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**THE HYPNOTIST**

(excerpts)

#### **PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

*These handwritten notes were found in room 273 of La Residenza Hotel in Venice by police called to investigate the disappearance of an American tourist, Eliot Ems, a professor at Yale University. After a thorough search for the building described in these pages, traces of illegal habitation were found in several abandoned palazzos. Police claimed that the homeless often use empty premises as shelter from inclement weather. Nonetheless, the identities of the people appearing in these notes have been confirmed, and--the most unsettling fact--each of them did disappear in unexplained circumstances.*

*Hoping that the publication of these notes will help accomplish what the police could not, or would not, do, we have reproduced the text in its entirety, including speculations of a scientific nature. We have followed the original form of the professor's writings, parts of which are reversed to read from right to left. Those readers who do not wish to become embroiled in scientific speculations or mathematical symbols may easily omit them, while those who wish to study it all must arm themselves with a mirror.*

1.

I know that some indescribable punishment awaits me for breaking the seal of silence, but I have to put my life in order and finally write down what my memory dictates. When I came here on Monday, I got off a water bus on San Zaccaria and set off along the bank of the Riva degli Schiavoni. Dawn was graying over Venice, and in the depths of the lagoon, the San Giorgio Maggiore church sailed out of the fog. I sat with my eyes shut along the whole of the Grand Canal, and someone may have thought I was sleeping off a night spent on a plane. On the contrary, I was unusually awake and fishing for every sound with my ears: the low, rattling engine vibrations of the waste disposal barge, the high-pitched whine of the water taxi picking up the last of the gamblers from the casino, and the lapping of the oars deftly moving and steering the asymmetrical gondola. I absorbed those sounds, recognising them as I had when I lived here behind sealed windows that admitted only strands of light. I felt pain and relief that now I was master of my own eyes and could readily open them to check on the source of the sounds. Before, I could only guess.

I turned onto the narrow Calle del Dose and out onto the Campo Bandiera e Moro. The Hotel La Residenza, the old Badoer

palazzo, had small rooms except for a huge hall on the first floor--what Venetians call the *piano nobile*--dripping with tapestries and gothic furniture. The sleepy receptionist found the reservation on an equally sleepy computer screen that flickered off whenever the list of guests appeared.

I took a room to the left of the hall and locked the door. As I unpacked, I noticed that I was unconsciously (or deliberately) arranging the room like that other one. I even slammed closed the shutters, so in the dimness I could hear and register sounds I knew only too well. Chairs being flung and heavy barefooted steps--that's Hette; the nervous coughs are Gerard's. All that was missing was the sobbing that penetrated the thick walls every day at dawn....

I don't know when I fell asleep. The phone woke me. It was already after one when someone, in broken English, tried to talk me into moving to a different room--a nicer and more expensive one, for the same price. I refused. The receptionist insisted, claiming they had made a mistake, and tried to bribe me with a free trip to the cathedral on Torcello, but I turned it down. I'd never survive settling into another room--getting myself into this one had been achievement enough.

I took lunch in a trattoria by the hotel and reluctantly set off around the town. Every step hurt. I gripped the railings on the bridges--a man suddenly taken ill, grown old and hunched. I didn't dare sit on benches or church steps; from some dark corner, through the crack between shutters, his eyes could be watching me.

For several days I wandered the streets of Venice, putting off the moment when I would confront the past, but my tired legs led me ever closer to the bridge by the Academy. Twice I was just about to step onto it but changed my mind at the last moment and took the much longer route round Campo San Angelo and the Rialto to cross over--avoiding the Ponte Accademia is a major complication for anyone walking through Venice.

Finally I gave up and stood on the bridge. The old palazzo looked just as I'd remembered it--dark green shutters closed with catches, the white facade of Istrian marble exuding a cold calm. The laced tracery of the loggia crowned with quatrefoils was architectural poetry, but in the interior lurked something that blew an icy draft through me. Yes, I remembered the layout of each storey and room, the stairs in the depths of the building and the little garden protected by a high wall. The smell of the damp walls and moldering gate above the Grand Canal filled my nostrils. Eaten from below by algae, it admitted the daily tides--a cycle of lapping,

spitting and slurping that evoked images of an old woman gargling and swallowing gallons of greenish water.

After a few minutes of watching the palazzo, I felt my knees give way. I summoned the last of my strength to turn and run through the side streets, bouncing off walls and people, able to calm down only when I slammed my hotel room door and hid myself in a corner. On the floor, in the dark, I finally managed to steady my breathing, to smile. Despite my cowardly running, my marathon of fear through the passageways, squares and bridges of Venice, I felt like a hero. I'd finally made it onto the bridge and looked straight at the house....

And I was also smiling because I'd envisioned the famous private detective (who never actually showed up) step onto the bridge and look at the house himself. He was amazed for sure that none of us managed to escape; his gaze didn't judge the facade as the music of architecture but as a training wall for mountaineers, who would scamper down the cornices, archivolt and pilasters. Or maybe he suspected some subtle alarm system—the windows wired; or vicious dogs and armed guards. Or maybe he calculated the possibility of swimming out under the moldy teeth of the gate. Whatever he thought, this super-sleuth who never showed up, he didn't begin to contemplate a force that needed no physical security measures. And maybe, if he stood there long enough, suspecting nothing, simply observing one of

the many palazzos in Venice, he suddenly encountered eyes that looked right through his brain, into the back of his head where the fear lies hidden. In which case he ended up as we did, waiting powerlessly until someone he knew remembered his existence and came to free him.

