somewhere.

"Hello!"

"It´s me, David. I just want to tell you what Ethan and I did yesterday."

"I haven´t got time now, gringo."

"OK, I´ll call you up later. When can I call you?"

"When I am home. I´ll give you a knock. At seven."

"OK. Bye!"

David hung up. He then dialed Raymond up, Elsa´s friend, Haylee´s older brother.

"Raymond," the sullen voice said.

"This is David, Elsa´s co-liver at Beck Street. Would yo like to join in? We´re gonna visit an ol´ sea-Captain who has opened up a social club by the harbor, at Thames Street. It is gonna be open every Wednesday night. I think it will be great fun. And I would like to know what you think of him, if he is dead or not or something. You know. He has sailed all over the planet….".

All David heard was Raymond´s heavy breath.

"You talk too much," the voice said.

"No, I talk like that."

"Sure. I like new stuff. I am bored too, you know."

"Fine. I´ll let you know the details. The old man wants to know. He wants at least seven or eight persons, for a start. He´s got a whole house. And boy, it is stuffed with chimpanzees and zebras. And a lion too. Stuffed."

"Ah. Lion and zebras?"

"Yes, awesome guy. A real sailor."

"I´ll be there. Call me!"

"See ya!"

They both hang up.

David rose and walked up to the window. He placed his knuckles on the windowsill and pensively banged with his head against the windowpane. He still didn´t know what his plans were. One thing was clear, though. He wanted to give Ethan a good impression of him, because meeting Ethan was the best thing that had happened for a year or so.

David stopped banging his head and left for the kitchen where he took out some bread from a paper bag and jam from the fridge and then sat down with a pile of books on Italian renaissance at his desk beside the window.

Outside David saw the trees losing their leaves in the light September breeze. The lane was deserted. Just three or four of these small, dense cars by the side of the road served as a contrast. Not a single sound was heard. You could neither see nor hear any birds.

His books on the Italian Renaissance always waited for him. He was not interested anymore. It was a new thing, though, that had come about lately, him losing interest in what had been important just days before. It was never like that a couple of years ago. Now he felt like this frequently. Like for instance, in July, when he had had a mania about science fiction. Just a few weeks later, in August, he was not the least interested any longer. Now it was only Ethan that was on his mind, and he didn´t care at all about de Medici, Julius II, Castiglione or Cesare Borgia. He would never take up Italian. He had just last spring planned to learn Italian. David could not stand these manias any longer. He was sick of himself.
David did not have any idea about what might help him. He was fascinated by Ethan. Ethan wanted to write books in French. That was gorgeous.
David had some sort of intuitive wisdom and logic. He thought that maybe he was on the verge of going crazy and end up in an asylum, like Ethan´s uncle. But being crazy does not in itself exclude wisdom.

David decided he needed a walk. These times were strange. In the recent pandemic, many people had acquired the habit of taking pointless walks. Many continued to do so. Life would never rearrange. Lots of businesses were all gone, and most people too. At least here in this town, just like in Texas. He sighed.
It was almost noon. David strolled down to the harbor. While watching the small yachts in the Inner Harbor, enjoying the weather, he sat down on a bench in the sun. Some days were like summer, he thought, and called up Ethan to check if everything was okay.

David returned to his house, putting his shoe on the white rectangular marble doorstep, when he suddenly heard voices from Elsa´s window on the other side of the front porch. Elsa had visitors. David sat down on the stairs to pretend to fix one of his shoes.
It had to be Elsa and her friend, Haylee, David thought. He knew Haylee from the library. She worked at a small pharmacy, and she used to spend her evenings at the library. David overheard their conversation. The girls discussed joining the basketball

team – The Northern Gulls - due to being excluded from the football team. Haylee also complained about her friend Jenelle, whose brother Joseph who had no job but was just cleaning car front windows at street intersections together with a pal of his. And she was for some reason worried about him. Then the girls suddenly got silent, and in a minute, both their heads were visible in the window. Elsa tore it open and shouted:

"So, you´re just sitting there?"

David didn´t answer but rose and went inside. He banged at Elsa´s door, and the girls giggled, but they did not open the door. Maybe they were trying on new clothes, painting their fingernails or something, he fancied. It was Saturday, and they were both going out tonight.

Inside his own room, there was a real mess. It was long since there had been any cleaning of any sort. David now the girls leaving for a walk. They probably thought that they didn´t have privacy enough in the apartment, David being in his room close by. But they hadn´t been long gone when they returned. They knocked at David´s door and told him they were going to near Woodstock, up the Patapsco, because they had had a call from a friend of Elsa's, who had his brand new wooden shack just by the river being burnt down. Elsa and Haylee had decided to go there by bus to see if they could help him sort things out. The girls bade David look after the cat. They might be gone till the next day, they told him.

David was just going to slip out on the street to check if the cat was in. He noticed a crowd on the other side of the road, at a house where another friend of his lived, Buster O´Malley. Buster was a jazz piano player, bebop style, an excellent one. It was not rare to see people standing or seated outside his window.

The cat lay on the bed.

David did not like at all to go into girl´s rooms when girls were not there. It was something unsettling with all their clothes, lotions, medicaments, garments, and the small faux jewelry. To David was downright sickening - that is when they were not there themselves.

David had several times been up at Woodstock, by Woodstock Road, which had a manifold of dense woodlands at small, brisk, idyllic waterways. It was kind of heaven on earth. That a concert had been held there, twice, was nothing that came to his mind.

David often had ideas about himself, picturing him as an enormously gifted and essential person. Usually, these ideas were linked to the fact that he partly was of Jewish origin. Young West did not look upon himself as a Jew or being of any race

at all. He sometimes did not even think that he was a human being at all. The thought of being important worked very well when he was alone but did not work well with Ethan.

David now heard Elsa rumbling about in her room again behind the door to her quarters. Much of David´s time in his home was wasted by trying to listen to what Elsa did. It was not long before he heard a slight knock on the door. She had heard him, as he had heard her. Now she whispered:

"Hey, David, are you there??"

When David saw Elsa, he got still more tired. She was never any inspiration to him. That was not anything he could help. He patiently waited for what she had to say. At the same time, he thought that he would be kind to her the next time he spoke to her, but not yet, not now. He said to himself that he in his heart was much nicer than what was immediately apparent to others. Thus David – of course – was a liar.

"Oh, David, it was terrible."

"What?"

"With Joshua, of course… and the police shootings."

"Yes, quite a shock. Don´t worry! Joshua is all right, I think. Ethan and I were with him at his house until just an hour ago."

"He is alright then? Is he really?" Her lip trembled.

"Yes. I told you."

Elsa hesitated. She looked tired, and her hair was a mess.

"I was just wondering," she said and returned to her room. She turned the lock twice.

When she was gone, David undressed and went to bed. He slept until 01.00 pm.

# Chapter Fourteen

Washington Post had the news early on the next morning, on Tuesday. The perpetrators from the robbery in Upper Fell´s Point had both been shot dead by the police.

It was 10.00 AM. In Joshua´s house on this very morning nobody checked that Washington Post web site, or Baltimore Sun, but the three youngsters in the apartment on Ridge Avenue all lay fast asleep. David´s phone rang, and Elsa told him of the deaths. She wondered if Joshua, he and Ethan were okay. David told Ethan and Joshua the bad news, and then he assured Elsa that he would call back later.

"Thank you, Elsa. Just take it easy." David finished the call. Joshua soon walked around in the small apartment on his crutches, looking awful, all grey in his face.

"I saw them you know. They were just my age," Joshua said, taking out, trembling hands, some cups from a shelf above the stove. The cups were green.

"I will make some coffee," David said.

Ethan took the cups from Joshua, and soon, he had laid the table in the kitchen, which was much cozier than the parlor and the other rooms.

Joshua maneuvered himself wearily to the window, where there was a small radio, and he turned on a news channel.

After listening to some ads about new Kia models, the news announcer reported on the latest violent crime cases. He told the Baltimoreans that two young kids, aged 15 and 16, had been shot by the police amid incredibly tragic circumstances. They had not succumbed to the police patrols' commands in Patterson Park.

"They got shot in Patterson Park," David said, whiter in his face than ever before. Joshua, who just had his jeans on, no shirt, also seemed to be close to fainting.

"We don´t know, they might …" Ethan said. But David cut him short and in a sudden rage flung out at him:

"They are dead, for sure. We do know."

The radio reporter continued, almost in a hysterical tone:

"The youngsters had refused to give back their guns. At first, the police shot the older boy, who declined to lay down his gun, which he waved over his head. Later, when the younger boy, in attempted revenge, aimed at the shooter with his revolver,

he was himself shot in the head. The two deceased boys, who just had been robbing a small grocery store in Fell´s Point, were both well known to the police. Their parents are contacted by the authorities. …. And now the weather forecast …"
Joshua now had to sit down. He was sobbing again, and Ethan´s trying to solace and to comfort him were all in vain.

"You must give your parents a call!" Ethan said while patting Joshua on the back, serving him coffee.

"Why?" Joshua sobbed. "Why did they shoot them?"

"They were a danger to the police," David said.

"I am so sad …." Joshua sobbed.
After a while he calmed down.

"I only wish it would stop someday," He added. "Sooner or later. The shooting. I can´t stand it. What is the use of growing up here, just to get shot?"
David looked out the window. He felt helpless too, and sad, not only for the people that had lost their lives, but also – in the usual way - for himself. David could see nothing to live for. Just hours ago, he had enjoyed Ethan´s company. However, right now, Ethan felt mentally absent to David, far away, and it was as if Ethan had frozen or turned into stone since he came to know about the robbery of the drug store. David realized that Ethan had not at all been able to cope with the recent events. Maybe he was a softer man than one might initially think, and he needed help …, David suddenly thought. Maybe he himself was stronger than he thought. The white boy glanced at Ethan, but Ethan´s eyes were covered with tears. Ethan was the superior mind here, David knew that, but why didn´t Ethan speak up then? People with brains do have responsibility. Haven´t they?

"Let´s call the police," David whimpered, "to tell them that we are in severe need of a psychologist or something! We cannot handle this situation by ourselves anymore."
Ethan looked at David, and suddenly there was a new understanding in his eyes.

"Do that!" he said, and he nodded his head fiercely, actually gulping.
David, happy to be able to grasp the situation and to be able to try to do something about it, called the police headquarters and told them that they were in a crisis. The operator was very understanding and forthcoming. She told David that they would immediately send two social workers educated to handle psychological strain and traumas. They also wondered if they should send a vicar or daikon too. However, David declined the latter part of the offer. A psychologist would do, he said. He thanked them and said that they waited for the help to arrive.

Joshua felt better while overhearing David´s call. Now, the three were more bound together, and David was happy with his action. He did not understand from where he had gotten his strength and such a brilliant idea of calling for that sort of help.
When the social workers arrived David and Ethan soon left for their own homes.

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It was late that day, at 11.22 PM at David´s place. David slept while having the radio turned on. The cat sat on the window sill. The small fan on the bookshelf worked at a slow speed, and it sounded like a medical ventilator.
Now, the phone rang. It was Haylee.

"Hello, it´s Haylee. I am with Elsa, but she is hurt. We´re at Woodstock. By the road. She´s been hit."
David got on his feet in a hurry.

"Where? How?"

"We got off the bus, and she slipped, and by accident, she got in front of a bicycle. An old man, a bum with a bicycle, hit her. Maybe she has broken her hand or something. It's just the wrist though. But we don´t know how to get to the hospital. I cannot reach Raymond …."

"Oh, is she bleeding or …?"

"No, but she´s got pain."

"I´ll go look for Raymond. I´ll call you. But …. Wait!"

"Yes."

"Can she talk?"

"Yes."

"Ah. It´s nothing. Just tell her that we´ll come for you. Where are you, then?"

"At Woodstock Inn. It is quite near the shack that burnt down."

"Where is the guy with the shack then?"

"He´s not here either. I don´t know where he is. We´re all lost. Jus´ the two of us."
Haylee was sobbing. David could feel the desperation.

"I´ll call you in a minute," David reassured her, and he at the same time got his short woolen coat on and rushed out on the street to go over to Raymond´s place.

Raymond was at home with his girlfriend, Beth, and they fixed with a new music video. They had set up an intricate net of cameras in the basement, arranged with several colored spotlights. They were both dressed in rather fantastic, elaborate gothic

outfits. They had a friend of Beth´s serving as a cameraman; a clever black girl named Odile, and were performing and shooting a crazy Goth song called “Death in the green attic.” which was a work of their own.
Raymond´s car, a small Kia, was in the garage, and they all stopped the shooting of the film and he all rushed for it, stilled dressed and in an outfit as Dracula, and Odile and David jointly called poor Haylee to tell her they were on the run. Odile could not ride in our car because they had to have enough room in the vehicle for Elsa and Haylee. Odile had a big motorbike with her, though, standing in the backyard of Raymond´s place, and she said she would follow us tight.

“The bike is faster than anything. I jus´ have to know what has happened to Elsa.” Odile said. She was a small, bowlegged, fit girl who wore a black leather jacket, neatly decorated with a massive red fist and the letters “NESSIE B.” ( Nessie B. was a sea monster in the bay of Baltimore.)
Raymond and Beth both had their Goth masquerade suits on. David felt surreal.

“How far is it?” Raymond asked, when they had all gotten in the small car, while hitting the gas... His face, all chalky white, with red horns on top of it, looked scary, which of course added more tension to the whole expedition.

“Maybe 30 miles,” David answered, though he was not very confident in this matter. No life was at stake here, though, David thought. It was about a hand concussion.
David was beginning to feel tired, and as always, when he was awake too long, voices came into his head, and pictures. Now there came up a striped monkey in his imagination or live dream, a primate with big white teeth. It laughed and told him to say, `That´s shit, bro.., That´s shit, bro´!” `You just tell `em that´s shit!´ David sternly pressed his lips together and suffered.

He glanced through the rear window to look for Odile. She waved her hand when she saw him turning around to look for her. She had on a blue helmet and was on the bike behind the Kia. Odile was small with a blunt nose. Her eyes always sparkled with mockery. She probably was not afraid of anything at all. But she was no psychopath at that.
Raymond, as they ran faster and faster, thought it was wise to take Elsa to Mercy Medical Center on Calvert Street downtown. He knew the doctors and nurses there, he said. Raymond had been shot in his leg not long ago. He had gotten his trauma treatment there for months after.

The night was dark, and it was a long ride for our small caravan of horrors out of the city towards more rural areas. The car ran smoothly, and so did the motorcycle behind. Beth, who also was a friend of Elsa, rang her up, and as Haylee answered her phone, she just told her that they were on their way to take Elsa to Mercy´s. Haylee was happy to hear that, and she told Beth that Elsa had had her arm wiped up in a towel and that it was terribly bruised. The lower right arm was susceptible to touch, and now and then, Haylee told, Elsa just screamed when she tried to move it.

David – who had planned to spend the evening alone - noticed that he had a pleasant feeling. It was relieving when something was going on, and it felt good as well to have a company.

David glanced at Beth, who sat beside him in the backseat. Flickers from streetlights rhythmically bounced right into the car through the newly washed windows. Beth had removed half of her facemask by using Kleenex, and David thought she was stunning. Raymond was an excellent driver. The car ran smoothly along the Patapsco River and up towards Elliot county and the Woodstock area. The woods surrounding the meandering road were densely grown. There were pine trees, white oak, and maple trees. Often a small current broke loose by the wayside. On a small meadow, there could be seen a glimpse of a deer or a large bird.

"There´s a deer!" David actually cried out when he thought he saw one. He never tried to appear more mature than he was. He wanted no credit for that.

"You ever were fishing `round here?" Raymond asked.

"Nope," David said," but I used to go fishing a lot in the Chesapeake Bay, though. By Severn Bridge."

David glanced at Raymond. The contrast between his Dracula face and the relatively commonplace question was so gross that he started to laugh.

# Chapter Fifteen

Raymond by the car wheel took the last turn before Woodstock, and David and Beth stretched their necks on the look for Elsa. It was now in the deepest night, at 02.00 am, and the small Inn, which indeed was nothing more prominent than a hamburger stand, was several hours closed. Nevertheless, by the creek, there was a trucker´s stop. There Elsa and Haylee sat together with two young males drinking coffee from plastic cups. Haylee waved her hand to the newcomers.

An owl howled.

The rescuers parked their car and got out, and Raymond went up to Elsa, who was wrapped up in a blanket, sitting by the table. The poor girl had bruises practically everywhere. She shrieked a little when she saw the Dracula face of his. But she soon calmed down. She pointed at her own face with her healthy hand and said:

"This is how you look when you have been hit by a bicycle." She could not talk straight because she had been hit on the mouth too.

Haylee had her arm around her.

"Why didn´t you call an ambulance?" David asked, standing in front of Elsa, indicating that he wanted to see her hand.

"I can walk, you know," Elsa mumbled. Her lips were swollen, and she had scratches on the side of her face. Her right hand was swollen and had a range of colors.

"Move it!" David told her.

She moved her hand up and down, and it did hurt, you could tell.

Odile, that had parked her motorcycle but left it blinking, came up to Elsa and hugged her and took out from her coat some small paper napkins to wipe her face with.' Elsa looked thankful.

In a couple of minutes, they were on their way to town again. When they arrived at Grace Hospital, Elsa was sleeping in the car´s backseat, leaning on Beth, who had put a spare blanket around her.

"What happened, really?" Raymond asked Haylee.

"It was just an old man on a bicycle. He was drunk. He ran into her, just when she had left the bus. He got petrified. He cried and peed his pants. He was from Marriottsville."

Nobody commented on Haylee´s recount of what had taken place. All of them realized why nobody had called the police.