## 2.

The warm April evening framed the rooftops of Copenhagen in thickening dusk. Ulla Sjøstrom left the Glyptotek and quickened her pace as she crossed Dantes Plads. She was unsure whether she had set the VCR to record the BBC programme about Holbein's "Ambassadors," so she headed for the taxi rank. She was just about to get in when she changed her mind. What did she want with Holbein, the BBC, the VCR and the extra expense of a taxi, when she had the refreshing twilight? The cries of the seagulls filled the square with nostalgia and the smell of the sea. She decided to walk, enjoy the evening.

Her eyes and back hurt after poring over the restoration of tapestries from Rouger, yet she loved her work--patiently joining her hands with the fingertips and thumbs of those other hands that had patiently woven the tapestries three hundred years before. They had belonged to a man. She knew his name. Johann. Johann of Rouger. And he came to her in her

sleep. He sat on the bed, slowly lifted the quilt and touched her stomach. With a skilled delicate hand. That morning, on waking up, on the bus and still later at work, she had felt his touch, and as she repaired the broken threads of the tapestry, she was bridging the gap of Johann's three-hundred-year absence. She knew that this was the way she could really love. Love someone who did not exist and could not marry her-- who could not betray, humiliate and abuse her for six years.

Ulla inhaled the clean sea air and smiled. Someone walked past her and looked her in the eye, deeply and obstinately. Her smile vanished. The stranger had driven a knife into her soul, probing for something she had buried deep beneath her memory. She had passed the second bus stop and decided she would get on at the third, at the University. She knew Copenhagen by heart; she walked instinctively. She felt she was being followed but did not turn round. She just strode faster and turned into Frederikberggade, practically running inside her favorite delicatessen.

The flood of lights, the smells of the meats and cheeses, and the friendly faces of the staff in their white cooks' outfits calmed her down. She waved, returned their greetings rather helplessly, not knowing why she had come in or what she wanted to buy. She could only feel her silver earrings becoming heavier and heavier, slowly starting to tear her earlobes

apart. The pain got worse. She dropped her bag and clutched her ears. She wanted to scream but composed herself with her last drop of consciousness.

Fingers shaking, she attempted to pull out her earrings, which strangely resisted. She was about to burst into tears when she heard a polite inquiry whether she was all right. Her mouth said fine, but inside, in the depths of her throat and in her stomach, she felt something unusual. Some enormous force was filling her from within and taking away her control over her own body.

She took a few faltering steps, sweated and swayed. The strong hairy arm of the Greek shop assistant saved her from collapsing. A new smile on her lips, unshed tears hiding above her cheekbones, a strange silence permeating the delicatessen, one deep breath, then another, then a third, and the faintness receded. Mumbling something about being tired, Ulla did her shopping: Swedish bread with sesame seeds, Gruyère, arugula, half a dozen oranges. She wanted to get something else, something she fancied, but was once more aware that she couldn't concentrate, couldn't speak to reassure the salesgirl giving her a quizzical look. Ordinary consciousness seemed to be lost as an unknown force told her to turn around, look out the window, and notice the man she saw pass her on the street.

She spotted him as he was turning his back, disappearing into the twilight. Ulla reached into her handbag and paid automatically but didn't notice the bag the salesgirl offered. Her legs were taking her to the door, out into the dusk of the street, toward the corner where the man had vanished. The Greek chased after her, baring his teeth behind the straight line of his moustache, asking pointless questions and thrusting the bag at her. Ulla pushed him away and ran into the darkness and the crowd.

A group of young Rastas were drinking coffee from paper cups outside a bar on the corner. Ulla plunged into them, bursting blindly through the cups and dreadlocks, deaf to the cries of the tall youth who spilled hot coffee over her--accidentally on purpose--and numb to the pain in her scalded hand. She ran on, following a man she couldn't see but smelled as precisely as a she-wolf with her nose to the ground. She caught his trace on the fresh air and knew she must track him down; nothing could hold her back.

Her cashmere Loro Piana scarf came unwound from around her neck and slipped from her shoulder, but she didn't try to catch it. She let it fall to the sidewalk, her favorite scarf. Its warm hair and plant pattern had given her pleasure since she stopped dreaming of a lover who would give it to her as a present, instead buying it for herself on her thirty-seventh

birthday. A woman's voice called to her, a hand picked up the scarf and held it out to her, but she didn't react, didn't even slow down, she scarcely glanced at the bird-like face of the woman--just another obstacle to her finding the source of the animating power.

Long minutes passed, and she realized she was no longer in the center of Copenhagen, she had run past the Sortedams Sø canal and now was slowing down, walking along Strandboulevarden and getting closer to home. She recognized landmarks familiar from the bus window and was aware of the stupefyingly simple fact that she never before came this way on foot. Neither to nor from her home. She always came by car, until she totalled it in an accident, then by bus, more rarely by taxi. She passed the new houses, looking into the well-lit homes and spying on young women pottering about in kitchens, their menfolk surfing through satellite channels. She even thought she glimpsed "Ambassadors," and this reassured her. Yes, she definitely had set the VCR. She no longer ran headlong, no longer feared losing the scent. She merely slowed down in the increasing certainty that her confrontation with the unknown was ensured. Her dread mixed with growing curiosity, even excitement. As she looked through the windows of the houses she passed, she had the sensation of gazing through a train window as it finally approached its destination.

Her steps crunched on the gravel of an alleyway. She spotted him near the entrance. The stranger looked not at her but at the treetops or perhaps at the moon rising above Østerbro. Ulla tapped the code into the entry system, stepped inside and held the door open. He didn't hurry, making her wait a while before following her in. She took the elevator; he climbed the stairs. He was there first. He stood by the door without looking at her. Ulla felt that somewhere along the way she had lost her body, gradually and painlessly, and now the door was opening by itself. She dared not look him in the eye. She knew what he was going to do; she leaned in the doorway breathing slowly, deeply.

He shut and chained the door behind them. Calmly and methodically. He glimmered for a moment in the hall mirror, and it was only now, via his reflection, that she could really make him out. Slim, in a hat and long coat, reminiscent of a character from some black and white movie. His face was absorbed in thought, sickly pale, a stranger to the sun. Unfathomable eyes with translucent pupils reinforced the colorless impression. The subtlety of his features seemed the antithesis of the power radiating from him.

The stranger sat on a chair in the dining room and crossed his legs. He was waiting. Ulla threw off her coat and quietly moaned with pleasure. She had never done this before--men

terrified her, they tormented and embarrassed her. And now she was rubbing herself against the doorframe, worthy of the porno film she had once found among her dead father's belongings and very occasionally watched when unable to sleep.

Her skirt and sweater removed themselves. The heel of her shoe broke, because she had wanted to break it and hear the quiet cracking as she moved forward. She touched her breasts, belly and hips, then in one movement tore off her half-slip. Her broken heel squeaking, she took a few steps, fell to her knees and crawled over to the stranger.

He took her from behind, on the floor. She screamed and covered her mouth with her head jammed between the chair and the sofa, not knowing how long she would be lifted into the breath-denying oblivion. She was swimming in boiling, algae-infested water; crawling through damp fire until she finally found her way back to her flat, onto the carpet, under the chair where he was stroking her hair, kissing her neck. Then he stood, slipped back the chain on the door and left.

Cowering, her hair matted with sweat and saliva and her eyes half-shut, Ulla did not move. She could not. She crouched like that until the morning, alternately crying and smiling, and it was only when she heard the neighbor's footsteps on the stairs that she realized her door was open. She got up and slammed it

shut. She didn't go into work that day; she didn't eat or wash. The telephone rang, but she didn't answer it. The following day was the same. On the third day she finally awoke from her torpor, had a bath and a meal, then hurriedly packed some essential items.

Nobody could explain to the police why the door to her flat was open, what a shoe with a broken heel was doing in the blood-stained sink, or why she had been screaming so loudly one night. The trail went cold. She had been self-possessed and calm, always punctual at work. A notebook with the name Johann of Rouger written seven times was of no help to the police; the Glyptotek staff pointed out to the young lieutenant that Ulla Sjøstrom couldn't have had any connection with Johan of Rouger, since the man of that name was a weaver dead for over three hundred years.

#### 4.

Hette awoke on the floor, or rather on the stairs. His head ached horribly, and he and couldn't remember how he had got here--wherever here was. He spent some time trying to gather his thoughts, without success. Finally he heaved his body over, lay on his stomach and, gasping, coughing and groaning,

hauled himself up to the first floor. When he switched on the light, he was horrified to see a splatter of blood on the wall. The pillow he had been sleeping on was soaked in something greasy and congealing. He touched his head and felt matted hair beneath his fingers. He began to flatten it out and groom it, as if that was what mattered most right now. He walked downstairs, holding onto the banister. On the stone floor below, a puddle glistened. More blood. He sniffed it, touched it to make sure, then ran into the kitchen for a cloth. He rubbed away at the blood but merely spread it further. He swore, tossed the cloth into the middle of the mess and ran to the bathroom, locking himself in.

He didn't dare look in the mirror. He threw off his bathrobe and stepped under the shower. The water that flowed from his twisted hair was pink. He thought it was the last of the old blood washing out, but he was wrong--its color intensified. Now he could make out the bump on the back of his head. It didn't hurt. The probable sequence of events slowly dawned on him. Probable, since the alcohol he had bought a week before in the Tirana bar had knocked him out in the first round. He had left a bottle downstairs in the kitchen, and during the night had gone to finish it off and slipped. The sharp edge of the stairs had done its worst and now his whole bachelor pad looked like an abattoir.

Pouring icy water over himself, he began to wail and slap himself about the face, scratch and batter his head against the tiles. He had had enough. Of himself and his lonely, loser's life, of his corpulence and stuffing his face alone in front of the TV, of boozing and smoking three packs a day; of the women he loved so much that they immediately left him; of the prostitutes who disgusted him, which he found exciting; of bad investments; of false friends and even of the fact that in nights of surfing TV channels he found nothing that interested him except pornography. He wanted to die with his inflatable dolls, piles of dirty magazines and irrelevant knowledge of chemistry and biology, thanks to which he had lost the game called life when the cards were dealt out after graduation.

He sank down against the wall and lay tangled in himself, the shower battering him with its merciless streams. He would most likely have bled away with his massive hangover, were it not for a Protestant sense of duty that his sybarite appearance belied. Duty propelled him from his home to the paramedics, who gave him twenty-seven stitches and three rolls of bandages. Walking along Prinsengracht, he was Appolinaire returning from the war--until he saw himself in a shop-front window. He burst out laughing at the graying beard and bushy eyebrows that appeared to have been stuck onto a huge rag-doll's head.