At the hospital, a doctor and a nurse took care of Elsa. She had not broken any bones. She did not have to stay there neither, the doctor said, and ordered some painkillers.

Raymond and his sister Haylee took her home and put her to bed, and David kissed Elsa on her cheek and went to his room. Elsa was dead tired and almost slept when they tucked her cushions and toy elephants around her.

It was 05.30 AM and a new day dawned. The giant owl grumbled and slurred and then made it ways through the woods of Patapsco Valley in search for squirrels.

# Chapter Sixteen

Around 08.00 AM, Ethan sat on his usual barstool behind the counter. He had few customers. On a September Saturday morning, there is not exactly any rush at convenience stores. Butterfield had called, asking if any journalist was there for comments about the robbery. Ethan said there had been one, but he had told her he did not know anything of substance related to the case. Butterfield then asked the

usual questions about supplies. Ethan checked upon it, and then Butterfield was temporarily content. The owner of the shop was a straightforward person to communicate with. Ethan was happy about that, although he did not like Georgie Butterfield. Ethan was equally tired of David, who, although it was clear that David wanted to make friends, did not seem willing to come forward as any sort of reliable person at all. However, Ethan, all the time, encouraged him to try to head in that direction.

The phone rang. Ethan rubbed his nose.

"Hi, it is Thomas," a voice said. Thomas, who was the most intellectual friend of Ethan, wondered if Ethan had read a specific book, which he named the title of. It turned out that he had not. Then Thomas asked Ethan for a loan. Ethan turned that request down, however. Thomas then said that he would come over for a chat. Then he hung up. Ethan looked out the window.

Thomas was immensely talented, but Ethan did not share his interest in politics. Thomas always had new ideas for political protests on his mind. Ethan thought that David would most certainly very soon make his own life a living hell if Ethan himself did not pay attention. To seek relief, he took out his sketchbook and prepared himself to draw something on one of the leaflets. He started out on a dragon.

By noon, the Police returned to Ethan´s store to return the video surveillance material to the owner, which of course was Mr. Butterfield. Some people from the press were entering the shop to talk to Ethan, but he subsequently had nothing to say.

Ethan answered questions put by the Police about the robbery. They all compared this incident to other incidents, better known to the general public.

By lunchtime, he took a hotdog, a soda and then talked to Mr. Butterfield by the phone. The latter was very friendly and promised him an extra $100 to help Ethan ease from the current stress caused by the robbery and all the surrounding tragedy. Ethan also was told that his boss had arranged for another replacement man.

Butterfield had owned stores, cafés, houses, and apartments in Baltimore for at least thirty years. Although he could have dozens of employees taking care of his stores, he liked to keep a close eye on the business himself. At present, he had one of those periods when he was overactive and was sneaking around to look for irregularities and fraud everywhere.

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In the afternoon, Reuben rang.

He wondered if the guys would turn up on the following evening.

Ethan told Reuben about the robbery, which Reuben was unaware of, since he did not regularly check up on the news. However, they agreed that David and Ethan should visit Reuben at 07.00 PM on the following day. Ethan said that he did not know if he could be able to assemble any of his other friends that fast but that he would try. Times were troubled too, Ethan said, but then realized that times always were troubled. They agreed that anyway, it was a great idea, and Ethan thanked Reuben again for the initiative.

They hang up, and the rest of the afternoon slipped by in the way it used to do.

That is, Thomas came by. Thomas was silent. He walked around in the small shop, fingering on packages and bottles, and finally bought a smaller Coca-Cola can.

"I heard you had been robbed." he said.

"Yeah."

"Okay. How much?" Thomas held up the Coca-Cola can between them.

"1.20."

Thomas paid and left the shop but, standing in the doorway, he said:

"So, Reuben Longman intends to open up a social club?"

"How did you know that?"

"I met him on the street. He invited me."

"Oh," Ethan said.

## Chapter Seventeen

R

euben realized that he had all day to himself. He had left the dog at Mrs. Campbell´s house. It was too early to summon to a Social Club meeting, and for that matter, he had not yet got the house ready. Consequently it was no hurry. But he longed to meet the boy´s friends and to find out about the youth of today.

Reuben was delighted at his new project and had set out not only to clean the house but also to rearrange the furniture on both floors. Since the death of Martha he just had let everything stand the way it used to. After lunch that day, he also managed to fabricate a sign to put outside his home. A piece of sheet-metal comes in handy. After having first painted it in a dark blue color, he had set out to meticulously put a text on it, in white, saying: "SOCIAL CLUB."

He left the sign on the kitchen table to dry, leaning against a package of corn flakes. Tomorrow he would pin it to the wall outside beside his front door.

The doctor who took care of the elderly Mrs. Campbell, rang. The lady was very ill, and the doctor did not think she would make it through the night. She wanted her dog to stay with her for a while.
Reuben should check upon the dog and Mrs. Campbell on the following day, through the nurse that cared for her. He got her telephone number.
He had taken the boxes out of Martha´s room and firmly put them in his house's backyard. It seemed too much of an effort to try to sell off those old artifacts. Instead, he planned to burn everything on the following day. After all, he did not need the money. He was financially independent for the rest of his life, much due to Martha. He did not need any small earnings.
Reuben also took out a can of kerosene and placed it outside the back door. He then returned to the living room. All the animals needed some sort of cleaning. The lion and the chimpanzee glared at him with their eyes of glass. He glared back and started to look for a brush.

But as he did not find a suitable brush he soon grew tired of tending to the artificial creatures and of cleaning up the house and finally gave the whole thing up and decided to go for a walk a walk. Then he remembered that he had to bunker up with some beer and biscuits. He rang a store and bade them deliver some good around 05.00 PM. He then changed clothes, looked himself over in the mirror, and checked that he had keys, wallet, and phone with him. He took an umbrella too, although it did not look to be any rain. The sky was plain grey, and it was windy like it had been all last week.
Before he left the house, he returned towards the living room and stopped at the wall close to the hall entrance. Reuben had pinned a photograph, an old worn one of A4 size, depicting a Mississippi steamboat. It was a glossy one in black and white, but it did not seem from very long ago. The Captain touched the photograph with his finger tops, said something indiscernible, maybe the name of a woman, and then returned to the hall to leave the house.
He decided to have his usual walk to Upper Fell´s Point. Reuben liked those quarters. He left his house, thinking of how long it was since he was Captain of a ship. It must be more than fifteen years now, he thought, making a small roundabout during his walk not to disturb two pigeons, which were having a meal on the sidewalk.

# Chapter Eighteen

One cannot measure the vast, almost bottomless, depths of a human soul by deploying the simple tools of a land surveyor, or, in the telling of a story of one´s life, use the multicolored signal flags that one has onboard warships.

Eric, Inga, and Armamente arrived at Baltimore Station on Wednesday at 04.00 AM. They were all of them sleeping when the bus arrived at the destination, and Eric had a sore back when he woke up. Armamente and Inga almost had to carry him to a cab. They installed on Morton Hotel, which was in Grant Street close to Porter´s Furniture, by the Kern´s Saloons. Since the doctor was not feeling well at all, they had to rearrange their planning. The appointment with Reuben had to be postponed. Inga called the Captain up at noon and told him that they would arrive on another day. Reuben agreed and said that one should not be careless with a sore back caused by bus travel. One should never go by bus, Inga said. But since none of them had any driver´s license, a bus ride was what "had happened."
After lunch, Inga and Armamente went for a walk in Baltimore, a town familiar to Inga. She took Armamente to the most picturesque of streets. Since the wind had slowed down a bit, they had a pleasant afternoon in sunshine, strolling about and buying unnecessary things in the very smallest shops that the illustrious town could muster.

Eric lay on his back, looking straight up in the ceiling in his room. He was in pain. They finally had to send for the doctor. Doctor Elijah Elias declared that the doctor for a long time seemed to have neglected his exercise. This was such a thing that inevitable would happen if the backbone muscles were not sufficiently used, the specialist earnestly told Eric.
Eric then got painkillers for one month.
Early in the evening, Eric declared that he was fit for fight again. But Inga and Armamente were cautious, and they told him he had to stay at the hotel for another twenty-four hours. Armamente at once started with letting the doctor make sit-ups, though.
Inga suggested that they should have a reconnaissance meeting on the same night at 09 PM. She wanted first to discuss the letters that she had brought, and which Armamente had read aloud on the bus. Secondly, she wanted to have a reconnaissance patrol that should investigate the writer circle, Martha had attended on the spring season in the year before.
Eric agreed that this was the right thing, and while they all started to search for the author´s circle via Google, they soon noticed that the hour was late, and they turned to their sleeping quarters. Each had wanted to have their separate room in their new villa, and they agreed on meeting at 09.30 AM on the following day. Armamente went to bed, without further ado, while Inga read a book on gardening. Eric listened to a string concerto by Vivaldi in his headphones before taking his sleeping pill. Vivaldi was his favorite composer.

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At Morton Traveller´s Hotel in Baltimore, it slowly dawned upon Connecticut's small crime team that they perhaps had to re-group.

The young detective herself was an early bird. She woke up at 05.24 AM, out of heavy dreams about dragons, and took on her shirt while looking out the window. There was not much commotion in the street. She only spotted the paperboy, and Armamente wondered about this old, historical city, on which she had just embarked. Since she did not know much about Baltimore, she googled on “Baltimore, a portrait of” and she read this, which was written by a schoolboy, who called himself Riddar Cato, on his blog Phat That Swat:

“Baltimore, ( pronounced.: ´Balwmore´ ) The City that Reads, Clipper City, The Greatest City in America, Frank Zappa town, Charm City or whatever you may prefer to call it, is situated where it is because of the Patapsco River, an almost forty miles long river in the state of Maryland, which is perhaps the per capita wealthiest state in the USA. This meandering river emanates into the famous Chesapeake Bay. Dams heavily support the river, so one cannot sail on it nor use the water. But after much renovation and cleaning of the water, one might nowadays again fish trout in it.

Baltimore is a flat city. No point reaches above 160 feet above the sea. This town was initially mainly a seaside port. Baltimore was created close to the Patapsco to ship tobacco and grain vessels up and down the East Coast. It has also always been famous for the building of those ships. Baltimore clippers for a long time – and long before Joseph Conrad´s times, too - plied the oceans. Baltimore region has a subtropical climate, with hot, humid summers and a short winter, which often is very mild. For Europeans, the weather in Maryland may most be like Spain's climate than any other country. Baltimore thus is an old city, in a former slave state, today mainly populated by black people.

Baltimore was established mostly by former Europeans in 1729 and was a local household for the mighty lord George Calvert family. Calvert's name is frequently found in the center of the town, referring to streets and buildings.

Despite Maryland not seceding from the Union during the Civil War, many of its citizens were conservatives and had Southern sympathies. Union troops, therefore, occupied Baltimore throughout the war. When the war was over, the city only slowly recovered from disruption and poverty.

A fire in early February of 1904 razed most of the center of the town. During World War I, Baltimore began to develop industrially with a multitude of war industries. A period of urban decay in the city's central parts after World War II was followed by a grand renovation of the downtown buildings, streets, and waterfront.

There have been devastating epidemics of Cholera and other diseases that have taken their toll on the population.

In 1821 the Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary became the nation’s first Roman Catholic cathedral. The Washington Monument, a Doric column, rises since 1829 high in the old city. State parks, such as Gunpowder Falls, Hart-Miller Island, and North Point can be reached near the center.

The current metro area population of Baltimore in 2020 is 2,325,000.

Birds you might see in Baltimore and the surroundings are Brown Pelican, Snow Goose, Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck, King Rail, Marbled Godwit, Great Skua, Pomarine Jaeger, and Parasitic Jaeger, Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Black Tern,

Chuck-will's-widow, Least Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Bank Swallow, Nashville Warbler, Northern Parula, Yellow Warbler, Field Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Common Sparrow, Baltimore Oriole, and Purple Finch. The Orioles is also the baseball team, and the Ravens are well-known for American football. A few blocks from the stadium, baseball legend Babe Ruth was born. The grave of Baltimore native writer Edgar Allen Poe is situated in Westminster Burying Ground, close to West Lafayette Street. Other birds are House Finch, Eskimo Curlew, Long-billed Curlew, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Long-tailed Jaeger, Mew Gull, Bachman's Sparrow, Lazuli Bunting, and White-winged Crossbill.
Finally: here is a small zoo too, in David Hill Park, with lion and tigers in it."
Armamente was quite content and amused by what she read, She already knew some of it, but it put things in perspective anyway.
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Morton Hotel offered free pancakes 24-7. She went down to the dining room and looked for to eat some. Only one more guest was awake and in the dining room at this time. It was an older man with long white hair. Armamente greeted him at a distance, and he waved back and smiled. He gestured at her where she could get the pancakes.
She asked if she might sit down at his table. He was a retired teacher from Oklahoma, on vacation and sight-seeing alone in Baltimore. He asked Armamente what her errand was in town.

"I am here to try and find out whether there has been a murder or not. A friend of mine has an old love that has died here, during mysterious circumstances."

"Oh, that is good of you," the man said.

"I am studying criminology at the University really," she answered, and she blushed because the old man seemed to her so kind and sincere.

"Oh, I see. But you still seem to be a very kind girl."

"Thank you. I am also looking for writer´s circles or writer´s courses in town. You don´t happen to know who is in the business of organizing such activities?"
"Not really. But you will easily find it, as you might well know. But I cannot give you any insider tips. Has it anything to do with the investigation you brought up before?"
"Yes. The victim seemed to have participated in a writer´s circle. Perhaps she wanted to learn to write like Poe?"
Armamente smiled. She so much loved the older man´s eyes that she was willing to say anything, to make him smile a little bit more.

“Indeed. Like Poe. But of course, you don´t know the favorite author of the victim, do you?”

“No. You are right. I don´t.”

“Most people have one.”

“You are right again. I don´t know what I am saying.” Armamente lay her hand on his hand. “I might be better off if I just ate my pancake and kept silent.”

“Anytime,” the oldie said, ”by the way, my favorite author is Stephen King. I think he should have the Nobel Prize.”

Armamente nodded.

“My name is Armamente, by the way,” she said.

“Oh, I am honored. I am trying to be as incognito as I can, if you don´t mind. It is just a way of life,” the old man smiled. Armamente was a bit baffled by this, but she was content anyway.

They sat silent while Armamente ate her breakfast. Outside, the wind surged. She hoped that she at least some time would be able to meet with the mysterious Mr. Longman.

She would, but first, she would, as we shall see, meet with a man by the name of Askelon. A Haitian writer and participant on the circle Martha attended.

She later googled and found out that there had been three writer´s circles held on a free basis by Johns Hopkins. She found out before lunch which of them Martha had attended.

Eric and Inga applauded her. They soon decided that Armamente and Inga should try to contact all the pupils of the course. Eric´s back was even worse, and at times he gnarled from pain.

At three o´clock, the young private detective had a Mr. Josiah Askelon on the phone. He remembered Martha well. But he also knew that she was dead, and he did not want to talk about her over the phone.

“I am not insensitive,” he said.

They decided to meet on the following day at a café in the harbor, close to where Josiah lived.

She now went to see Eric and Inga, who was seated in a study at the hotel. Eric was wrapped up in a big frock-like fur, which had been provided by one of the attendants at the hotel. He was on painkillers and looked pale.

“Now, I have come into contact with the circle,” Armamente said.

Inga was impressed by this achievement, but she also had news of her own.

“Listen,” Inga said and flexed her very muscular legs,” I don´t know about you - I have to ask you something, both of you.”

Eric grunted and took a sip of his tea. Armamente looked at the old lady with curiosity.

"Eric, you are retired and in deep trouble with your back. But we are on a mission, and I suppose that we all want to complete it. I don´t know about you, Arma ( she had created a nickname ), but it seems as if you for this season does not have much of a plan.

But I have a plan, and since we are having such a good time but are living in an expensive hotel, I have done some research in the housing market."

"Housing?" Armamente cried out.

"Yes. You know, here in Baltimore, many houses are all empty and for rent. Why don´t the three of us just rent a house here and settle for a month or two, to let Eric recover in perfect peace and calm? And we might do a thorough investigation in the Martha case. We might also further learn about each other and have a more pleasant time without bothering about the regulations and the hotel costs. What do you think? Let´s rent a row house in Arbutus!"

Eric and Armamente looked at each other. Large smiles appeared on their faces, and it did not take them long to agree.

"As a matter of fact," Armamente said, laughing," I do enjoy myself so very much in your company. I could not think of anything more exciting than living with you fellows for a month or two in Baltimore!"

"So be it," Eric concluded, and it was agreed upon that Inga should fix a house for them until the next day.

They now laughed, and they told each other that now they were all Baltimoreans.

Eric then said he wanted to return to his room. He had found an interesting book on a bookshelf in the hotel's small study, where they had been sitting. He showed them the book. The feathered serpent by Edgar Wallace.

"What is good about that one?" Armamente, in glancing at the cover of the book, asked, without knowing why she put such a rude question to the sick old doctor.

"Ha!" the doctor burst out," Yes, you know, I am familiar with Wallace since long. I will tell you that he once was quite a remarkable and very successful mystery writer."

"Why?" Armamente insisted, who had disliked the book, on the cover of which green figures performed some dance.

"Among other things," the doctor grunted," Wallace claimed that his books had no literary value of any sort. They were written with the sole purpose to entertain. He claimed that he had left absolutely no mark whatsoever of his thoughts or personal

reflections or anything in those books. They were all dictated to a secretary and went checked by no one to the publisher."

"No literary value. I told you!!" Armamente cried out triumphantly. "That´s what I said!"

"But, don´t you see, dear Armamente, that that is a real achievement. Isn´t it a real proof of genius to be able to write tons of books – because he wrote dozens – and not leaving one single personal trace in them?"

"I see," Inga said," I bet you have set out to find the real Edgar Wallace!"

They now all laughed, and Inga took out a big cigar from her purse. While the doctor retired to his quarters, Inga and Armamente Dulcinea decided to have a refreshing walk in the escalating wind, which was not very cold though, outside of the small hotel.

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On the following day, grey and windy, Armamente hired a bicycle in a small shop and set out for the New Harbor. She found out that she was already in love with Baltimore.

She was troubled thinking of Eric and how he almost had changed to the worse after he had got his back ailment. It seemed, she thought, as if his table of existence suddenly had become very small. Inga, she thought, was a marvelous woman, energetic and competent.

The café where she should meet Josiah was a small one, facing the water.

A lovely schooner from Australia lay on the fly.

She went onboard the café, that itself was on a small boat, fastened by the quay.

Soon she spotted Josiah, who had informed Armamente, that he would have a black cap on with the name of E.A. Poe on it.

"Hello! Come and sit!" Josiah shouted, in a modestly high fashion. He had of course spotted her first.

After they had exchanged some phrases of politeness, Josiah started to tell about Martha:

"She immediately became a central person in the circle, although she did not show any special talent in anything at all. It was her charm and presence that made the rest of us seem negligible."

Armamente tried to understand who the young man with the Poe-cap was. He had a yellowish complexion and African treats, although his skin was not black. He had curly brownish hair, and his speech was fast, and he was well versed. Josiah´s eyes

were sad, his clothes clean and old fashioned and a bit too large. He had a brown khaki shirt on and blue jeans.

"She was immensely sexy, despite that she was not at all young anymore. Her mouth was like a strawberry, eyes like cornflowers. She often wore all white; a white top and a white skirt, and a white taffeta shawl. She also had a white or red gardenia or something in her hair. It was all overdone, but it suited her."

"Ha. But what about her writing then?" Armamente interrupted.

"Oh, yes. Our teacher, Ogy, Mr. Ogilvy, told us to write a short story about meeting our new neighbor in the elevator. Martha wrote a long story, but hers was the only one where the elevator fell and crashed. Her story was about the split second when it fell."

Josiah paused.

"It was a very effective plot. But it was badly written."

"Hm?" Armamente said.

"Well, she also flirted with all the male pupils at the course, and I had an evening with her in a park."

Josiah changed the subject and blushed.

"IN A PARK?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry. Not in the park where she died. We were in a big park, to the west. I have forgotten the name of it. I borrowed a car. And we went up there."

"Was it kind of romantic?" Armamente asked.

"Yes. Oh, yes. But she kept talking about Africa all the time. I got nervous by all her stories about Johannesburg and Addis and the parties there and so on…."

"She seems to have been a completely terrible person!"

"Absolutely. Yeah. Yes. Martha was terrible, indeed. But she had lots of charms. Tons of it."

"Did she have any self-distance at all? Had she any irony?" Armamente asked.

"No. Oh no." Josiah looked down.

Armamente looked at Josiah. He had given a remarkable portrait of Martha. She was delighted to have met him. Now she knew better what kind of person the whole expedition was about. And no wonder Eric was in such a miserable shape. After all, the woman he had loved was both gorgeous and thoroughly despicable. And that sort is the most dangerous, and the hardest ones to come to terms with when dealing with them in our recollection, Armamente thought. Armamente, consternated, emptied her coffee and thanked Josiah.

"You have been of great help! I´ll see myself out."

She mounted her bike and drove back to the hotel.

When she arrived, Inga and Eric were already outside, packing themselves to leave for the house, complete with simple furniture supplied by the housing agency, Butterfield Housing Ltd, from which Inga had rented it for a month at a time.

"Oooooh," Armamente cried out, "this will be absolute heaven!" She left the bike with a boy in the street and told him to leave it at the bike-store. She then rushed up the stairs to her room to get her things.

After fifteen minutes, they were on their way to their new address. Oyster Pancake Street.

The Connecticut doctor with friends embarked on their new home during chat and laughter. Pain in Eric´s back seemed to down normal. It was such a lovely house, with red brick and white brims. The kitchen was small, and the house had modest proportion all over. But there were seven rooms in it, and the furniture was a simple one. Striking was that the Housing Agency had hired some consultant who had chosen an all-blue interior for this house. Thus not only all the chairs and tables in the kitchen were blue, but all the beds in their bedrooms, as well as sofas and armchairs in the living room. Even the willow furniture was blue. Everything in the house had this sky color.

Eric did not like it, but to Inga and Armamente, this was a change, and they did not object to it.

A man from Butterfield Housing, Mr. Condon, helped them to gain entrance and showed them around.

"Here in the cellar," he said and pointed at a bolted door in the hall. There are some other furniture down there if you grow tired of the blue style…"

He laughed, and Inga smiled and praised the management.

In the kitchen, there were complete sets of pots and plates and cups of all sorts. Armamente had bags with food and wine sent for from the Food Markt. They sought out a bedroom each in the upper story, and Armamente got one with windows facing the backyard. In contrast, Eric´s and Inga´s rooms faced Oyster Pancake Street. Trees outside still had left on them, and magpies strolled around at the parking lot.

At 05.00 PM, they were all seated in their living room, watching the telly.

"This is fabulous!" Eric said. "I have not enjoyed myself this much since I was a young medical student."

"I can´t wait to get to work," Armamente said and blinked. The others laughed.

"Yes, please, tell us about the writer´s circle," Eric cried out while he turned off the TV-set. Armamente, in great detail, recapitulated what the Poe-loving Haitian writer had told her.

“Now, that is not exactly true,” Inga said, referring to the young man´s picture of Martha, ”she was in no way vulgar! I must protest!”

“Indeed, everyone has a right to have his view,” Eric said, blushing a little. ”But I, of course, never saw Martha like that. Was he sincere in his purpose, that man? It seems to me that he almost had a … plan.”

Armamente corked up a bottle of red wine, and she said that she would try to contact more people from the writer´s circle. Armamente jostled around in the living room, wine glass in her hand, where there even was a small bookshelf with some old novels in it. While she dusted them off with one finger, she said:

“Tomorrow, we must visit Reuben Longman. I can´t wait to see that person.”

“We sure will,” Inga said in an authoritative tone. ”Still, I would like to meet with inspector Ludwig to hear where the investigation stands.”

“Calm down, girls!” Eric said, and then he suddenly remembered that Armamente was no girl, and he blushed again and corrected himself:” Everybody, one at a time!” All three of them laughed, and Inga and Armamente smiled at each other.

# Chapter Nineteen

Butterfield was sitting at noon in his small office at Pratt Street in Baltimore's center, looking through last month´s debit and credit of Butterfield Housing LTD and Butterfield Service Shops together with his primary accountant, Sanders, when the phone rang. Butterfield´s Schaefer dog, Hubert, made a small leap under his Butterfield´s chair. He had once been scared by New Year's bombs and rockets.

It was Leclerc´s voice.

“Hello! I hope I am not interrupting anything …. I wonder…”

“No, no, Hello, please, go on!”

“Yes, I am sitting here with one of my men plus a fellow from BAM.”

"BAM?..."

"Yes, Baltimore Art Museum. Well, you asked me if I could help you out with that Reuben Longman thing? And I, along with my partner, Westwood, Sidney Westwood, have some ideas. You know, Longman has since long this famous Matisse, and it is even now and then shown at BAM. Still, Westwood and his friend from BAM might call upon Longman to ask for permission to look at the other paintings that Martha had … collected. They might … well, you see what I am suggesting. They might simultaneously try to look for any place where Martha could have hidden the papers. Longman could be stressed and diverted, yes, even shortly removed so that Westwood might have a good search. Do you follow?"

"Oh, that´s just excellent! I am highly supportive of this. But what would my expenses be for all this, you know, my business…"

"Don´t worry! We are all interested in art, you know. Maybe one deal or another could be made with Longman at some stage regarding some painting. We already know he won´t sell the Matisse; this said, he has a lot more."

"I am so thankful. So very indebted, Leclerc. You are so kind. I could never have thought of that."

"It is Westwood you should be thanking. He is a real gem. I´ll send him over so that he can get a notion of what kind of stuff you are looking for."

"Good. When will he come?"

"This afternoon. If it´s fine with you?"

"Four o´clock."

"Four o´clock."

When Leclerc had hung up, Butterfield had got a big smile on his round face,

"Worth a try," he summoned.

He looked at the photo of Eliza, his daughter, and only child, which was placed on his desk, and caressed it with his index finger, brown from tobacco. Butterfield hadn´t given up smoking. He ran a dangerous game.

The phone rang again, and Butterfield now sent his accountant away, who had overheard the Leclerc conversation because the name "Tommie" was shown on the display.

"Hello, Tommie! How is it going?"

"I took the stuff off his backyard," a metallic voice declared. "Nothing of any interest, though. Just old clothes and stuff. I might get some dough for it, though."

"It serves you well. Thank you anyway! No documents whatsoever?"

"None. Not even an envelope. No stripes, neither."

They hang up.

Butterfield wasn´t content. Reuben was no crook, the way Martha had been, he thought. He had no hard feelings against Reuben and therefore intended to be reasonably fair. Butterfield lit a cigarette and bent down to scratch his dog Hubert behind his ear.

Police cars drove by outside. The familiar sound of the sirens did not bother Butterfield. He glanced at the Pratt Street sky through the window. September in Baltimore is still summertime, he thought. But suddenly, he missed happier September days and fell into a melancholy mood. For a split second Butterfield thought of having bourbon and benzodiazepines, but he then took a deep breath and called for Sanders, his employee who had waited in the office lounge together with the secretary.

# Chapter Twenty

The actual importance of moral values depend on the level of sentimentality in a society. Sentimentality is not a value in itself, but it is how we look upon values. North American culture is highly sentimental. Sentimentality is a kind of remembrance, a pious memory, and it is a highly conservative view of life. Sentimentality does not only affect the way we honor the past, but the past will, in a sentimental society, put a ominous mark on the present. Sentimentality in such a community will be a shadow, put on every present action. Today's actions are thus seen IN THE MOMENT through sentimentality already when these are in the making. Consequently, no action is performed in its own right but from the view of sentimentality. Thus sentimentality tends to invade values so that every value becomes soaked with a sentimental Self. Sentimentality is a kind of blindness concerning the present. It is, more or less, the moral and ethics of a dream.

The three from Connecticut decided that they would visit Inspector Ludwig in the morning while they would take on Reuben´s place later on the following day.
After breakfast, the trio took a stroll to the BPD, Central District Police Building, which lay on 500 E Baltimore Street. On their way, in lovely sunshine and noticing that there was not much wind, Inga also looked at Eric, satisfied with the rapid recovery of the doctor. Pigeons gathered around fountains, and people were happy and chattered in the cafés or on their way to the marketplace.

"You do look healthy again, Eric! It must have been a terrible time…."

"Oh, yes, it was! You know, Doctors generally marvel at how very often people are healthy. We, therefore, often are hypochondriacs. When struck with sickness ourselves, we often become almost psychotic. We cannot imagine that we are patients. It is almost against Nature. At least against the nature of being a doctor," Eric laughed.

"You have a way with words sometimes," Armamente said and blinked.
Inga stretched out at a pace with which the others were not comfortable.

"You know," Eric panted, "Martha also liked to walk very fast. I always walked three steps behind. That is the way psychopaths behave. Rushing way ahead of the rest, dismissing the social…"

"Leave it!" Inga cried out, but she lowered her pace.
They passed by a small shop called Anette´s Dog Trim. Inga looked at longingly.

"I would much rather live in a small shop than in an apartment."

"Why so?" Eric asked.

"You are always talking about psychopaths," Armamente remarked on Eric´s previous claim.

"Yes, as far as I understand, that is the only real problem in the world. Almost every problem, aside from psychopathy, can be dealt with."

"I would like to live in the middle of a rush," Inga insisted, and she also had stopped and turned around. She was looking back towards the Dog Shop. The shop owner, a young woman in hijab, was sitting in a bamboo chair outside with a light blue blanket loosely swept around her. She waved to Inga, noticing her blank appreciation.

"Inga!" Armamente cried out. "Bring yourself together."
Soon the three of them assembled and then continued their walk.

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Police lieutenant Hans Ludwig greeted them with a big smile. On his shoulder, the emblem with the Battle Monument shone sunlit. Because sun shone in through the

large window. He was sitting on the corner of his desk, looking tired. It was 10.30 AM.

Inga was leading the troop.

She put her hand towards Ludwig and introduced her Nordic beauty:

"Inga Nord."

"Hans Ludwig." Ludwig smiled warmly.

"These are my friends, and the doctor here, Eric Goldkettel, actually was a close friend of Martha. Armamente Dulcinea is our expert on criminal investigations."

"Delighted to meet all of you! Only if it were under different circumstances. Sit down please!"

The room was a simple office and had two chairs for visitors. On the wall there was a big poster with an oriole on and the text "BALTIMORE". On Ludwig´s desk papers were spread out in an unorderly fashion.

Ludwig mustered the strangers from Connecticut while adjusting the watch on his left arm. The trio searched out places to sit in the inspector´s room while Ludwig took out an envelope from a cupboard.

"These photographs are showing Martha in the park."

Eric and Inga took the photos in their hands. Armamente glanced over their shoulder, standing behind their stools.

"It just looks as if she had laid down to sleep," Eric said.

The others nodded.

"And she was completely lifeless?" Armamente asked.

"Yes, she was," the BPD officer said.

"There were signs that she had run across this field." Ludwig took out a bird´s view photo of the park and pointed at a red line on a field, "… and it seems she fell to the ground at least three times before falling about and die." He said.

"So she was chased?" Eric asked with a sad look on his face.

"Definitely. But of course we do not know by whom."

"Were there no other people there that day? I mean, it is a park. Workers…"

"The park was closed that day because they were going to have a concert in the afternoon. The entire park had been marked with red ribbons, and a scene was built on the day before, and they were going to have an audience at 04.00 PM on the next day. This park is rather significant, and it was as good as empty, apart from some people who were arranging chairs and such things. But they did not see Martha."

"Was there going to be a rock concert?"

"Yes. Some sort of. The band´s name I have forgotten."

"But Martha was walking there anyway?"

“She was a bit rebellious,” Inga filled in.

“Strange,” Eric said. “And you have no clue? As to who might have followed her…”

“No clue at all. It might have been a dog or a rapist!” Ludwig said. “We don´t know.”

The photos of Martha showed her with some blood on her face, but not much. Her beautiful face with the red lips had no expression at all. Her eyes were shut.

When the trio, the newcomers to Baltimore, left the BP house, they were in for a surprise. Outside of the building, riding a small red bicycle, the woman in the hijab from Anette´s Dog Trim was waiting with a little smile on her face.

“Sorry,” she said and climbed off her vehicle. ”I just thought you guys seemed such loverly people.”

Inga rushed to her and immediately hugged her.

“I knew it!” she shouted, ”I knew you were something special the moment I saw you!”

The woman, who was in her thirties, and presented herself as Çansu, then followed them back to their small brick house on Oyster Pancake Street.

# Chapter Twenty-One

On Wednesday evening, Ethan and David strolled off to visit Reuben. They were excited. David wondered if Reuben would show some old books or memorabilia or stuff like that from his years as a Captain on the Seven Seas. Since David´s friends still had not recovered from Woodstock's events, the two friends had decided to come by themselves. But Ethan had given his learned acquaintance Thomas a ring and told him that they were going to Reuben´s at seven o´clock.

They had both agreed that if there was no fun at Reuben´s place, they would go somewhere else. Youth is short. It would not put down their spirits, they agreed, but they would then go to have a glass of beer and then go for a visit at the Town Hall to enjoy the singing of the amazing Polly-Ann. This young singer was the daughter of the late famous rhythm-and-blues man Yonder-Creek Blue Bufford. David also had told his friend Elsa that he might go there. If they then decided to go to the Hall, they would immediately give her a ring. She had agreed to that.
Although it only was late September, the storm season had begun. It was a violent one too. On the week before, winds in the harbor had managed to destroy seventeen boats. Six people had been killed by flying debris.
Now when Ethan and David were out on the street heading for Reuben´s place, they saw several trucks on their way to the harbor, with military personnel sent out to assist the fire brigade. The weather had stabilized, but the weather service warned of another storm surge in a day or two.

"Brace for the storm!" was the word of the day.

David and Ethan had met outside of the Free Library, a place dear to every youngster in Baltimore. Ethan had greeted David with what the white boy later should understand was Ethan's usual greeting ritual. This ritual, or position, consisted of Ethan placing his left hand near his left ear and, at the same time gripping with his right hand under the elbow of his left arm. In this way, a 90-degree angle protruded, probably denoting some sort of frame for the upper body. This greeting, Ethan told David, was invented and frequently used by the Dutch modernist painter Piet Mondrian, which was a renowned painter. You might see some of his works at BAM, Baltimore Art Museum. Baltimore Art Museum was very famous, among other things, for the collection of the Cone sisters, containing more than 1000 works by Matisse.
Ethan told David that Matisse was among his favorite figurative artists. His favorite author was Balzac, he said.

This Mondrian greeting, though, did not entirely show the typical in Ethan. On the contrary. Sure enough, Ethan was a guy that existed in two allotropes. The least common was the colorful, inventive, unconventional one, with the odd greeting. The most common was a stale, earnest one and a more insecure young man, with a considerable reflection capacity.

David laughed at the "90-degree greeting". He said that he was very familiar with the works of Matisse and his eloquent handling of color. This was an exaggeration on David´s part.

It was six o´clock in the Monday evening, and David said that it was just not sure at all that Longman was at home. Ethan thought he would be. Maybe they should give him another ring? However, older people tend to stay at home, he claimed. David then commented on how expensive Longman´s costume seemed to be. "He might be at the sick lady´s house or maybe out with the dog or something.", he then said.