"Now my looks would turn any girl's head," he said under his breath, then took out his cell phone and called the chemical plant to take time off from work. The secretary feigned surprise on hearing that he'd had an accident and been in the hospital, since everybody knew perfectly well what kind of life he led and exactly why he was absent. He would long ago have been fired from any laboratory, were he not a true genius of biochemistry, constantly receiving offers from around the world. But Hette stayed put in Amsterdam, saying he had been born there and would die there.

He returned home and fell asleep. That evening, after cleaning up the last of the blood, he jogged to choir practice. His constant alcohol intake produced an extraordinary *basso profundo*, and singing was his third source of entertainment, after chemistry and biology. Unlike alcohol and women, which he took deadly seriously. On his way to the rehearsal, he decided to end his alcoholic experiments in the Tirana bar, so he went into a shop he knew and stocked up on the largest bottle of Smirnoff available over the counter. Just in case.

The sight of him took their breath away. The Canticum Novum choir members were accustomed to his various excesses, but this was the first time he had appeared before them as a bandaged melon with a stuck-on beard. He told them the truth that he had fallen down the stairs, but lied that it had been

in the lab; the truth that he had twenty-seven stitches, the lie that he had been sober; the truth that he had lost consciousness, and the lie that in broad daylight.

Sara, a sixty-year-old widow with a thin face but thick hands and feet, massaged his head. He hissed with pain and turned round. Once he had taken her home for the weekend because her fat fingers had excited him at a rehearsal--being drunk, and thus brave, he had gone up to her and unceremoniously offered her a Saturday and Sunday of fiery sex. He had actually been waiting for Sara to slap his face as she was more like a mother than a lover, but it was not to be. She took him under her arm and threw him into her car; during the ride her hands held more than the steering wheel. They did not meet again, and the only legacy of their weekend was Sara's behavior at rehearsals. She did indeed treat him like a son--wiping the sweat from his brow, fixing his hair, picking threads from his jacket. And he could not bear this. Maybe there would have been other weekends, but Sara's maternal gestures extinguished even drunken fire.

Maestro Don Cassiano entered the hall. He was an Albanian and was not born Don Cassiano, but when somebody had once attempted and failed to read out his real name, it emerged so twisted and wrong that Don Cassiano corrected him with insane obstinacy, becoming really furious. Particularly since that somebody taught Dutch in a school for refugees. The situation

was hopeless. If even a teacher in this weird country (where nobody had window curtains and bureaucrats smoked marijuana in public and lived in communes) was unable to pronounce his name, then that was it. "There's nothing we can call our own, which lives on after us, except our name," he used to say. So he packed, and was just about to leave when a fortune-teller told him that if he took on the name Don Cassiano a real career would open up before him. He agreed, unpacked, adopted his *nom de guerre* and became director of an amateur choir, now waving his baton over Hette's sick head.

The space inside the Engelse Kerk, an old presbyterian church beside the Beguine Assembly, was filled by the sounds of a Mozart Requiem. Hette forgot about his painful and ridiculous physicality and became just a voice; he felt airy, floaty. He looked up at the bright vaults and lofty windows and thought it strange that light, which he considered king of all life, did not fill up the church's space as well as sound did. Here and there shadows of pillars and beams were visible, where light did not reach, confirming his idea; but sound, their shared song, caused the air to vibrate and penetrated every corner to form a three-dimensional negative, a transparency cast from the stone mold of the church. His pure scientific mind knew exactly the reactions of the air molecules bouncing off the walls, pews, crucifix, himself, Don Cassiano and the strange person sitting at the end of the nave, on the last

pew. The motionless presence of the man who kept his hat on in church and sat there in his coat, listening to their rehearsal, became ever more a burden on his vision, crushing him like stone on glass. Once or twice he even stopped singing. The deal was quite clear: when members of the choir brought a guest along, even their own child, they asked the rest for permission. This time nobody had asked anyone.

Don Cassiano sensed his vexation and glanced over at him, eyebrows raised. Hette pointed with his eyes at the man. Don Cassiano stopped the rehearsal, looked around and asked half aloud if anybody had brought a friend to the rehearsal. His question met with silence, so he asked once again. Nobody owned up.

"Did you come to listen to us practice?" asked the conductor loudly.

His question echoed back; the man in the hat did not even twitch. Don Cassiano decided to ignore the stranger and raised his baton.

The singing was clearly not holding together. The choir looked at one another and Hette cursed and muttered under his breath, "Let's kick that bastard out."

"Yes!" added Sara, "He didn't even take off his hat in the Lord's House."

Don Cassiano tapped the pulpit with his baton and gestured for silence.

"Let's sing, please!"

It got even worse. The stranger's presence had distracted the choir completely. The conductor gave up, flushed and threw his baton to the floor. In his sudden rage, his ears turned red, his Dutch syntax failed and he swore venomously in Albanian. The choir members ere enchanted by his swearing, it seemed to have so many voiced consonants that the pronunciation alone was enough to let off steam. Not like dry-sounding Dutch swearwords, which lacked this flowing juice.

Don Cassiano made for the stranger and irritably asked if he had heard what he had said. The stranger did not react, did not even look at the conductor. This was definitely enough—Don Cassiano went right up to him and in a resounding voice demanded an answer. After another silence, he asked if the intruder were mute. The situation was becoming ever more ridiculous. Don had no idea what to do with the stranger and loudly began to demand respect.

"Respect is what matters most!" he cried. "Respect for God, your fellow man, work and concentration. Without respect, a person becomes an animal!" he screamed.

The spring of aggression in him had been wound up so tightly that he could have gone for the stranger's throat, but the man

raised his eyes to Don Cassiano and pinned him with a pair of gray, penetrating pupils.