Ethan was silent. He greeted some people they met on their way to Thames Street. Ethan greeted with a simple wave of his left hand. Ethan seemed to know everybody. Anyway, he used to serve them all at the drug store, of course.

"I bet he is a Jew," David said. He wanted to provoke Ethan.

"I don´t care what race people are."

"I was just kidding," David said. "I am a Jew."

"I know."

David thought that Ethan was both very handsome and very intelligent. Also, he was quite envious of him for both. But it was a mean thing to say to David that he, Ethan, knew that David was a Jew. It was not apparent that he was a Jew. He looked like an Englishman.

David was a little more lighthearted than the day before, perhaps because he had left the Glock at home. He had put it under his mattress.

"But if you are going to write a book," he said," there has to be something more to it than the small things. There must be some form and a tone in it? You know."

"Yes, and a formative idea," Ethan said and was happy to talk about something else than Reuben. He already knew Ruben, and David didn´t, but he was soon to be acquainted with him.

"Yes, exactly.", David panted. He was tired from trying to learn a new computer language, and he had been sitting still and he had not eaten much either. He had no peace in his soul. Or maybe he was becoming sick or something … "So what is the performative idea?"

"Formative." Ethan corrected. "I think it will be a meeting of two different delusions. Two misconceptions. I want to dream forth a book about two friends, who

both of them are delusional about the other. The curious thing with misconceptions is that they are still conceptions."

"Nae, Nae," David smiled, ignoring the final twist, "that is a much too common thing. It happens all the time. Nobody knows anything about other people…"

"It is not about knowing. They simply are supposing the wrong thing about each other."

"I don´t quite get it."

"It is fun because two delusions do not exactly make one truth."

Ethan smiled broadly, and David smiled too, without any earnest ground. David then lightly smacked his friend on the upper arm. It was good to have a new friend.

He had been much too lonely all summer, and he knew he would never become a hacker, however much he tried. He was not good at it, as it were with everything. He was not good at anything at all. He was not bright like Ethan was. Ethan looked as if he might become a professor or something, a chemistry professor perhaps if he got the opportunity if he got a scholarship!

Then, like a flash of lightning, it struck David that Ethan might not be his friend at all. No, of course, Ethan was just accompanying him to Reuben to ensure that he, David, and Reuben were to be safe and look after him so that nothing dangerous should happen. Ethan probably had noticed the Glock pistol on the day before, and now, when he saw that David did not bring the gun, he was just relaxed and had begun to talk about writing and stuff. He was supervised. That was the whole thing. David West was an idiot. And Ethan felt sorry for him!

David went silent. They got quite near to Thames Street when David said:

"I don´t want to rob Reuben. I just said so. To get attention."

"I know," Ethan answered, glanced down on the shorter boy with the booties, and lit a tiny cigarette.

Although David frequently used the phrase "I know," he still hated when others used it.

They now were just two blocks from Reuben's house when Ethan suggested that they should call the old seafarer up, instead of just old stylish surprising him with a knock on the front door of his row house. David agreed that this was perhaps the most sensible and polite thing to do and would strengthen their case. Ethan then exerted his Android from his breast pocket on his light brown khaki shirt and dialed Reuben up. It took a while, but Ethan then got him on the phone. After a couple of minute's conversation, it was decided upon that the two youngsters should arrive in an hour since Reuben had to manage some errands for a neighbor right now.

Ethan finished the call and told David, who had been listening slyly while admiring a small car in the street, painted in deep green and had a yellow roof on it, that they had to spend an hour for themselves before the visit.
The car also had stripes that said:" Jambalaya."

Since the two of them now had a whole hour to spend before the visit, they decided to go to the nearby Green Mount cemetery for a chat on a bench there, a bench that Ethan said he always choose for both meditation and the writing of short stories. Short stories could be written while standing on one leg, he said. The cemetery was called St. Otter. Soon they had comforted themselves on this very sofa, and they buttoned up their light jackets against the evening cold and the brisk wind. David had one blue and one black sock. Ethan then said:

"My uncle William tells me the only thing that works against madness is coffee."
David was startled at Ethan´s way of taking the discussion in all kinds of directions. Thus, he took the challenge:

"I haven´t got any uncle."
Ethan smiled. Even if David looked very stupid, he wasn´t, he thought.

"If you had an uncle, he would tell you that this is the case," he returned. "Coffee is the miracle drug."

"About the books you are going to write: who would read them? I mean: whom are you addressing?"

"Oh! Every Frenchman." Ethan answered.

"Frenchman?"

"Yes, you didn´t think I was going to write a book in English, did you?" Ethan said, looking upon the top of an old elm, who was looking for oxygen way up among the clouds.

"I certainly was," David muttered. He added:

"You win. Stop this bullshit!"

"It is not bullshit. Like the French language, and I am going to publish my book in France, on Gallimard."

"Say something in French!"

"Nous sommes en retard." He looked at his watch. Ethan wore such a gadget, a Ravel.

"Who is your favorite French author?"

"Rabelais."

"Never heard of."

"He is good, though."

"I just love the word ´though. ´ It is so diligent."

A small black baby crow was approaching the little wooden bench under the elm tree. The boys discretely looked at it, and the bird carefully kept the distance as crows always do.

"Have you ever been to France?" David asked, now very sullen. Of course, Ethan was kind of brave, realizing that David was not wearing any Glock pistol.

"No. Never."

Ethan exercised his eyebrows up and down.

"But you cannot be serious. Maybe we should call Elsa and tell her that we are not going to the concert but that we are keeping to the plan with Reuben?" David said, and he was about to change his mind about the visit to Reuben because he didn´t want to be made a buffoon.

"I am not kidding you. I am writing in French." Ethan said. "Many famous authors have written their major works in a language they do not consider their native language. Thus, Kierkegaard wrote Either-Or in Latin, and Conrad, although he was Polish, wrote Lord Jim in English. And they are both masters of unraveled literary subtlety. And Raymond Chandler was an Englishman, not an American, you know! All great things are achieved by keeping a certain distance. ´Am besten sieht man ferne Dinge.´, as Kafka put it so well. Kafka was Czech. But he had his books translated into the Czech language by his girlfriend. Strindberg, who was a Swede, wrote his short novel Inferno in French. Lots of Russian people wrote in French."

The Afro-American was well-read. His face shone with youthful energy.

"I don´t think you are serious at all." David claimed, "By the way, is your uncle alive?"

Ethan laughed out aloud. He turned to David and suddenly kicked him off the sofa, shaking with unrestrained laughter.

"I haven´t got any uncles. I am all phantasy."

"Now I am distanced," David said, but Ethan´s remark had suddenly made him happy. Ethan was unhappy too. That was fine.

Ethan and David, both of them, were just kids. Ethan was 22 years old and David 25. They passed by the small Iglesia de Dios en Cristo, and soon they heard happy songs from inside the building. Many churches in this town are – architectonically - façade churches. The backs of the churches look like any other houses. This makes the impression that religion is integrated into society.

"But who were going to be characters in your novel then?" the Euro-American asked.

"Just ordinary people." The Afro-American answered. "The important thing is not content. Content is something minimal."

When Ethan and David finally arrived at Reuben´s porch, Thomas, dressed in a simple black leather jacket with pins and needles on it, was waiting, sitting on the porch stone.
Reuben opened the door and showed them inside.
He had his favorite striped costume on, and beside his armchair in the living room, the spotted terrier lay, void of interest of the outer world.
Reuben served wine and beer and asked them if they, as the first members of the Social Club, would like to listen to a story. Thomas, who had been admiring the famous Matisse painting on the wall above the sofa, thought that would be great. David and Ethan were both equally delighted and the three of them sat quite like schoolboys in Reuben´s living room as Reuben started telling a story.

"This whole event happened more than twenty years ago." Reuben began his account, "It was Captain Burrow from Perth, first officer Don Yoseley and a new 3rd officer names Bert Hansen. And me as 2nd. We were on a long trip between England and Australia on a standard carrier, a ship, 13.000 tons dwt. Bonaventura II was her name, and we got to know each other pretty well between the officers. All the four of us."
Ethan and David looked at each other. They were completely baffled. It turned out that Reuben was a eager and apt storyteller, something they would never have guessed about him. They were thrilled. Thomas´ eyes also shone, and he took off his jacket and placed it on the floor beside his armchair. The chair was green with red flowers on it.

"Now the thing with Hansen was something strange," Reuben went on. "… and this the others soon found out. They got too annoyed with it, no doubt: the man was much too perfect and could do absolutely nothing wrong.
He was very tidy, he was exemplary in his work, an excellent sailor, as well as a navigator, and he seemed to at most – in the capacity of handling the sextant – to come to a couple of fractions of degrees wrong."
"Especially to Captain Burrow, George Burrow, a short, stubborn man, who smelled of fish, this Hansen was a nuisance. One night when I had the night watch and mate Yoselyn had dropped by, he told me that he was so irritated at Hansen, who was – by the way - of Norwegian descent, that he, Burrow, could no longer sleep at

night. The Captain bluntly said he would give a whole bottle of whiskey each if we could set Hansen up, make some fuzz with the sextant or something like that, to make Hansen make some faults, so that Burrow could reprimand him. Burrow said, licking his mouth before sticking his chime pipe back, that he would love if Hansen were made to apologize for it.

Now, Yoselyn and I started to make plans. We recognized on Hansen and calculated what might be the easiest way to set him up. We looked at his way of making calculations, noticed which were the stars he was observing the most when calculating position, and all his other routines.

Yoselyn and I called our future victim "The man who could do no wrong."

Well, eventually Yoselyn and I got hold of the sextants and simply hid two of them in our own quarters, and then tampered with the remaining one so that no sensible data could be obtained, using that one."

"Of course, Hansen soon discovered that something was wrong, but since Hansen probably suspected the truth, that he was disliked by us and even by the Captain, he could win absolutely nothing by complaining about us to him.

Hansen then locked himself up in his courters for an hour, came up unto deck in the evening, when we just were passing in the reach of Windfall with an apparatus that he had made himself. Within an hour, he annotated in the observation book just the correct position of our vessel.

We gritted our teeth but did not give up. Burrow was furious and could not stand to be on deck at all but resided in his saloon listening to Puccini at a high volume."

The eyes of Ethan glowed with fascination. He thought of Reuben as a future writer of novels.

"Yoselyn and I then thought of reversing the cables of the wire-operated telegraph, that is used to send stop, forward and back-signals to the machine-room, but since we were not permitted to put the ship in danger while we tried to oust Hansen, and the Chief of the Machine department did not want to be dragged into the affair, we left that idea.

In the meantime, we noticed that Bert kept himself unusually happy and tidy too. We noticed that we both, Yoselyn, and I were tired, ragged and filthy from the navigation tampering. We raged at this.

The next thing was to get rid of the updated tables from Greenwich. We took the books with the tables and locked them all up in a box that we stuffed under my bed in my cabin.

Without tables, it would be impossible to establish longitude. This was all clear to us and to Hansen, and we were now on Bonaventua II in a pre-Harrison predicament. George Harrison ( … another George Harrison ) was the man who invented modern navigation. Longitude is hard to find out without tables.
The next night, it seemed as if Hansen much earlier had foreseen this eventuality, and we found that he had made some annotations on a piece of paper that let him make his observation faultlessly.
We then tried simply to poison him.
This was of course a bit radical. But our Captain insisted.
On the next day, we saw him on deck, resting comfortably – clad in trunks, sunbathing, because it was tropical weather and in July in the middle of the Atlantic, outside of Kongo - and we decided to serve the man ice-tea. We ordered the chef to do that. Without the chef knowing anything, we put tons of laxatives into his cup."

"I don´t believe a word," Ethan said with a broad smile, energetically rubbing his knee and nose.

"Don´t you?" Reuben asked with something like ironic earnestness. He continued his story:

"Noe, I will tell you, Bertie-Hansen- man sipped at the tea but then let it trickle out on the deck.

We had to tell the Captain that we simply could not find out anyway to provoke a mistake from The Man Who Could Do Nothing Wrong.

As soon as we arrived at our next stop, which was Durban, the Captain left the ship – pretending he had an ulcer – and transferred the command to Yoselyn. When we got home, we heard that he had taken a flight home to Florida, where he and his wife lived.

Now, Bonaventure II continued on its trip, but Yoselyn and I refrained from harassing Hansen anymore. We even tried to laugh the whole thing off, together with him. However, Hansen only got on with his perfection and acted as if nothing happened! Imagine that!! The ship eventually months later returned safely to London, where we were stationed. We each of us took leave, and I saw neither Yoselyn nor Hansen anymore. However, I stayed in Red Cargo Orient Line for a long time."

David and Ethan raised their eyebrows.

"But," Reuben said, and he took a large sip of Kenyan coffee, "the story does not end here. When I as a 1st officer met one of the Red Cargo Orient Line owners a

couple of years later, I told him the story about strange man Hansen aboard my ship, from the time I was 2nd officer. He laughed, – his name was de Koen – and he almost bade me tell the story twice. Still, it was all the time something strange with the old ship proprietor because he kept nodding while I told the story the second time. And he had a troubled and confused look in his eyes.

However, he soon began to speak, and now he was more stern and formal:

´Dear Mr. Longman, I know the man. Or – more correctly - I knew him, sir´

´What? ´I cried out. ´Tell me !´ ´Please tell me,´ I fiercely begged him.

´Well, ´ de Koen continued, ´Hansen sailed on one of my big fruit vessels, one of those container ships, for many years. He certainly got that reputation which you just, in such an elegant way, have described. When he turned sixty-five years old, he came to me in my office to take leave. Hansen was, like you, sailing as 1st Officer at this time. I turned down his resignation and said that he, from this very moment, was promoted to Captain and that he next month should be taking my largest ship to Shanghai.

However, he persisted and told me that he intended to follow the rules of the Company. The rules in this shipping company were such that retirement was due to the 65th birthday. I finally, when I saw the determined look at his face, let go of my resistance. The retiree got a substantial bonus, a Havana cigars box, three bottles of Bell´s whisky, and I said thank you and goodbye to him and good luck.

Later an employee of mine from the HR apartment told me the perplexing ending of it all.

Hansen had his wife back in Trondheim, which he had visited now and then, with whom he had no children, but who was through all these years a very faithful and good wife to him. He came into his apartment on Hardangergata, as was the name of the street, that had an excellent view over the harbor, I have been told. The home comer hung his cap on its place, kissed his wife, and got into the bedroom. There he lay down, and after having a cigar, which he maybe had brought with him and kept for a long time, or one of the Havanas he got from me, he took a blanket, turned to the wall, and …. didn´t move.

His wife cried, she tried to make him at least eat something, and she asked him what was wrong. Then Hansen answered, turned away from her, facing the wall:

´I am old now. My opinion is that older people shall not be a burden to others. It is also quite clear that the planet is overcrowded as it is. So, I, therefore, have decided to die. The natural way to die is by stop eating and drinking. Farewell, and thank you so much for everything, my dear!”

His wife got mad, hammered at him with both hands, and even bit him in his ear in her rage, but Bert Hansen allegedly did not move.

His wife was beyond her senses, cried and went berserk, and she tried to summon folks from Hardangergata and a competent doctor too. However, Hansen, from his position facing the wall, just told them to leave.

After two weeks without food and water, Hansen did die.

The man who could do nothing wrong was gone, forever.´"

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This story shook the soul out of its audience.

Reuben emptied his coffee. The dog at Reuben´s side, gnarled, sensing that something terrible once had occurred. The room in Fell´s Point was quiet, and the sky over Baltimore outside Reuben´s place was as grey as ever, and the birds hid under the cars. Then the old sea-Captain lent forward to scratch his foot. Maybe he did this as some kind of apology for having taken so much time and being so pretentious.

"My God!" Thomas said.

David sensed that Reuben, when he told his story, wasn´t ambiguous at all. At least not in a bad way, which he had thought Reuben sometimes was.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

Some Maryland stories are classics. It happened – they say - in Maryland just shortly after the American Revolution.

A soldier named Charles Sims had come to get some wealth, and he and his dog, a blue tick hound, a black and white English foxhound, went to one of the local beer houses for a drink. However: In vino veritas! Charlie could not refrain from talking in a loud voice of his riches and the deed that had led to his wealth. He patted his pockets, where he kept the gold when sitting in the bar. The other guests, three

youngsters, Henry and Chuck, and Billy, were listening. Several of the men came from Port Tobacco, as was Henry. Port Tobacco is a Maryland town, just to the east of Washington, which today has approximately thirteen inhabitants.
When Sims left the bar, Henry and the others followed him. They apprehended Sims and his dog along Rose Hill Road, hitting him with an iron bar, killing Sims and his pet. Chuck and Billy got scared and left. Charlie fell on a rock near the road. Henry took the fortune from Charlie´s pockets, buried it beneath a nearby holly tree, and fled. When H. returned a day later to get his treasure, the dog would not let him have it. The ghost of a big hound appeared, howled, and charged at Henry. This poor man tried to shoot the dog using his rifle, but the dog evaded the shots, jumping high. These dogs are both intelligent and agile. The dog attacked. Again, Henry decided to leave. Henry never did get hold of the treasure he buried. He reportedly fell ill and died suddenly shortly after. If you're courageous enough to travel Rose Hill Road, look out for the place where they killed Sims and his dog. The treasure is – if nothing has happened to it - still there, in the woods by the state route.

Ethan thought that this story told so much of his beloved Maryland.

Ethan spent Saturday evening at home, trying to tidy up. There was not much anybody could do to window-sills that very badly rotten, though. His apartment was almost beyond repair. But of course, it was not. Ethan ought to call the property owner, but keeping the rent cost at a low level was also a question of importance. As it was, the price for his apartment was minimal.

After having carried some trash out in the backyard, Ethan turned off the lights and indulged in reading.
He simply could not get enough of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville. This presented a considerable problem since he had consumed everything both Conrad and Melville ever had written.
He liked Jane Austen too but not Poe, the Baltimore son. He thought that Poe´s prose was a little meager. But Poe, of course, had many good ideas, and Ethan thought Poe had a brilliant nerve in his stories. Ethan sometimes wished that Poe had taken himself more time with his stories. Why hadn´t Poe been a little more elaborate?
The Atlanta school was also gorgeous. He liked McCullers, Capote, and the author of To kill a mockingbird, whose name he never could remember. He was fond of Virginia Woolf, and he liked Franz Kafka as well as Robert Walser. He read Raymond Chandler but also Cornell Woolrich. The latter almost had surpassed Poe

in the masterful novel by the name of Fright. And Ethan also admired Paycheck by Philip K. Dick.
But, for no reason at all, other than it was a natural thing to do, he spent lots of time on the internet that day too. He did not usually comment on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Still, he was a member of all three of them, and YouTube also. Often he took time to follow specific and oddly specific accounts, often Baltimoreans. He had a more active account in one author´s forum, where he sometimes posted short stories of his own.
He received very few comments.
He gave concise comments himself.
This and that conspiracy theory on the web caught his eye just because it was there. He was a curious person, but more so, he had much reflection and a skeptic mindset of his own. He concluded that people who believed in theories like that suffered from laziness and naïvité because they tried to jump on a train wagon in motion without asking themselves which train it was, where it came from and where it was heading.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

Reuben willingly welcomed some visits to his house, but he grew suspicious when a phone rang and a man presented him as Carl Larsen, from the BAM, the Baltimore Art Museum Larsen declared that he was interested in buying rare art. He said he was sorry for Reuben´s loss, for the death of Martha, and had heard that Reuben had more interesting paintings than the famous Matisse one. Might someone possibly be able to take a look at the entire collection? Longman agreed, and Larsen was welcomed on the same day, at 03.00 pm.

Later that day, Larsen walked through Reuben´s house with a small camera in his hand, looking at art objects; Reuben however took a neutral attitude. The BAM man did not think any other painting, mostly North American artists - pictures showing the Rocky Mountains in sharp sunlight - were of any value. There were no

Modiglianis. Larsen rushed from room to room, and Reuben had a hard time following. Finally, he sat down on his salon sofa and let Larsen stroll around as he pleased in his house. Suddenly Reuben thought he heard a familiar sound, a small squeak, and he performed a stealth operation to find out what had caused the sound. It was Larsen looking behind a drawer.

Reuben rushed to Larsen, grabbed his camera, threw it to the floor, and stomped on it until it lay asunder in infinite parts.

Then he turned to Larsen himself, who had grabbed for a gun in his back pocket. Larsen could not get hold of the small weapon, but it fell to the floor as well. Reuben then raised his hand and gave Larsen a giant blow in the face.

"Why are you doing this?" Reuben shouted. "Why?"

Larsen, whose nose was bleeding, did not answer.

Reuben took up the gun from the floor, put it in Larsen´s outer coat pocket, and led the man, who was bleeding heavily, to the front door and threw him out on the marble stairs.

Larsen fell about, raised, and without a word, he disappeared down the street, where a Mercedes stood waiting for him.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

Human beings are right from the very start, intuitively interested in animals. It is not an odd thing since we all live amongst them and together with them, sometimes from them. We just don´t feed off them, but sometimes we make clothes of their skin, and we might often ride on them or have them draw wagons or wheels for us. Sometimes they are admirable companions, at the hunt or just on our walks in the neighborhood. However, often our interest in animals grows more intense than that and even becomes a little bit weird. It is, in fact, no uncommon thing that people are trying to understand the inner realms of animals, trying to get in deeper contact with them, almost in a perverse way. Some of us just do not limit ourselves to become cat owners or dog breeders, but at some – often very critical – point in life, many of us try to find

comfort in a situation of crisis, in attempting to establish emotional and loving contact with an animal. We will yet try to delve a little deeper into this matter.
It might be about an effort to come close to an ape, an elephant, a dolphin, a tiger, or some other creature, perceived by us to have some sort of mental complexity. For example, we are trying to find out if the animal in question can understand certain matters that we believe we have a great understanding of, in our way. Like music, literature and philosophy.
By examining this, some of us think that we might achieve both bits of knowledge of these animals and contact with them.
On countless occasions, humans have put mirrors in front of animals to watch what happens. Humans are watching how the tiger or the elephant watch themselves – or each other - in the mirror, how the analyzed creature walks to the mirror's reverse side to try to solve the mystery. We amuse ourselves, almost like Kaiser Nero himself with his slaves, on behalf of animals, which seem completely ignorant vis-à-vis the function of mirrors.
It is all very sad and deplorable.
It is an excellent comic in seeing how people, time and time again, laugh their asses off when they realize that the animals – the lions, the giraffes, the bears, the lynxes - have no idea about mirrors. People of all ages, shapes and sizes are shouting:
"Look, it does not understand that it is he himself in the mirror!!" And some wise guy leans toward his son and points at the giraffe, explaining:" You see, it has no self-conscience!"
Whenever people display themselves in this manner, comparing themselves with animals, it is as if stupidity explains itself.
Many humans spend their entire precious lives in trying to teach apes using sticks and other tools to a greater extent than apes do in their natural environment. Many humans spend their lives constructing experiments designed to show that apes can predict future events. The human interest in animals is not funny per se. But it is, more so, bothersome. It is, namely, both as if humans have an inner urge BOTH to prove that animals are stupid AND that they are not stupid at all compared to humans themselves.
It is only that this wise stupidity, or stupid wisdom is understood by every five-year-old child WITHOUT having to design experiments. It is in the human DNA, this knowledge of other animals. Children know how smart and how stupid the cat and dog is. It is an inborn quality with humans that we, from the outset, are aware of this.
Now, this isn´t all. There are people to whom it is not sufficient to design an experiment to determine the obvious about animals. No. High strung people meet

with individual animals . as I already mentioned - as if they were offering a special kind of relief and resurrection. It seems to certain people as if they need to be rescued from something by an animal. Some people are looking for wisdom, or whatever, in the eyes of dolphins or orangutans, or jellyfish.
Human anxiety and despair are so strong, that many of us wants to be rescued at any cost.

There are countless theories about experiencing extended spiritual dimensions by exchanging vibrations with jellyfish in aquariums.

As everybody knows, some folks gather outside of an aquarium shouting to it:
"Oh, jellyfish, jellyfish, octopus, octopus! What enigma is torturing your soul?"
The octopus in question is lying at the bottom of its manufactured home, its water cellar, ( WATER CELLAR ) and is all silent. It does not say a word nor does it respond. This appears to make things more evident to the public. Folks outside of the water bunker (WATER BUNKER) feel mesmerized by the serene, eloquent, mystical fish, whose ancestors were comrades with the dinosaurs and probably also have relatives on Mars.
It is NOT, however, the jellyfish that mesmerizes. It is our stupidity. WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT WE ARE LOOKING AT OURSELVES IN THE MIRROR! (And we dare not look behind it.) It is like our idiocy poisons us, and we are kneeling in front of the amorphous fish, crying:" Please, please, give us a sign from your precious, secret world! Say something! Anything! Whatever you say, we will obey! Give me a message because I KNOW that your BRAIN is just as COMPLEX as mine is! Or complexer!"
It is our stupidity that is talking. Perhaps the octopus raises one of its many legs, and we are screaming with joy, sinking to the ground with bliss painted in our faces. Our exhaustion is enormous. Our spiritual anguish has momentarily been released in the meeting with this fish. The thought that each of us is all alone in this completely unknown world, in this incomprehensive cosmos, just feels less immediate. The subtly coded message that the jellyfish left with us is like Christ returning on resurrection day. When we are leaving the area, the CELLAR ZOO with the foreign animals, we are anew talking to each other, one disputed person in Spe to another, planning to write a paper on the wisdom and the elusive truth contained in the eyes and the hints of animals of the watery kingdom. Every one of us wants to exhibit a degree in the metaphysics of the Octopusian civilization.

Truth is like hints, Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed. Maybe the gesture of an octopus can be relied upon. It lifted its paw anyway.

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When David made himself ready to jump into bed, there was a small knock on his window. It was Odile. David opened the window.

"Tomorrow, there will be nice weather," she said. "Let´s all go to the zoo tomorrow. Elsa too! She´ll be fine. "

"Perhaps," David said. "I´ll call you. But I don´ have a slug."

"Don´t bother. I´m rich," Odile, who smelled a little from vanilla, grinned. Then she jumped on her bike and drove away with thunder.

---

Ten hours later, the big sun shone through the window, and though it was late September, it was almost hot. It was like a summer´s day. Soon Odile came by again on her thundering Honda.

They called upon Elsa, but she immediately told them that she just wanted to sleep. Odile had on a short black skirt and a white blouse. Her brown skin was gleaming in the sun.

"Are you a member of ANTIFA?" she asked.

"No, why?" David answered.

David jumped up on Odile´s bike, and she drove the short way to the small animal park.

Odile and David went to the zoo alone.

When they got in and stood by the penguins ….

All of a sudden, David realized that he was in love with Odile.

"Lo … lo …k at him!" he said, pointing with his finger at a small penguin who just suddenly had fallen over and into a small ditch. "He … is cute," but his whole body was in a whim, and it was uproar inside him. Odile looked at him and saw that he was sweating profusely.

"Mmm. What´s the matter?" she said and added:

"Are you sick?"

The park was vast.

It had three main compartments.

Arctic, Africa, and America.

When David and Odile stood by the fence, looking at the zebras, David, who had regained some strength, glanced at Odile.
They then approached the bird section, where the zoo kept some Aras, owls, and orioles. One of the roofs was asunder after a storm, and the guard said that a couple of owls had escaped last spring - great horned owls.
David omitted a giant sigh. People who are deeply in love do often sigh deeply.
David, the anarchist, snuggled his hand into Odile´s. She allowed him to.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

Eric, Inga, Armamente, and Çansu sat in their living room at Oyster Pancake Street drinking tea. Armamente had convinced her friends that tea was not only good for digestion but also that tea promoted sound thinking. Çansu told a little of her Turkish background, her life as an actor and now as a shop owner. It turned out that she had lived in Asheville too, like Inga, but up in the beautiful hills, together with her husband. They were now divorced, and she felt happier than ever.
According to the agreement, Inga called Reuben up, and it turned out that they were welcome at 01.00 PM to Thames Street Inga asked if she might bring some friends with her, some of which also had known poor Martha. Reuben told her that she might do as she liked.
Since the rain after the storm had arrived to their street, Eric rang for a cab.
It was not long before the four of them knocked on Reuben´s front door. Çansu had been asked to join. Reuben would be informed in the case by Armamente, who had a talent for explaining matters with few words.
Inga pointed at the big, amateurish sign, saying, “Social Club.”
“Heye, look at that!”
Çansu, who had a white complexion, and was slightly fattish, took out a notebook.
“What is that?” Inga asked, referring to the notebook.
“My notebook. I always take notes.”
“Let me see!” Inga said, and she firmly removed the small black book from Çansu´s hands.

“Ah, hear!” she said, and while Reuben opened the door to his house, Inga read aloud from Çansu´s book:” Imagine if all trees were ugly. Imagine if there were no books or stories at all in the world! Imagine….”

“Very welcome!” Reuben said, and his thin face, with its clown-like look, twisted into a giant grin.

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Reuben had made some coffee. He now served the small gang of intruders, who all f them were delighted, as every visitor would be, at the chimpanzee and the zebra.

“It is a real zoo!” Inga said.

“Zoos have live animals,” the doctor corrected.

“I remember,” Çansu said and took out her notebook again,” once in a zoo…”

Eric and Armamente looked at each other, smiled and shook their heads. Armamente then looked at Inga, as if it was her fault that this meeting now seemed to be all messed up by Çansu. And in a way, ofcourse it was.

Reuben immediately understood what was going on. Therefore, he stretched behind the sofa, took out a small baby ape made of cloth, and gave it to Çansu.

“Here´s for you!”

But he did not smile.

Çansu first got immensely offended and would not take the ape, but then she changed her mind and asked if she might keep it, take it home, and Reuben said yes to that, she accepted. Now Reuben smiled. His clown eyes were wide open.

“What can I do for you?” Reuben then asked, and he had turned to the doctor, whom he had fancied was the small private investigation group leader.

“We are just interested in trying to find out what happened to Martha,” Eric said earnestly and in an otherwise neutral voice.

“I don´t know more than the police do.”

“We spoke to inspector Ludwig yesterday,” Inga said.

“We are interested in her laptop.” Armamente then boldly asserted.

“Oh. But my wife´s laptop is a rather private …”

“We would not insist on that.” Eric raised his voice, tapping the table, ”but could you tell us what you guess happened in the park. What do YOU think occurred on that day?”

Reuben looked down at the carpet with an inaudible sigh.

Çansu put the ape in the blouse, Armamente held her chin in her hand, and Inga flexed her muscles in her feet. Eric frowned.

“Martha had many enemies. She was very adventurous. We had a troublesome journey behind us. Maybe we soon would have split up. I don´t know what happened to her. I miss her, I do…”

Reuben´s face was sorrowful, and he looked much older now. He looked as if he was ninety years old, though he probably was no more than seventy. Armamente still wanted to ask for Martha´s laptop, but Eric now acted as if he wanted them all to leave soon. He apparently felt very uncomfortable.

Eric had not touched on the Mexican coffee.

“Might I take a look upstairs?” Armamente asked Reuben. “Perhaps I could come back? You do have some sort of social club here, haven´t you?” the young transgender said.

“Sure, I give you a ring, and you may join another day. On next Wendesday. I am sorry. I don´t like to talk about Martha.” Reuben turned his head to all sides, like he was excercizing the muscles of the neck, and then coughed with a shrill sound. He was looking at Çansu, who scribbled notes in her book, now standing in front of the Mississippi photograph beside the door to the hallway.

Inga had opened the front door.

“What is that?” she asked, referring to the photograph, while the head of the monkey was bumping on her hip.

“It is a riverboat, on which I once served as a Captain,” Reuben answered.

“What was her name?” Çansu asked, pen in her hand.

“Conchita.”

“Aah,” Çansu said admiringly but got a push by Armamente. Then they all left in a hurry, ushered forward to the street by Eric. He felt that they somehow had been trespassing at Reuben´s and wanted to undo this offense by vanishing as quickly as possible.

“Absolutely meaningless,” Armamente murmured, but nobody heard what she said.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

Inga and Armamente spent the rest of the afternoon discussing Martha, specifically Martha´s connection with the writers of the circle, where she had met with the elusive Mr. Askelon. Now they had set out to use the Internet and their smartphones to find the other members of this illustrious gang of aspiring bestseller authors. Armamente also contacted Askelon for the addresses of the other participants in the writer´s circle. She thought he most likely had those addresses because the circle had had the habit of outdoor meetings and thus used to form contact chains to assemble at different spots at certain times.

Inga and Armamente, who both was were determined to solve the mystery, did not dare to discuss Eric´s obvious lack of interest out of fear that he would call the whole thing off.
Askelon finally mailed Inga a small list with six names on it. W. Thunder, O. Cantrell, Bill Porter, Anne Porter, Sam Ellis, and Jackie Nelson.
Inga and Armamente divided the names between them and started to call the persons up.
By the information they got through the calls, which was a very diverse one, they soon reached an even better understanding of how Martha had appeared to the circle folks.
The most interesting among the writers seemed to be the Porter couple. Armamente and Inga had found out that they lived outside of Baltimore in the countryside on a small farm that they had rented, where they - according to Google - raised Labrador dogs. The two investigators, who seemed to enjoy each other's company more and more as the days went by, set out to visit them.
They went there by bus and were thrilled by the desert landscape.
The mansion lay on a small table-like hill in a flat landscape. When they got closer, they experienced a lovely summery heat. When Armamente looked around, she noticed clouds in all directions, but the sky was clear above their heads. But they were on the countryside now.

They at arrival were stunned at all the small blockhouses that were built around the main building. These houses were for dogs. But it showed that some of them contained birds as well. And on the slopes of the small knolls, sheep wandered around, now and then lifting their cute heads and looking at Inga and Armamente

with rectangular, scared, greenish-brownish eyes. Some of them bleated in a low murmuring way.
One of them sounded like an oboe.
At a small distance from the house, Inga saw a sign telling them that they now entered the Porter Free Town, and on a pole, there was a flag, white and blue, with a large red "P" ( as in "Porter") on it.
Nobody seemed to be at home, though Inga had talked to Bill just an hour ago on the phone.
Suddenly, a woman appeared from a guesthouse. She wore what seemed as a tarnished white dress, Armamente thought. She was rather old and seemed of Vietnamese or Cantonese origin. The woman soon approached them and waved her thumb towards another small house that appeared to be built over a small well and half shouted:

"Bill."

Armamente and Inga then entered the small brick house.
Then they met a middle-aged man, who wiped off his hands towards his shirt and presented himself as Bill.
After a couple of minutes, they sat in Ann´s and Bill´s enormous kitchen, which contained an old iron oven, and Anne, a small, endlessly pale woman, soon served them tea. They never had coffee, they said, because of tender stomachs.

"Yes," Bill began, while changing shirt, to a clean one, which was handed to him by his wife.

"I was wondering when someone finally would come to ask about Martha. We have been wondering that for a long time, haven´t we?"
Anne nodded and put on a faint smile on her thin lips.

"It is good to tell, but not pleasant, though," she said.