The director stood in an odd pose, immobile for at least a minute, then meekly sank onto a pew, curled up and covered his face. The choir did not understand what could have happened. After all, the stranger had not touched the conductor or done anything, really. Maybe the classically apoplectic Don had had a fit, but this did not look to be the case. Don was quiet as a mouse, and seemed to be crying. Meanwhile, the stranger had walked out through a side door that someone forgot to lock.

Hette felt unwell as he took in the scene. His stitches, squeezed by bandages, were tearing at his scalp. He swayed and would almost certainly have fallen had it not been for Sara. He asked her to take him home, and she was happy. On the way, she constantly asked him how he felt, but her concern had no altruistic motives. At a corner, she put her hand on his knee like a boy touching a girl, but this was in a country where girls often carry their boyfriends on bicycles. There was no mention of the incident in the church.

Hette barely managed to crawl into bed. He collapsed and asked Sara to fix him a stiff drink. She refused, but his begging convinced her. She found the bloody cloth in the kitchen sink, stains on the table and floor. Hette had not cleaned them too

thoroughly. In horror, she began to follow the trail, wiping it away until she reached the bed. Hette was asleep. She was pleased to be freed from the duty of seeing to his vodka, and she undressed to lie down beside his huge, heavy body. She caressed him. Ever since their shared weekend, she had tormented herself by replaying the details before falling asleep. Now she slipped out from beneath the quilt, sat in an armchair and looked Hette over. There was nothing attractive about him--a sweaty, snoring, fat guy with the CV of a loser--and that was exactly what got to her. Got to her and excited her. She touched herself with more and more ardor, and her muffled groan awoke him. He observed her pleasure for a moment before raising the quilt and inviting her in.

He was passionate despite his headache, or perhaps because of it. Sara asked him to say something; his deep voice excited her. So Hette started to talk about what he really loved--about chemical compounds and how our nose does not smell smells when it sniffs a flower, it just reacts to the particular geometry of the flower's molecular construction. And about how flowers are sexual organs, the only ones which grow upwards, pulling, drawing the plant towards the light, whereas the organs of animals and humans grow downwards, sinking their energy into the earth.

"But a flower yearns to fly, levitate, rise into the air, and this is why it invites anything with wings into its stately Venereal temple. For insects, these are the kind of ostentatious shapes and colors that painters break their brushes over. Some orchids have shamelessly grown to resemble female bees, and males copulate with them, going in up to their knees in sticky pollen. Yes!" he cried in excitement. "Plants have wings and they fly, rising up to tease space, a head of ivy rotates like a drill, turning a full circle every sixty seven minutes, shivering and looking for a support. When it finds one, it only takes a minute for it to start twisting around it." Listening to his droning voice, Sara unconsciously illustrated the story with her hands and tongue. "Within an hour, it's twisted round the support and the feeler is pulling the rest of the plant up after it. How come? What's happening? Can plants see? Do they have eyes? How does it know about this support sticking out? It obviously feels its presence, since it avoids empty spaces and unnecessary movement, and heads straight for its goal!"

Hette collapsed on the pillow with a roar of fulfilment. Sara was crying with happiness. When she fell asleep, Hette went to the bathroom. Not satisfied with thoroughly cleaning up, Sara had sprayed the tiles with Issey Miyake cologne. He felt sick. He quickly opened the window and breathed in Amsterdam's cold, damp air. He looked at himself in the mirror. On the bandage

over his right temple there was a red stain, though it was not blood but Sara's lipstick. Hette removed the dressing, bent back the wing of the mirror and reviewed the shaven back of his head with its twenty-seven stitches. He did not understand how a stupid stair could have cut him so deeply. Actually, he liked the wound--it did not look like a flower, rather a reproductive organ on his head. Such a big one that somebody had to sew it up.

He dug his father's sailing cap out of the drawer of the hall closet and tried it on. It fit. He had never worn it before. He wondered why not, and as he shaved he came to the conclusion that it was because until now he had been unworthy of it. But now everything had changed. He had fallen down the stairs and the evil spirit had flown out of his open skull. He could not remember which of the gods' heads Pallas Athena had flown out of. Probably Zeus's--he was in charge of his own and others' generative matters.

He took a shower, scrupulously towelled himself down and wondered what next. It was the middle of the night, but he did not want to go back to bed. He felt fresh and rested. He opened the closet and pulled out a suitcase. He did not pack much--a few shirts, a sweater, thick socks and the usual hip-flask of spirit. He left without waking Sara. No, he was not running away from her, he simply did not know what to tell

her. And anyway, Sara would not have allowed him to go anywhere, she would have seen to everything for him, putting him to bed and wrapping him in a diaper (on his head), and then at night waking him again with her stifled cry.

The taxi took him to the airport. He sat on a bench for several hours waiting for the ticket desks to open. It amused him that choosing a random destination, as he had planned, he chose Venice. Probably because, he thought, he had been in a singles bar, shouting drunkenly into his cell phone that he would not be in Monte Carlo tomorrow, because he had to supervise the renovation of his palazzo in Venice. He hadn't shouted to be heard over the music (a slow, sad song had come on to help the singles feel miserable) as much as to impress a knock-out blonde, hair teased like some 80s American soap star, heavy eyelids, shoulder pads and all. His monologue was supposed to make her faint in his arms. The cell phone wasn't even on.

## 5.

I don't remember how long I stood in front of the gate. Maybe all day, maybe a night. I lost track of time. All I know is that when I finally heard the metallic clank of the key, and the gate gave way, it was dark. I entered the dark thicket of

the garden and walked along an overgrown path; branches hit my face and scratched my clothes, spikes of holly slashed the top of my right hand. I was led by a closely-cropped youth, who didn't say a word and didn't help me with my bags or even offer a hand in greeting. I didn't see him until we got to the threshold of the palazzo--he was blond with regular features, the kind of banal face you don't remember even when you're looking at it. He shut the gate of the palazzo behind me and showed me up the marble stairs that grew out of the greenish water separated from the Grand Canal by ornamental fencing. They led up to the open space of the *piano nobile*.

The palazzo appeared abandoned. Old furniture propping up the walls here and there only increased the impression of uninhabited emptiness. Looking at the faded frescoes with their unclear motifs, I wondered whether I was in a museum. I climbed the side stairs to the second floor, but heard no sounds of life other than those, which made their muffled way in from the Grand Canal. The youth led me into a spacious room with closed shutters, put the light on and left without speaking. A smell of damp irritated my nostrils. I wanted to open the window, but the shutters wouldn't budge--someone had killed them with nails.

I unpacked. I got an apple out of the side pocket of my bag, and it almost disintegrated in my hand. I'd taken it from the

plane so I'd have something for breakfast, and now I was wondering whether airlines fed passengers apples that rotted the next day, or whether.... No, impossible, I couldn't have stood at that gate for longer than two days. For the first time, I was perplexed: something was happening to my memory, something unpredictable and bad, as though somebody had been censoring it. I sat down on the bed to try to take this in, but sighed in resignation. After all, memory is hardly a regular phenomenon like a mathematical grid. If we drew it as one, some fields would be enormous and some so small they'd be practically non-existent. I leaned over and sank into the liquid pillow. I fell asleep immediately, with my clothes on. Maybe I really hadn't slept for a week.

When I awoke the next day (or after a few days?), a tray sat on the table with coffee, a jug of milk, cornflakes, jam and cold toast. I cast an eye around me as I ate. The room was enormous, its high ceiling adorned with Mauritanian-style stuccoes. Although the recently painted walls were run with greenish patches of damp, it was clean, almost ascetic. The effect was heightened by the sparse furniture: a table, a chair, a bed, a closet--simple, but crafted as meticulously as only those unaware of technical refinements could create them. The bare essentials. Apart from the dimensions, it might have been a monastery cell. The bathroom with its porcelain tiles

and brass fittings wasn't quite in keeping with this motif, though.

I shaved and paced around the room again, not quite sure what to do with myself. I was about to go back to sleep when I was overwhelmed by a feeling that I should go out. I was surprised to discover the door was open. Rows of identical doors stretched along either side of the empty corridor, their locks slightly too high up. Walking almost on tiptoe, I reached a staircase and went down to the floor below.

Yes, they were waiting for me there, on the *piano nobile*. Gnawed by centuries of bugs, wooden chairs as uncomfortable as they were beautiful, formed a circle on the marble floor. From some of them people were watching me. I saw their eyes gleaming white, and after a moment I could make out their faces in the dark. I sat down, and like the others remained silent, uncertain and intimidated. The only woman present was sitting with her back to us. She was crying soundlessly.

The fat guy on the right looked me up and down, then lost interest and shut his eyes. His hair, thick, dark and unwilling to grow where it ought to, had fled to his nose, ears and hands. The faint glow oozing through the cracks in the shutters reflected in his twisting, shimmering outgrowths. The man to my left blinked as he looked at me longer than the

others. Every now and then he wiped his bottle-thick glasses and clasped his hands behind his head. I wondered why I hadn't said hello and introduced myself when I came in. Nobody said anything, as if it were normal that we were here, doing nothing. And indeed, for a long time nothing happened. There must have been a vaporetto stop somewhere nearby--its characteristic dull thud resounded as it pulled up to the steel moorings.

Suddenly, straightening up in her chair, the woman turned to face us, and in came the servant who had led me to the palazzo. This time he was holding the hand of an eight or nine-year old boy with fair, shoulder-length curls and a blue sailor's outfit. His features were so delicate that for a moment I thought he was a girl, but his movements--decisive, slightly angular--gave him away. The servant left him with us and wordlessly disappeared up the marble stairs. The boy ran round the circle of chairs, high-fiving each of us with an outstretched hand like an athlete entering the arena, then sat on the chair between me and the guy in the glasses. He looked at me too.

Now they were all looking, even fatty had awoken from his lethargy.

"Well, say something, we're waiting," urged four-eyes.

He addressed me in English, with a strong German or Scandinavian accent.

"What am I to talk about?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"No."

"Don't make fun of us."

"This is far from fun."

"Stop pretending."

"Pretending what?" I felt stupid.

"You know perfectly well why you are here."

"What? I've no idea."

Fatty croaked and slapped his knee with his hand. They obviously found me entertaining.

"He doesn't know, Ulla," he said in a warm, deep voice, looking at the woman.

"I can understand that, Hette," she replied. "It took a while for me too."

"What are you talking about?!" I'd had enough, and raised my voice.

"Please don't get upset." The boy laid a fragile hand on my clenched fist.

"Yes," said the man in glasses, "I do wish you would calm down. Fretting won't help."

Ulla leaned forward in her chair with a caring smile, "Why not close your eyes? It helps you concentrate. It'll come back to you."

Her tenderness soothed me. I followed her suggestion and, sitting with my eyes shut, I felt a pair of translucent pupils probing straight into my brain. They read words from it as if from an open book, making me speak. I was giving exactly the same lecture that had taken me out onto the football field, to be confronted by the stranger in the gray coat with the seizing, drilling gaze. But this time, rather than limiting myself to the hydrogen atom, I was talking about all matter.