"Who was that old woman in the garden?", Armamente asked Bill. She saw that Inga had been shocked by something. Inga was busy pulling herself together, with an intense stare down on the surface of the tea in the tea-cup.

"Who was that woman in the garden," Armamente retook," … that unlucky woman?"

"Oh, she is alright. We met her a year ago. It was outside a restaurant downtown, you see. They were changing their furniture in that Chop restaurant. They had flung out some giant Chinese carpets in their backyard, where Ann and I happened to sit and watch a game of table tennis with friends. We approached the Chinese and asked if we might have one of those carpets, a yellowish one, with dragons on it. It was mighty thick too."

Bill measured at least ten centimeters between his index finger and thumb.

"Of course, they said, but then one woman lingered a little longer behind, and it appeared that she wanted to get away from the restaurant. She helped us out to the street with the large and heavy carpet, and then she asked us if we might take her with them for protection. Other Chinese, young men, came out on the street with sticks in their hands, but I always carry a Glock, and when I took it out and pointed at them and shouted for help up the alley, they vanished. Since then, Lin has been with us. She is taking care of the dogs and has a small massage saloon in the basement as well."

"I see," Armamente said. But she was worried all the same.

"Is this the carpet?" Inga said and pointed to the salon, where a tip of thick yellowish carpet, with dragons upon it, gleamed forth.

"Exactly," Bill said, "a lovely carpet. Maybe valuable too," Armamente noticed that his eyes were almost infinitely small as if the owner of those eyes had spent his whole life smoking pot.

"Now, you said you are happy we´d come?" Inga said, almost in a hostile tone. She was as bothered as Armamente by the sight of the poor Asian woman.

"Yes, we had Martha here as a guest the week before she died," Bill said, blowing up his left cheek to enormous proportions.

"She was vain," Ann said absentmindedly.

"You don´t say!? Tell us, please!" Armamente said and leaned forward to try to catch a glance of the living room, through a doorway, that was just half covered by a Turkish purple curtain, with oriental figures on it, which was hanging on some copper nails. The entire house smelled of Turkish cigarettes and dead snakes, Armamente thought and involuntarily brought her hand to her nose.

"Martha rang me up after the class one evening in May," Bill told the visitors, "and asked if she could come and visit us. I agreed. She came, silver blond hair and black city dress, and she stayed for three weeks."

"She said she had a small apartment on Fell´s Point, but Martha was not used to living alone and told us that she needed a day or two, and then maybe she would buy a small pet dog for company. She hated to be alone, she said."

"On the second evening, though, she began to brag about her seductive powers. She said that she could still, although at the age of fifty-six, have any man she wanted."

"Much rather she talked about men and herself than about literature. In our writer´s circle, she was not prominent at all. Not as a writer. She sure dominated as a

person. But she rarely showed us anything she had written. I don´t think she wrote anything at all. She was there just for the company."

"Yes, she was incredibly vain.", Ann said another time, picking her nose.

"I told her that I thought she looked like Marilyn Monroe. That made her happy. Every day she talked to Lin, who has a massage salon in the basement here, about to give her massage. Martha said she did not know who was the mayor of Baltimore, for instance, but she could swear that she could make him jump in bed with her. And give her some antique artifact at that, as a gift."

"I told her that it would be impolite to doubt it…."

"Now, we searched for who was the mayor of Baltimore. But that turned out to be a woman. Then Martha said that that woman must have a brother. The mayor had. It was a guy who generally went by the name of Leclerc. To make a long story somewhat shorter, she set up a meeting with Leclerc, and then she was gone about six o´clock on one evening."

"She returned at 01.00 AM on the following day - in the middle of the night, that is – and was all messed up and crying. She had been ridiculed by this man Leclerc and utterly insulted. He had even laughed at her. Martha went to bed and was not seen until the evening on the next day. She was utterly silent."

"Now, on the next day, when we were trying to console her, it turned out that Lin, our Chinese factotum, had her nephew here, a boy around twenty years old. It was not long before Martha had dragged the boy with her up to her attic room and seduced him."

"Lin herself afterward was raving mad, but she gave Martha her massage as usual on the next day. Only she gave her the evil dragon massage, she said. An expert masseuse, she knew that if you press the right spots, the body will not relax, but the body will react with severe nightmares, jerking, and appetite loss. After the massage, Martha was a wreck. She looked for Lin, but Lin had hidden in a doghouse. Martha then left for her apartment. This was on the day before she died."

Armamente and Inga sat with their chins dropped.

"But that is MURDER!" Inga shouted. "Lin is the murderer."

Suddenly Lin herself entered from behind the Turkish curtain.

"Why so? It is not possible to die from a massage!" she asserted," nobody can prove that she died from a little nightmare."

Armamente looked at the elderly Chinese woman, who still had her tarnished dress, a massage suit, on.

"She is probably right," Armamente shouted, to silence the utterances of all the others. Because, as it was, the persons in the kitchen seemed divided into two camps.

Ann and Inga seemed to immediately want to convict Lin of murder, while Bill and Armamente played a waiting game.
Lin´s face was stern. Armamente was curious about why she had told Bill and Ann that she had executed this kind of massage.

"Because I am an honest being," Lin answered.

Armamente was so upset that she gave a shout that echoed in the entire building.

"I HATE this!"

"Who knows what happened in the park?" Bill said while he cleaned the table from cups and saucers.
Inga just stared out through the window, towards the clouds at the horizon.

"Poor Martha! Little Martha…" she said.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

Some folks look for comfort, and some want thrills; some are looking for someone who can take care of them. Some look for money and power, and some are looking for adventure. Some want hot love. Some are just happy with themselves and the way other people are.
Odile was at the library studying. She was an industrious student.
Odile seemed to be a well-organized, perfectly content, and audacious young woman, but you only had to be with her for an hour or so to realize that she had a soul as

complex as it was worried. Her eyes were as watchful as they were dreamy and brave. She was an audacious woman, and you also saw that she was on the look for something else, something distant and rarely seen, which she yet did not know what it was. Now and then she kind of shook off the present situation off her mind and put up a new face, as if she said: “Now what? Let us shove all we know aside and get to learn something new.”
She thus could put her worry aside.

Late in the day, she would become calmer. Soon she would wander off home. You could see her by in the Inner Harbor or by the waterfront, she looked afar, and she was silent.
Some said she did not know where her father was. He had left when she was five years old. She did know who her mother was, but not where she was. She also had left without notice.
She sometimes thought that since there always seemed to be so many problems caused to humans during childhood, the best childhood would be one of a coma. Then, when the person was revived at the age of fifteen, she at least could not be hampered by ugly memories from the early years. Some said of Odile that she always thought of how to find her father.
She wanted to be a psychologist — and many who wants to be psychologists like motorbikes. The motorcycle thing was much like looking for the mysterious “Self.” She wondered how a reflexive pronoun ever had managed to take the place of the soul. A reflexive pronoun was nothing but a mirror. Why call the innermost of a human being a … mirror?
Odile wanted to get cute David on a motorcycle.
Having a bike is almost like writing a novel. Having a friend also is very much like writing a book. Having a friend, however, is not like having a motorcycle.
She put aside her book of duty, which was an introduction to psychology.
How should she ever manage to become a psychologist when she had no father and her mother just had left?
She thought about David. They had had a good time at the zoo. They had stopped in front of an empty cage. There was a hole in the roof. The owl, a barred owl, had run from the zoo. David thought that most animals at the zoo did not belong there. Odile had said that the animals probably had not a worse life at zoo than anywhere else. It was a romantic notion, that they were better off in the wild, she had said.

David had seemed all taken aback by her person. He was clearly in love with her. When she thought about David, she smiled. He was not her type. He was definitely too weak. He was just a baby yet. Maybe he would mature.
She took out her phone, smacked the book together. On her way out from the library, she called David up.
It was 07.30 pm, and David answered.

"Hello!"

"Hello, it´s Odile."

"Wow! Hi!" the boy´s voice raised to falsetto.

Odile smiled.

"I have got an extra helmet," she said. " Want to go for a ride?"

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

Inga and Armamente were on their way on the bus back to the house on Oyster Pancake Street to tell Eric what they had discovered. But they were both shaken, and they were not very keen to tell Eric about Martha and Leclerc, or whatever his name was.
Eric had been in love with the seductress, and now she was dead. Inga had all the time known who Martha was, but she did not think Eric had. The doctor was broadminded and tolerant, but when it comes to love, everything is a whole new story.
The two newfound friends, Armamente and Inga, were sitting on the bus and wished again they knew what had happened in that secluded, closed park that afternoon. Had Martha Longman gone insane because of Lin´s awkward massage? Or was there more to it?

"Do you think," Armamente said, "…that we might gain something by letting the police know about the Porters and Lin?"

"I don´t see how we might," Inga answered, glancing out in the autumn sun on the streets and cars of Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A..

"Maybe they might retake the autopsy …."

"And find out that she was crazy??" Inga snapped. "I don´t think psychiatry has come that far. It almost certainly never will neither. I hate psychiatrists."

The bus stopped in front of the red light.

"Do you think Martha hated psychiatrists?"

"She died on the following day. You were listening, weren´t you?"

Armamente smiled. She loved that they had come so close to each other in just a couple of days that they could quarrel with each other without further ado.

"Yes, of course. I just thought that Martha would be exactly that kind of person who would like to visit psychiatrists. Male psychiatrists, that is," Armamente said in a light tone. "You know, every bit of information is of most significant interest to us, as private eyes."

"She just died," Inga said, "and as a matter of fact I am beginning to lose a bit of interest now."

Two blue and white police cars drove by, exerting hideous signals with their horns.

"What do you mean by that, that ´she just died`…"

"I simply mean that she probably just had a heart attack and died."

"She did not have a heart attack. Such things an autopsy perfectly well can reveal."

When the bus stopped, they immediately walked the few yards to the house to search for Eric.

They locked up the door and went in. They could not at once notice Eric. After a while, Armamente spotted some smoke entering the sleeping room on the back, from the balcony. She rushed to the balcony, and there she spotted Eric lying in a folding chair, smoking a cigar.

"Do you SMOOOOKE?" she yelled, entering the small balcony, where a whole row of small pots contained blue flowers.

"I do not inhale," the doctor said, looking at Armamente, his eyes looking pale.

"This is a lovely balcony, at least?" he added.

"Oh yeah. But you did buy that cigar?" Inga cried out.

"Yes. By the way, I have been to a psychiatrist."

"A psychiatrist?"

"Yeah."

"I did not know that you needed a psychiatrist. I actually tho…"

Eric coughed. Now Armamente appeared with a cup of tea in her hand.

"Hello Eric," she said, "what have you been up to?"

"I visited Martha´s shrink," Eric told them.

The women were truly stunned.

Soon the three of them comfortable gathered at the balcony to have tea and reflect upon what the psychiatrist had revealed.
Eric put out the cigar, which had a sharp odor and a black smoke too:

"I checked around a little to the most prominent psychiatrists in town with private practice. I told receptionists I just needed information about a dead person. Suddenly I got to know that a doctor by the name of Silbermann had a patient named Martha with platinum hair."

"I got an appointment right away, and Silbermann sacrificed the hour before lunch to tell about her, for a reasonable sum of money."

"She had visited him numerous times during recent years. Martha had been a very serious patient, and she had not clung to Silbermann in any ordinary or unordinary way or for that matter tried to seduce him. But she had complained about her misery, claiming that her childhood had turned her into an insecure girl, prone to senseless adventures, instead of looking for true love. She had in early years been subjected to abuse, but the real problem was that she had not any self-worth at all, according to herself."

"I never thought that she would look for comfort by a psychiatrist," Inga said. "She was not excessively proud, but she certainly was afraid of appearing vulnerable."

"Silbermann told me that he had asked her if she was afraid of people. She claimed that she was not afraid of anybody or anything. Except for birds."

"Birds?" Armamente cried out.

"Yes. Her husband at the time, Carlos, had owned a giant red parrot named "Sammy." This was in her first marriage. Martha had tried to take out her real anger at Carlos on Walter and had walked around with the large cage, teasing the bird. Suddenly the door of the cage had opened up, and Sammy had escaped, then hitting her with his wings, chasing her around, so she fell about and hit her head. Carlos had come and rescued her from the beak of the bird. When Sammy was back in his cage, Martha was crying. She soon left Carlos, but she told Silbermann that until that very day, she had nightmares about Sammy."

"Strange," Inga said.

"Did they still meet at the time of her death?" Armamente asked.

"Oh, yes. Martha had an appointment on the day after she died."

"How do you feel about Martha when you hear all this?"

"Of course I feel bad," Eric said, and twisted his mouth to illustrate his feelings, "but you two, did you meet with the Porters?"

Armamente then told Eric about Martha´s days in the Porter Free Town. But, out of shame and pity, she omitted the story about Martha´s seduction of the Chinese boy. Eric listened carefully.

"Yes, I remember her passion for massage. And she thought that it was a very classy thing too," he said.

"She was rather vain, wasn´t she?" Armamente said, feeling both tired and disappointed.

Inga was resting before the telly when Eric and Armamente returned to the living room.

"Maybe we´ll concentrate on Reuben." Armamente said, "The important thing in life is of course, to concentrate on people alive. Let´s concentrate on Eric and Reuben. They are still alive." Armamente said, in a desperate try to both be funny and to create some sort of engagement.

"Death is a matter for the living," she said, but added:" but life is the most significant matter."

"Who is looking at a television-series like this?" Inga said, holding the moist remote control to her cheek.

"You are," Eric said while slumping in another armchair.

Eric never talked about his deepest feelings. Maybe very few people do. He thought life was like a dream. The image of Martha slowly was disappearing. He sensed that he had never known her. This insight created nausea within him. He didn´t want to have a life where he did not even know his loved ones.

Suppose there was an afterlife, and you met your friends in Paradise, and it turned out that you had never known who they were. At least for Paradise's sake, you have to be sure of who your loved ones were.

He clenched his fists in painful sorrow. This was not the way life was supposed to be. In despair, he cried out to the women in the room:

"I love you!!"

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ethan and David, on the following Wednesday, called upon their friends, and Odile, Elsa, Haylee, Raymond, and Beth all agreed to come along to Reuben´s Social Club. Thomas would also attend. By seven o´clock in the evening, the eight of them were let in at Reuben´s place.

Those among them, who were newcomers, marveled at the stuffed chimpanzee and the zebra, as well as the numerous beautiful oil paintings and the curious atmosphere in Reuben´s house, as well as at Reuben himself.

Reuben laughed. But his clown eyes did not. Since they were operated around, there never was an actual smile on Reuben´s face.

Not much was said after the awful account about Derek Hogan.

David and Odile walked around in Reuben´s apartment and looked at the paintings. Some books consumed Ethan in one of the bookshelves in the small study.

Elsa, Beth, and Reuben were talking about the poor dog, who had been laying by the sofa all the time, and which seemed ill again.

# Chapter Thirty

To Ethan, the following week was one of work at the drugstore and reading. He also went to have a haircut. But he kept his Rasta hair, and it wagged on his head when he moved.

David tried to concentrate on his course in Italian Renaissance. Butterfield had a phone call from Eliza in London, telling him that she might not come home even for Christmas because she thought her jazz band would have a Santa gig then. Eric, Inga, and Armamente were enjoying their time in Baltimore. Eric and Armamente had chess battles, and Inga bought some new furniture for the house.

Reuben was walking his dog, feeling a bit uneasy. He was waiting to get a letter from his old Mississippi love, whom he had presented with a necklace of great value..

# Chapter Thirty-One

David and Ethan were together with Odile, Beth, Elsa, Thomas, and Dulcinea´s Armamente, who also had had a call for the upcoming Wednesday Social Club meeting from Reuben, asking her if she would like to attend the gathering.
When everybody was on their places in his living room, the Captain with the clown face, without further ado, told them a story of a certain Captain Burbank. This was Reuben´s third longer story, and it would be his last as well.

"It happened some years ago in the Persian Gulf outside of the Iranian coast when a man named Burbank and I were managing a small convoy of Patrol Ships. As joint chiefs, we had orders to evacuate a general and nine men from a camp to our ships. The convoy was thus a military one and consisted of three ships. Medium size vessels it was, and we were three Captains, and the two other Captains were relatively young. On the third ship, we had a guy, who ordinarily was a Chemistry professor, a Mr. Knight. In these years we had all sorts of personnel.
We had set out to rescue a gang of paratroopers led by a commanding general that had been stuck in a small castle just close to the coast. We supposed that we had been lured there but could not do anything about that. We had to try to get the folks out of there, alive.
Burbank was a young, competent Captain who had excelled in two executive maneuvers before. He was, according to his reputation, fearless, bordering on lunacy.