"The volume of matter used to build a man is too small to be seen under a microscope, " I said. "Solid bodies are so empty that the whole Earth could be squeezed down to the size of a pearl. Then it would become a black hole."

At this point the boy jumped from his chair and stamped his foot.

"So what's that?" he asked. "Does the floor not exist?" He drew himself up to his full height, raising his chin, and gave me an aggressive look. His English was faultless, a definite Eton case.

"The hardness of a stone is an electrical illusion," I replied, amused by his temperament. "Negatively charged electron clouds mutually repel each other with such force that

we can't walk through it, or poke a finger or even a pin into it. And if we fire a machine gun at it, those forces will flatten the bullets."

"So why can thought pass through a wall, but I can't?" The boy was still standing but no longer stretched.

"I don't know. I don't know what thoughts are, or what their physical properties are. Science has no answer to that question."

"Because science is deaf and blind," said Ulla.

"That depends," said the man in the glasses.

"On what?" she asked mockingly.

"On how competent the brain is."

"The brain is stupid, it can't take anything in. You have to feel things, feel them with your heart and soul. The heart, and not the brain."

She stood up and made for the door, but froze just before reaching the stairs, struck motionless by the bespectacled man's words.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he shouted in irritation. "The brain is a very complicated thing, the most complex piece of matter in the Universe, in fact. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can even begin to compare with it, and I'm speaking from a purely scientific viewpoint. It's a mysterious parcel, packed beautifully and tightly inside a bone safe, the ball of bones we call the skull, and even today we don't know

how this parcel functions. And most likely we'll never know, since we use only two percent of its capacity. The brain, madam, is a litre and a half of the most highly organised biological structure in the cosmos. The world's entire phone network would barely take up a space inside it the size of a sunflower seed. What do you say to that? Even your standing still without turning round is the work of your brain--every second, millions of nerve signals co-ordinate over six hundred muscles in your body. Your brain is the Universe and infinity!"

The bespectacled man spoke passionately, shaking his head and nervously running his fingers through his hair. He shouted data at the woman, who still had her back to us.

"... And this ultimate complexity, this miracle of nature," he continued, "who knows if it wasn't a present from some higher civilisation, and you call it stupid? How dare you! That just shows your ignorance."

Ulla turned around and smiled through her tears. "I'm sorry," she said gently, "I didn't mean to offend you."

"Please, don't apologise." The bespectacled man was also calmer. "You don't hurt me with such words, just yourself."

Silence fell. The boy, who at first listened with interest, now had his eyes shut. He was smiling to himself, possibly lost in daydreams. I was about to open my mouth when a tapping

of high heels resounded in the depths of the palazzo and the young servant led in a slim woman with straight, dark hair. The woman stood looking round uncertainly at our faces. She toured the chamber, her light, angular stilletoes loudly emphasising her gait, and after a while she sat down opposite me. She amused herself swinging her shoe, showing off the beauty of her feet, but I knew her actions were a smoke-screen masking the terror that we all felt on coming through the palazzo gate. Not so much the gate as the little side door with the rusty lock. Lost tourists wandered past it every day, not suspecting the strange goings-on behind it.

## 9.

During the first phase of my stay in the palazzo, I hardly left my room. I sat in the chair by the wall or on the bed. I lay, slept, woke, ate the breakfast the servant brought and did nothing that might distract me from listening intently to myself. This went on until the moment I felt I had to get up and go down to the piano nobile to take part in another lecture. I say lecture, but it was more of a dispute witnessed by the Blue Boy. I'd called him this since that first time. His clothes weren't always blue, but they were always slightly old-fashioned, resolutely ironed and fastened to the last button. He looked immaculate as he was led in by the youth

with the faceless face who brought each of us our three daily meals and once in a while changed our towels and sheets.

I couldn't understand how nobody ever called us, but we all appeared on the first floor at the same time. Even more unfathomable was why I never left the building, despite the door being unlocked. I'd never even been in the garden. I really wanted to go out to visit the city, especially during the first few days. Who wouldn't want to walk round the place Hemingway had described as 'a good city for walking. The best, I think. I'd like to walk round this town all my life, dammit. All my life!' I found that quote recently, in 'Across the River and into the Trees,' a book so far removed from the spirit of Venice that I managed to wade through less than half of it, but that fragment stuck in my mind. Ironically, I never walked round Venice and now that I'm trying to catch up on the experience every step hurts.

Several times I got myself together, ready to leave. I laced my shoes, checked I had money and documents, and got as far as the door before turning back as if I'd forgotten something. Then I'd sit down on the bed trying to remember, concentrating, but to no avail. After a moment I'd forget what I was doing and why, 'dammit'. I was upsetting the peace, which had filled me. I'd forget what I wanted, rather than wanting nothing since everything I really needed to live was

there for me, for free. Some force kept me in the room, magnetized, tied with an invisible chain like the one Dr. Tolmes had used to hold down the shamanic exorcist.

On the one hand, I was happy, having achieved something I was unconsciously craving: peace. On the other hand, I was imprisoned, my free will heavily muzzled. My mood swung in constant oscillation between contradictory feelings, even though some philosophers claim they complement one another and only in slavery can a man be truly free. I suspected that the Blue Boy was playing a fundamental role here, and the rest of us were merely planets orbiting his youthful glow. The most important player, whose gray pupils had penetrated the deepest parts of our minds, was not present, however. I could feel him observing us but nobody saw him, and nobody had any idea what his name was, and nobody asked.