´We will pose your respective vessels on anchor one mile to the south and one to the north, covering my ship,´ I said. ´And then when I got straight up to the pier, and I let them run aboard, you will shoot at anything that moves, and as soon as I am back, in line with your ships, we will leave. But we are going to move quickly.´

We did so.
Knight, Burbank, and I had hugged each other and swore we should make this.
My own ship suddenly had to fix a propeller blade, and Burbank got the order to take the final step in evacuating the gang ashore.
Burbank went right to the shore, flung out a ladder at the small port pier of the castle, where our lads were waiting, swept in ladies' coats, disguised.
When the ten refugees had got aboard, Burbank´s ship turned around. Then, however, the shooting from the Iranian artillery started, and what a shooting! Knight´s vessel, Patrol Ship 211, which waited alongside my own almost at once, sank. Knight himself, with three men, managed to come over to my ship, Patrol Ship 113, which was busy shooting at the Iranians as well as looking for Burbank. When Burbank had come halfway, he too got harpooned, and when his ten guests sat out a lifeboat, he also sprung on it. His vessel, Patrol Ship 101, did not sink. It lay floating while he arrived at our boat with the happy general and his men.
Suddenly, Burbank remembered that he had a rare painting, a tiny but precious painting by Renoir left on Patrol Ship 101. He turned around with the motorized lifeboat, with two sailors to help him. He managed to collect the Renoir, wrapped up in brown paper, and he got aboard the lifeboat just as Patrol Ship 101 gave up and sank, in a roar, with over twenty of its skilled crew.
The enemy was still shooting, but Burbank managed to reach my boat, which, as you understand, was the only ship we had left. I was raving mad about the delay, mostly since the reason for it was such a silly thing as collecting a painting, which in itself still probably was not genuine at all, but fake. I always thought everything with Burbank was fake.
We even were subjected quite unnecessarily to enemy fire.
Anyway: as soon as Burbank got aboard, he got into a big quarrel with the general, a fellow by the name of Resonansstedt. Then our boat, Patrol Ship 113, was hit. We rushed to two lifeboats.
To make a long story a bit shorter, the general did not make it to our boats, and in the commotion, just Knight, Burbank, and I managed to survive to the shore. The Persians immediately caught us, and they interned us in the castle.
Burbank, though, had managed to, under his skirt, save the painting, which was very small, so far as into the Iranian camp.
Knight and Burbank got into a gorgeous fight, and Burbank finally walloped him that he, being an academic and not at all used to fighting, died a day later.

I at least had in my Captain´s cap my small spy camera, which I later hid in the toilet. As a memory, I kept photos of Burbank´s ghastly action when he escaped from Patrol Ship 101, with the Renoir in his hand.
Burbank finally lost his painting, which was destroyed by fanatics since it was a nude. Burbank and I spent one year together in prison before the Mossad rescued us."

"Is that really true?" Thomas cried out, almost laughing.
The others laughed too. All except Armamente.
Reuben held an earnest face and said:

"Unfortunately, it is all true."
David and Odile both thought it was a great story. Nobody knew if it was true. Armamente looked at Reuben with admiration and curiosity. Old Reuben was no ordinary man. She was convinced the whole story was true.

"Tell us another one!" Beth said.

"When did you first time go to sea?" Elsa asked.
The youngsters now, since Reuben wanted the story to sink in, looked around in the apartment. There was a lot to see. There were paintings and stuffed animals, but there were also musical instruments, vases, old books, maps, tin and copper boxes, playthings for children, masquerade attires, and a lot more.

"You need to have somebody cleansed all this stuff," Elsa said.

"What is a story, when you think of it?" David asked, philosophically. "I wonder if the whole world isn´t comprised of stories."
Armamente joined them in their conversation.

"I think the captain is fantastic. Are all the sailors in Baltimore this fantastic?" she said.

"You are not from here?" Ethan asked.

"No, I come from New York and Boston. I study in Boston."

"Ah," Ethan said.

"I can hear that from how you say ´Boston.´" David laughed, "It sounds like this: `Basten´."
They all laughed.

"Bawlmr," Armamente said.
They laughed again.
Now Elsa, Beth, Odile, and Reuben were gathered in the kitchen while David, Ethan, and Armamente were alone in the living room.

"Look here! Joseph Conrad´s collected works!" Ethan pointed at an impressive row of books with gilded letters on them. It was the beautiful Gresham Edition.

“So good!” Armamente said, who had her finger on a book by Carson McCullers. She smiled knowingly. She also took out a thin volume by Cornell Woolrich, ”The bride wore black.”

“He is widely read.” She finally said, referring to Reuben.

They chatted about books, Edgar Allen Poe, Frank Zappa and about some movies.

“Now, listen,” Armamente said,” I am new here in Baltimore. Couldn´t we meet up and you show me around in town someday? Or I could visit you. You are pals, eh?"

“Yes. But my house is in such bad shape. I am sharing an apartment with Elsa,” David said.” Do you live in a hotel or something?” he then asked.

“Nae, we have rented a whole house.”

“Who are “we”?” Ethan asked, and Armamente explained.

They soon decided that Ethan and David should visit Armamente and her friends Inga and Eric Goldkettel on the following evening at 0800 PM. The whole party soon broke up after every guest had thanked Reuben, who seemed delighted to have been their host.

When the young folks were leaving, Reuben glanced at his photograph of the old steamboat on the wall - the “Conchita.”

Longman closed the door, and out of his pocket, he drew a letter that earlier had been left to his postbox and that he had managed to save for to read when the guests had left. It was a letter from his Mississippi woman. He had sent her the bracelet, and with the bracelet, a letter and here came the answer.

He sat down in his favorite armchair, beneath the stuffed chimpanzee, which looked terribly ragged. Slowly Reuben now opened the small light blue envelope that smelled of elegant perfume.

It read:

“Dear Reuben!

Thank you sooooowow much for the lovely gift! You should not have!

I remember those years on Conchita so well. I loved it. I will never forget them.

Nowadays, I am just concentrated upon my small antique shop, and I have my dear bird. The bird and I travel a lot, and when we do, I just close my shop. I bought Sammy a year ago. He is a large red Ara, a parrot. We enjoy all the bird exhibitions. I am sending you a photo of him and me.

Actually, we were in Baltimore last spring and almost won the first prize. We had some trouble with the police.

Now I have not more to tell. I have always been a lousy writer when it comes to things like these.

*Kisses from*
*Your most loving*
*Cindy*

*Hug hug hug hug hug "*

The old Captain stared at the letter. Then he smelled at it again and finally lifted the photograph. It showed an old lady with a red parrot in her lap.
Reuben wiped his eyes, walked into his study and took out a magnifying glass, and scrutinized the photograph.
Well, it seemed to be Cindy, after all. But how she had aged! All wrinkled. It was not more than thirty years since they had met. But she looked so very old.
She toured with a parrot!

"She is touring with a bird!" Reuben said aloud, in a broken voice, and put the letter on top of some books on the bookshelf. He went to a cupboard to take out a bottle of brandy.
Reuben did not think that he had aged. He was only focused on the woman's age and looks, whom he had presented with a million-dollar bracelet.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

When Armamente returned home on this Wednesday night, she met with Eric and Inga, who were playing chess in the living room on the first floor. From the speakers, a Concerto by Vivaldi streamed out in the room, and Armamente discovered that it had a marvelous, soothing effect on her.

"Who wins?" Armamente grinned, and she put her cheek on Eric´s shoulder to get a picture of the game standing from his point of view.

It seemed as if Inga had the stronger position, she thought.

"Let us pause to hear what the evening at Reuben´s was like," Inga suggested. Eric nodded, and the three of them all moved to the chairs and sofa by the mantelpiece.

"Shoot!" Inga said, smiling at Armamente. Inga, at the same time, wondered how life would develop for this young boy-girl. Inga had in the last few days begun to look at herself as a person dealing with the final chapters of life. The heat and youth of Armamente had overwhelmed her, and she looked with envy at her fresh limbs and broad smile. Inga stared at the pretty, intelligent and agile transgender person whose cheek was glowing, despite the late hour. Often in the years that have passed, Inga had regarded herself as a modern and free spirit and as a progressive and activist one, perhaps just because she had allowed Martha to live that wildest of life that her friend had lived. But now, when she had started to reevaluate Martha, her view of herself had changed remarkably. When she realized that Armamente was the one that took responsibility in their small collective, she slowly found herself to be most sentimental and conservative. She almost thought that she had become such a person that she hitherto had loathed the most, one who protested against every novelty and every change.

"Oh, it was absolutely fantastic!", Armamente said," You should have heard Reuben tell the most horrific story about military actions in Iran…."

And she made an extensive recapitulation of the entire early evening.

When she had finished, Inga raised her voice in disbelief:

"Is he telling tales, or are these stories true?"

"They are presented as true," Armamente said.

"You did not talk at all about Martha, did you?" Inga asked, irritated as she presently was at the whole world.

"Nope, but another thing happened. I bade Ethan and David, two of the nicest boys in the world, to come to us tomorrow. We might ask them further about Baltimore and about Reuben too."

“Do they know him well?” Eric asked.

“Not so well. But regarding what we have found out about Martha, I mean, we do not seem to be able to find out so much more. Why don´t we go over to Reuben´s place and tell him about Martha and the Porters, the massage and all?”

“Yes, maybe she just died, overwhelmed by … massage?” Inga said with an ironic ring in her voice.

“You mean that that would satisfy Reuben and close the case?” Eric wondered in disbelief.

“We may never know more about Martha than what the Porters told us,” Armamente concluded.

“Sometimes one has to let go,” Inga agreed.

Eric rose from his chair, with some difficulty, and then stretched his back, yawning. ”I think I´ll go to bed. Maybe I can think straight tomorrow. Today my head is like fog.”

And Eric left the others, who turned on the telly and zapped between the programs until they found an old movie with Jack Nicholson.

“But if Reuben really is interested in knowing what happened to Martha, I don´t know,” Armamente said when Jack played the piano for the little dog Verdell in the movie.

“What is his real interest then?” Inga said, with a cheese snack between her teeth.

“Maybe he is interested in young girls….”

“You know, I wonder if Martha might have left some belongings with the Porters. She seemed to trust them in a special way. Don´t you think she was exceptional with them? Suppose …” Inga said.

“You are right. I´ll call them tomorrer.”

Armamente´s smartphone rang. She took it up and spotted the name on the display. ´Reuben.´

“Hello, it´s Armamente!”

“Heh,” a voice was heard.

“Hey, …. It is …. I am shot…”

Then there was a scramble, and the phone went dead.

“IT´S REUBEN. HE IS SHOT!” Armamente shouted out. She took Eric´s arm and they now called the police and then for a cab.

In a minute, the trio were on their way to Thames Street.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

Reuben lay on his back in the hallway, blood all around him when the police arrived. There was no way in saving his life. Reuben had been shot in the stomach, and the blood loss was immense. The patrol officers rang homicide right away, and after fifteen minutes, Lieutenants Ludwig and Sommers arrived. Bill Sommers closed off the entire street and ordered a large gang of forensic engineers to the place of the hideous crime. Ludwig, who knew the victim and had been at the apartment before to discuss the Martha case, carefully strove through all the rooms of the house. When entering Reuben´s living room, he froze.

The killer apparently first had called attention by ringing on the door, then shot Reuben and then stepped over his victim to go into the house to steal the famous Matisse painting. Then, as far as one could see from the bloody footprints, he ( or she ) had retreated the same way, to disappear from the area, presumably by car. As soon as Ludwig had oriented his superior officer about the mysteries of the proceedings to the case, Bill Sommers took out a notepad from his pocket. While licking his lower lip, he said:

"Let us see! Here comes a killer, manages to lure a war veteran to the door and even shoot him in the stomach, without further ado. Suppose Captain Longman knew his killer? And this killer must have had nerves of steel. How come to risk discovery in order to steal a painting? That is odd, very, very odd!"

“Exactly! It does not add up,” Hans Ludwig concluded in a vague and contradictory manner.
At this moment, a policeman on guard out on the street announced that two visitors, who claimed they knew the victim, wanted to have access to the investigating officers. Armamente and Inga were let into the house, through the back of the house, escorted by another policeman.

“So? Who are you?” Sommers shouted. Sommers, who was a big fellow with a red face, always got very nervous when relatives of victims were around on crime scenes. Sommers thought the two newcomers were relatives.

“Relatives? No, no,” Armamente said,” I don't think he had any. We were just distant friends. And I personally…”

“When did you last meet Mr. Longman?” Sommers interrupted.

“A couple of o hours ago,” Armamente said. Inga nodded.

“You too?” Sommers growlingly asked Inga.
She nodded.

“What did you do here today at Mr. Longman´s place?”

“We were invited to his social club.” Inga answered.
Armamente then had lots of trouble explaining all the oddities that had taken place. The two women were admonished to go to the Police Station uptown to be questioned in full there. Sommers and Ludwig would show up later. But Armamente and Inga had to leave their phone numbers.

“Do we have any witnesses on the street? Do we have cameras?” Sommers shouted.
Ludwig ran around to find answers to the questions posed. As a whole, they had very few leads. But there still were a couple of youngsters outside who could describe the suspected killer.
A young black man named Tiko said that it was a big, white guy, with a robber´s hood and a military jacket. A mobile movie soon appeared from another boy, Zach, who had caught the man on film, as he embarked on his getaway car, a black Volvo. Sommers now sent out the number of the car to every patrol car in the whole of Maryland.
The coroner, Dr. Pullman, a small energetic man with curly red hair and giant glasses, soon delivered the expected information:

“The man was shot with one bullet. He died in ten minutes.”

Armamente and Inga soon were sitting alone in a small questioning room at the BPD on Baltimore Street waiting to be heard.

"Absolutely horrible," Armamente said, looking intensely at the opposite wall. Her gaze was such as if it tried to perforate the concrete.

"Does this change what we think of the Martha case?" Inga said.

She apparently wondered if Armamente thought that the guy who killed Reuben also had anything to do with Martha's death two months earlier.

Both of them now went silent. The cooling system of the building kept working, omitting a deep murmuring sound. Armamente in an eerie mood got up and soon started walking around in the small deserted room, embarrassing Inga, who did not have any reasonable ideas to reflect on.

Armamente soon cried out:

"HEY! I know!"

She rushed to the room door, locked from the outside, and began pounding with her bare fists.

"Tell this to Mr. Sommers! Please! Tell Mr. Sommers!"

A young, slender police officer white a mustache opened the door and stared at Armamente.

"Tell Mr. Sommers to jump in a car, take some men, and go to the harbor. You will see a military ship. Go on board and ask for Mr. Burbank! There you´ll have your killer!!"

The young policeman, a guy from Barbados by the name of Powell, took out his phone and got Bill Sommers on the line in a minute. Sommers and Armamente then took a heated discussion, during which Armamente recapitulated the story of Patrol Ship 113. When the transgender person hung up and finished the call, Inga almost cried salty tears from excitement.

"You mean, you know what happened?"

The two friends then in a trance danced around in the interrogation room and soon were served coffee and biscuits by a consternated Constable Powell. Now the wait was on for them while Sommers and the SWAT-team in the darkest night embarked on the vessel, which was about to leave Baltimore's Inner Harbor, where it had stayed for a couple of days in the October sun before it should set out on a journey to the Taiwan waters.

"Call Eric! And call the boys! Call Ethan and David!" Inga cried out. Then she fumbled in her pocket and took out a phone herself. The police hadn´t robbed her of her belongings.

Armamente´s face was uncommonly pale and almost as pale as a sea shell in Sahara or something.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

The minute he spotted the SWAT-team's arms, Burbank hollered at them from the ship and told them that he gave up. Sommers simply put handcuffs on him. He was brought to the Central Police Station, BPD, to be interrogated without any commotion.
The outdated military clothes he wore did match the photographs from Tiko´s camera. He was the man. Sommers subjected Burbank to a short interrogation. He was mildly cooperative, not admitting to any more crimes than were perfectly obvious. The Matisse painting was found in the cargo of Patrol Ship 113. Perhaps the Matisse picture was the final evidence, Ludwig concluded.
When Sommers and Ludwig realized that Burbank was unwilling to talk about Martha, they incarcerated him in a cell with high security at the Department. It was late, or relatively early in the morning, since Thursday at 05.00 am, and Sommers decided that not much more was necessary to be done until noon. A talk between Sommers and Armamente thus was scheduled to take place at 01.00 pm.
Armamente and Inga returned to Oyster Pancake Street.
Inga called Ethan up and told him about the recent development in the Reuben case. Ethan was deeply moved by what has occurred, and he and David were at Ethan´s place, drinking green tea.
Eric shook his head and lit another cigar:

“The moment I saw you, Armamente, I knew you were something special. But, honestly, I could not imagine that you would catch a killer!”

“Poor Reuben!” Armamente said. ”He was a decent man.”

“I think so too,” Inga added. Inga stopped. ”But who will take care of the dog, the little dog?”

“The dog with epilepsy?” Armamente said. “But Inga, do you want to take care of a dog with …” She silenced, realizing that she just was awful and heartless. “Of course the dog, the poor dog,” she therefore added.

They sat down in the study at Oyster Pancake Street. It was 10.00 am. Neither Inga nor Armamente had any wish to go to sleep. Eric´s cigar left large clouds of black smoke in the hall on Eric´s way to the cozy study, where the limited space of the room made it a true offense to bring a lit cigar. Hence, the doctor then put the cigar out, using the frame of a 19th-century painting of a long-boat in a storm as an ashtray.

"What do you think, Armamente," the doctor said, his forehead constrained in an almost new enthusiasm. "Do you think that Burbank killed Martha?"

"I do," the private eye retorted," but I certainly cannot prove it."

"Let me hear your thoughts then! The circumstantials."

"Nae," Armamente wavered and lifted her cup of coffee. "I sure would talk to the Porters first. I have a feeling that they are not exactly telling the whole story."

"You are a genius," Inga said, flexing her ankles. She did not feel as a genius herself.

Armamente smiled. Inga lent forward and kissed her gently on her chin. Armamente blushed, and Eric laughed.

No matter what the outcome may be, Eric thought, I have a couple of lovely friends. "I have a feeling they will stay with me indefinitely," he fancied.

Not many men can manage to hold themselves together after having showed themselves so vulnerable as Eric had done in front of Armamente and Inga. But Eric was down to earth, free from pretension, and a prestige free person. He both did not judge others and, in both moderate and covert way, cared for them.

"Suppose Burbank was looking for the microfilm from the head camera of Reuben´s." Armamente said, "Maybe Burbank initially tried to get Martha to get it. Burbank knew that Longman hated him and that he would never get this evidence from him. But the killer from the Persian Gulf certainly might succeed in pressing upon Martha. What could Martha do if Burbank told her that he would kill her if he did not get the microfilm roll? Nothing."

"You are right," Inga said, perplexed at the fact that she did not have the brain to make such a simple deduction.

"In fact, Martha was the perfect person to put pressure on in this affair. On the one hand, she was a competent woman. Martha Longman could make any MAN do almost anything for her. She just had to wave her platinum blond hair. On the other hand, she was vulnerable in her loneliness. Burbank had put some pressure on her. What kind of pressure we do not know."

"But why do you want to talk to the Porters again?" Eric asked.

“I just have a feeling that Martha had been contacted long ago by Burbank and that she knew she could not escape from him. She did not think she was smart enough to get him herself. After all, he is a pro! But she sensed that if Burbank got her and killed her, which she thought he would do, sooner or later, she would at least plant enough evidence by some folks to put Burbank behind bars for it.”

“But this is pure speculation,” Eric said, rubbing his neck.

“Tell me,” he continued, ”what made you think of Burbank as a possible killer?”

“I just remembered the terrible story about the Patrol Ships and how Burbank then had sacrificed humans over a piece of art. Now he put everything at risk, at least himself, by robbing Longman of a Matisse. Very few people would have climbed over a corpse twice to get a Matisse, while the police were not far away. And besides, when Reuben got shot, he rang me! Why me and not any other of the youngsters, like Ethan or David? Well, because I was the only one who said, on the Social Club meeting, I thought the Persian story was true.”

“You are a born detective,” Eric said. ”But I am curious about whether there is any evidence that he killed Martha. After all, yesterday we almost all agreed that she … just fell about and died in the park. From natural causes. How could we prove that it was not so? How do we know that it was not massage that killed her or a horrible bird?”

“Perhaps, as I just said, the Porters have the answer.”

“Suppose they have,” Eric said,” then our mission is over. Then we have no more business in Baltimore. Oh, girls, I am so afraid that will happen.”

All the last hours' tension was almost too much for Eric, who still took pain-killers for his sore back. We all know what pain killers can do to a perfectly sane human being. Much worse than for the doctor, who was since long overworked. The greatest danger in the world is sentimentality.

“Calm!” Inga cried out, ”we might keep this apartment and spend our holidays here. Won´t we, Armamente?”

“Sure, sure,” Armamente nodded, ”but it isn´t over yet.”

Eric had set out sobbing, and he claimed he had got his pain back. Inga and Armamente had to walk him to his bed, where they gave him sedatives, at his ordination (!) and sat by his bed until he fell asleep.

“I have to make a call to Bill Porter!” Armamente whispered when the two of them silently left old doctor Eric´s bedroom, where sun rays lit the old man’s white hair, him laying sleeping on white bed-clothing.

"You will visit the Porters. I will go get the dog," Inga said and put out her boots that seemed extraordinarily steady and practical.

"Without the microfilm, which made Burbank kill Reuben, we might not get justice for those men who died in the Persian Gulf." Armamente said.

"Strange thing, that Reuben kept the film and did not go to the police with it." Inga frowned.

"It is strange. But we will probably never know the reason for THAT, now that Reuben is dead."

"But Reuben would never give the microfilm to Martha!! He was a man of morals! I don´t see how we will find that film? If it is in the house, the police will, of course, find it. But it is not likely that Reuben kept the film stuffed in his house." Inga speculated, and it was like she had got new energy out of nowhere.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

Ethan on this Thursday had tried all morning to reach David, but there was nobody answering. Ethan was troubled by this. It was not like David at all.

Ethan wanted to talk to David about the recent news. But since other folks connected to the Social Club, that now was part of history, also needed to be oriented about Reuben's murder, he called up Thomas. Thomas had attended several meetings at the social club, and he was a reasonable person too. But as soon as Ethan set out to call him up, David called.

"Hi, it is David. I am sorry. I am with Odile."

"With Odile?"

"Yes, at Odile´s place."

There came a smile of surprise ( more than of joy ) upon Ethan´s face.

"You don´t say!"

"Yes. We are having a … good time."

"Something terrible has happened."

"What?"

"Reuben is dead. He has been shot."

"WHAT?"

Then there was a silence.

Ethan almost heard how David got up from a bed somewhere and put on his pants. Ethan told the recent events, and he noticed that David was taken aback by the news. It seemed as if David – despite his delusional, anarchist and criminal mind - had grown fond of the old captain during these evenings.

"I will come by later," David said.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

Miss Inga Nord had borrowed a bicycle from a neighbor up on Oyster Pancake Street and drove up on it in front of Reuben´s house just before noon to see what happened to the dog. She had a large red raincoat because it looked as if it would come to a small rainstorm later on the day. Outside on Thames Street, there were now still white and blue ribbons and one officer standing guard.

Inga tried to act decisively and after having repeated the words "I know the dog," a couple of times, also acting deliberately a bit hysterical, she managed to get to talk to the officer in charge, the young officer from Barbados, Powell.

"Hello again!" he shouted at Inga and looked admiringly at her muscular legs and strong back.

"Hi, officer," Inga flustered, "oh, oh, pooh, I am not used to bicycles any more. I was … pooh … wondering about the dog. Where is the dog, Reuben´s dog??"

"It is inside. I brought him some cookies this morning. But he won´t eat. He is all depressed. I never saw such a sad dog."

"Where is he? Might I see í him? It really wasn´t his dog. It was ol´ Mrs. Campbell´s."

Powell had no way of giving allowance to Inga entering Reuben´s house, but he called Bill Sommers up and asked if Inga could take the mourning dog. There was a pause in the call.

"Sommers wonders if the dog knows you," Powell asked Inga in turning to her.

“Not exactly, but I love the dog.”

“She loves the dog,” Powell repeated to Sommers.

“He says that you may take it. But if there is any trouble with the dog, you'll have to bring it to the police station. We have the responsibility for the dog. It is part of the investigation.”

Then Powell ordered another officer, Sergeant Miller, to take his watch, and then he went inside the house to fetch the brown and white canine.

The dog, which Inga did not know the name of, was soon dragged out of the house by force by Officer Powell.

“As you see, he does not want to leave. No way he´ll voluntarily go with you.”

The pied dog now sat outside Reuben´s front door, forlorn. Both ears hang a little, and his eyes were full of sorrow.

“It is heartbreaking,” Inga said and fell on her knees, hugging the poor thing.

“Oh, where is he, where is he…” she cried, in referring to the dead Mr. Longman, and soon both the dog and she was crying loudly. Other officers came by, and soon a small congregation of people was standing sobbing around the strange couple. Nothing moves the human heart like vrying animals.

After a while, Inga rose and talked to the dog:

“Ruff! Come, Ruff, let´s go!”

All the while Inga was patting her knees, bending towards the dog.

To everybody´s delight, the dog closed up by her side, and off they went, Inga, leading her borrowed bicycle by hand.

It took Inga and Ruff, who immediately accepted this name, half an hour to reach Oyster Pancake Street, where Eric sat in the garden, pretending to read a book.

There never was any rain that day.

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

While Inga was taking care of the poor dog, Armamente, whose energy seemed absolutely boundless, had set out for a Porter Castle visit. She went by city bus and arrived at the gravel road outside the house, dogs barking from the small cottages and the sheep bleating. She, too, had a raincoat, and a hat, that she had borrowed from Eric. It was a hunter´s hat, with a feather in it, and it suited her extraordinarily.
She did not spot any human being yet in the rural landscape, and she wondered if they weren´t at home at all. But she had no hurry. She could spend the whole day waiting for them, playing with the sheep and exercising her legs. After all, Martha and Reuben were both dead now. There was a need for neither hurry nor alarm. She thus lowered her shoulders and slowed down. She also took a deep breath. Then her phone rang.
Of all people in the world, it was Odile.
Armamente and Odile Little had exchanged telephone numbers at Reuben´s. So she saw the name on the display, ´Odile.´

"Yes, it is Armamente Dulcinea." Armamente said.

"Hi, I am sure you don´t remember me, Odile…"

"Oh, yes, as a matter of fact I do. How are you?"

"Oh, how are you?"

"Ah, I am way out on the countryside. I am looking at fields with cows and sheep and rabbits on them."
Armamente could easily imagine Odile´s face. An intelligent face it was.

"Sorry to disturb you! There is something I´d like you to know. I heard about Reuben´s death. And since you seem to be some kind of investigator, I thought I´d call you. I don´t want to go to the police. I am confused. And now I am … betraying someone too.."

"Oh, what a mess! But please tell me what´s on your…"

"You remember David?"

"Oh yes, beautiful boy," Armamente said.

"I only have known him for some weeks. And yesterday he suddenly said, and he was rather in despair about it, that he had slept with Martha. Martha Longman."

“What! David?” Armamente, who had been watching one of the sheep running across the field, now looked straight at the telephone in her hand.

“Yes. David. I am betraying him now.”

“When was that? When did they…”

“In June, or May. He could not remember. But she had lured him home, and he said that he was not very experienced, because he had … . And she was so much older. He cried. He did not like it. It was humiliating he said.”

“I see. But…”

“Now I think … and I am betraying him …. that he had been mad at her and that he might have hunted her down. He is an anarchist, he is on pills, has a gun, you know. A Glock. He showed it to me. He wears it in his inner pocket.”

“But do you really think that he did that?” Armamente spoke long words.

“No. But I thought I had to tell you. But I had to talk to someone about it. Otherwise, I get wacko by it…..”

Armamente was silent.

“I´ll be damned!” she said.

“I am so sorry,” Odile said in a low voice, almost unrecognizable. “I just think David is sick and I don´t know what to do about it. He is mentally ill. It is hard to be with somebody who has such nightmares….”

“Pooh,” Armamente said, ”well, I am happy that you called. Maybe I can contact you later. I cannot help you. I wish I could. Really, I am out in fields, baby.”

“It is okay. Good to talk to you anyways.”

They both hang up.

Armamente shook her head in half disbelief at the fuzz that Martha Longman had managed to create.

“She is unbelievable. That Martha! A real c**t!”

Suddenly she heard Bill´s voice from the barn, the old building where Armamente first had spotted Lin, at her first visit.

“So, it is you again?”

“Yes,” Armamente smiled. ”I thought I´d take your invitation literally and show up another time…”

“I guess you want a kitten or something? Are you planning to move to Baltimore?” Bill smiled, and he at least seemed much friendlier than last time when he almost was ironic and enigmatic all the time.

“You won't believe me,” Armamente said, ”but I was raised in a hotel. But, seriously, you haven´t heard yet then what has happened to Captain Longman?”

“Oh, yes, I heard. Terrible! No ordinary shooting, I reckon? This time the killer was some Navy Seal or something?”

“Oh, yes, but I came to tell you that maybe he actually killed Martha too.”

Bill, who was busy, buttoning up his coat, stopped and a growl escaped his throat.

“Nae, you don´t say! And we almost hanged old Lin for it?”

“Yes. It is comical,” Armamente said, scratching her leg, where some insect had taken a bite.

“Might I just come in for a chat?”

“You are always welcome, but … chat about what? We don´t know anything about anything

Armamente thought he was a real redneck but entered the Porter mansion, followed by Bill. Bill put his shoes outside, while Armamente kept hers on.

Ann Porter was busy with cooking cattle bones for the dogs. She greeted Armamente with a wave of her elbow. Bill bade the guest sit on the old living room sofa.

Armamente explained what had come out regarding Reuben´s killer. It was probable that the killer was looking for some microfilm. It was also possible that Martha knew something about this film. Perhaps Martha, who was living with Ann and Bill, kept things in the Porter house without the Porters knowing anything of it. Armamente asked Bill to be able to have a look in the room where Martha had stayed.

Bill agreed, but he did not think that Armamente would find anything.

The room, however, showed itself without interest to Armamente, who soon abandoned her search with the Porters.

On the bus back home, she wondered about her future, but almost immediately fell asleep.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

A light breeze hovered over Oyster Pancake Street, reciting tales of the Atlantic. All kinds of larger seabirds had crowded on the roofs and empty yards of Baltimore. This October evening seemed to be the very last song of summer.

Eric, Armamente, and Inga had their supper in the small garden behind their rowhouse. Inga served mackerel and potatoes. Eric was reading an SMS from Delmonte, who wondered about their expedition.

Armamente had discovered a red plastic ball in the grass by the hedge, and now she was playing with Ruff, Reuben´s dog, which had been melancholic as well as restless all day, which was understandable. But it hadn´t been Reuben´s dog after all. It was the dog of Mrs. Campbell.

"This poor thing," Armamente said as she threw the ball in a high loop towards a dustbin, from where it bumped back to her, without the dog being able to catch it this time.

"First you get Epilepsy, then your mama dies, and then papa dies, and now you are with perfect strangers again! Bobobobobobobooooooh!"

She reached for the dog and stuck her fingers in the dog's fur on its head.

"Bobobobobobobooooooh!"

"Crazy collar," she then said, letting go of the dog's head," I didn´t know that there were pills against Epilepsy. Look here: on the collar, it says: ´I am epileptic. Pills inside.´

She grabbed for the collar. The dog suddenly got an angry look and tried to get loose, shaking its head. But Armamente was determined to have a look inside the folded collar at the miraculous medical pills. She finally managed to open the collar, and a small tin pipe fell out.

"What is this?" she cried out.

"You must eat!" Inga said, "Your mackerel will get cool! It is fine fish."

The hands of Armamente worked with the small tin tube, and she eventually got inside that one too.

"LOOK! MICROFILM!"

She held up a small film roll in her left hand.

Eric, who was just about to swallow a good bite mackerel, let the fork drop.

"No, don´t say that!"

Inga rushed up to Armamente.

"Holy shit!"

Armamente decided to call Sommers up to tell him that they possibly had the after-sought item. But she wasn´t sure, of course. But could they perhaps meet at BPD to try to watch the content on some apparatus?

Half an hour later, Sommers, Ludwig, Eric, Armamente, and Inga sat with a technician scrolling through the film. There were lots of photographs on the film, and the content was all from the fatal expedition in which Reuben should have participated with Patrol Ship 113. Many photos were highly dramatic, showing canon fire and ships going down. The last three pictures showed some officers in a ship´s gunroom, drinking, laughing, and singing. They had the Renoir painting between them.

Burbank's face, which now was known to them, was visible, but one of the other persons cheering with Burbank attracted Armamente´s interest.

"Who is that?"

The face seemed familiar but was not at the same time.

The officers had names on their dresses. On Burbank's coat, there was a marking, saying 'Capt. Burbank' but on the half-familiar man, the sign said 'Easton.' The third man´s marking-sign was not visible because he had an extra coat on.

"Who is that Easton fellow?" Armamente cried out.

"Could it be Longman?" Sommers said.

"It´s not Longman," Inga said.

"It IS Longman. Of course, it is Reuben. How stupid of me," Armamente said," that I hadn´t thought of that! He had had surgery. He looked like a clown. He had had surgery not in order to get better vision but to change his identity. He was in on it! He was as good as Burbank, and his story about the terrible Burbank must not necessarily be ENTIRELY true."

Sommers and Ludwig looked at each other.

"This has become an even more interesting case," they agreed.

"But why did Longman-Easton keep this microfilm if it was a true disadvantage to him?" Eric said.

"Maybe Longman was in his heart a real gambler?" Armamente suggested.

They all concluded that they now had come a bit closer to the truth about the murder of Longman-Easton. Armamente´s theories had been largely corroborated, including part of Longman´s tale about the Renoir painting.

"We may never get the whole truth," Sommers said.

This Armamente and the others found to be true.

"That is, if it does not happen, that Burbank will speak," Inga said.

“If someone killed Martha Longman, we will maybe never know,” said Armamente, lowering her head. She felt tired.

“It somehow does not matter anymore,” Eric said, and he suddenly felt totally exhausted. Maybe somehow they all thought they knew Martha well now and that what they knew was sufficient.

Years later, just hours before he died, Captain Burbank actually confessed that he had met with Martha in the park and “accidentally” scared her to death.

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ethan´s aunty, Yaya was lying upon her sofa.
Yaya lived further down on Pratt Street in a slightly larger flat than Ethan. He visited her when he needed another higher perspective on the world or when she called for him. She was a small energetic, black woman with dyed red hair, generous mouth and large brown Tortoiseshell glasses. These glasses were enormous, yes, too much, and Ethan had told her so many times.

"Look, Yaya, this town makes me sick sometimes."

"Why?"

"I don´t know. It seems that history is not shaped here. That it never was. And why should it? I don´t know where myths and meaning come from, but it isn´t from here…."

"I don´t understand a word of what you are saying. Are you sick, or have you lost money on the casino?"

"No, I don´t gamble," Ethan said pensively.

"I am only honest with you." He added.
Ethan looked at his phone. He needed a new one.

"Perhaps I just feel a little lonely. David just told me he had a girlfriend. Odile."

"I see, yes, now I see" Yaya said and took out a box of small cigarillos from a drawer just close to her.

"There have been more killings, you know. People I know had been killed."

"Yes, it is awful," Yaya mumbled - cigarillo in her mouth.

"You don´t know what it´s like to be young!"
Ethan was happy to be able to talk freely to Yaya. She was like a mother to him, or much more than a mother. Yaya was better than everything. Better than himself, better than Baltimore. She was better than books.

"An old man I met was not the man I thought he was. He was a war criminal."

"Those things are the worst. When people deceive you," Yaya said, adjusting the small dotted blanket with which she tried to keep her legs warm. Yaya always wanted to keep warm.

"Tonight, I am going to the theatre on Baltimore Street together with a transgender person," Ethan changed the subject.

"Transgender person?" Yaya blinked. She had to think to figure out what kind of person that was.

"Yes, she, or he is Armamente. And he, or she, is clever. Very clever. And very charming."

Now he grinned. The greyish-black face shone, his teeth glittered and the Rastafari hair seemed larger and loftier than ever.

FINIS

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