Ulla called him 'eyes', a word we heard as 'ice'. None of us knew the sound of his voice. Someone claimed that he wrote his instructions down on pieces of paper, which he immediately burned, but that was probably just gossip. Whatever, we got to know very little about the extraordinary situation we'd found ourselves in. Nobody was particularly bothered, either, and so we lived like that, sitting in our rooms, placid and free of pain, waiting for the group discussions to enliven us, always with the Blue Boy present.

Personally, I was keen to take part in these sessions, as that was the only way for me to be close to Anna. I know it's sick and punishable, but I quietly dreamed of having the power Eyes had, being able to possess Anna just as brutally as he'd taken Ulla. I hear Ulla's voice quavering with fear, but also with unsuppressed excitement, when she spoke of that April evening in Copenhagen; I was with her in the deli, walking to the bus stop, I was in her flat and saw what He did to her. But although her descriptions were so vividly suggestive, it had only happened to her, so we listened with a certain disbelief.

## 29.

One day, when she had shut the door of her room, Anna felt something soft rub against her ankle. She froze. It was a cat. She had not noticed it in the corridor, had not seen it before anywhere. It was ginger like Sis, her favorite cat from Jesenik, and its purr was like clockwork. Touching it was enough to wind up its spring. Anna was not sure whether it was permitted to keep a cat in the room, so whenever the servant brought her meals, she hid it in the bathroom just in case. She called it Secret, but when she found herself shouting 'Secret, Secret' she realized it would not be a secret much longer. She changed its name to a tune she had just heard sung

by a tenor on a gondola. She hummed 'Volare' and the cat appeared by her side. It was clearly a musical cat.

One day Anna heard footsteps in the hall, and tried in vain to locate the cat. And then it happened. When the servant laid the tray on the table, Volare leapt from the closet straight at his neck. The servant's eyes almost popped out, his face swelled up, he fell to his knees, rolled over and had a fit of epilepsy. His close-cropped head battered against the floor, and Anna barely managed to shove a pillow under it. The fit was so violent that the servant lost consciousness and thus had no recollection of the cause of the attack. So the cat stayed with Anna.

She spent hours looking into its wide eyes, seeing the dormant wildness in them. Set in the front of the predator's head to focus its sights stereoscopically on its prey, Volare's eyes were as mesmerizing as the pair of gray pupils that had brought her to the palazzo. Volare was extremely lazy and rested for twenty hours a day, the same as a full-grown lion. Anna could not understand how it could sleep for so long. Thanks to her insomnia, she felt an affinity with the frightened roe, or more the giraffe, which drops off to sleep for at most ten minutes, head leaning against the fork of a branch. Anna tried a similar way of sleeping, with her chin resting on a cornice, windowsill or the back of a chair.

Exhausted through lack of sleep, Anna dared to breach the subject of 'El' during the next lecture. We'd called Eyes 'El' for some time now. I can't remember who thought up this new name for the Blue Boy's father, but it immediately caught on, although mostly in our minds. We were afraid to talk about him aloud, in case our words summoned him into being. Thanks to Anna's courage, the subject of El brought about an explosion of concealed emotions like never before. We talked over each other, confusedly, loudly interrupting with speculations as to who he was and what awaited us here. Gerard's version seemed the most believable--he claimed El had escaped from a psychiatric hospital in Germany and kidnapped the child from his wife. This didn't explain the boy's calmness, even radiance, but Anna suggested that El had wiped all memories from his mind. That was possible. We were living proof of the power of his eyes, mind or brain (we didn't know exactly what).

Ulla was certain that the Blue Boy's mother was the key to understanding El. When we asked her how she knew, she simply replied that she could feel it. And where did El get a palazzo? We didn't know this either, since when we weren't on the *piano nobile*, we sat shut away in our rooms, shutters nailed closed. So we knew nothing, and this was all the speculation of our exhausted minds. El had to be very rich to

have a palazzo, especially in Venice, right on the Grand Canal. But why kidnap and imprison us? He could obviously afford to employ a team of tutors for his son, maybe even better specialists and teachers than us.

"Any banker looking at El would hand over all the money from his safe," declared Hette, "but he doesn't need money. All he has to do is look the palazzo's owner in the eye, and the palazzo is his."

Hette had worn his father's cap since his affair with Ulla had brought some life into him. Now he pulled it down over his eyes and pretended to hypnotise us. Ulla laughed loudest, but her laughter stopped short when the servant silently swept the Blue Boy from the room before the lecture could finish.

We sat in silence, not really knowing what to do. Should we go straight to our rooms, or wait for the boy to come back? Ulla was the first to get up, Hette followed her. Others gradually left, heavy and dull, with heads bowed. I went out last, right behind Anna. I don't know how it happened, but on the stairs a miracle occurred--Anna slipped and fell straight into my arms. This time, there was nothing that could stop me. I kissed her. She responded by embracing me and biting my lower lip. I was happy. I could feel the warm, sweet taste of blood in my mouth and wasn't even aware that the miracle had come to an end and an unknown force separated us. I crept back to my cell, torn

between feelings of despair and joy. That was our only kiss, which I later went over and over in my mind as I sat alone (in between counting drips from the faucet, and the cosmic baths I took to observe the Universe). Alone, but still touching my lower lip and watching Anna on the screen of my closed eyelids.

30.

*Why are you hurting me, destroying me with your cruelty? Once we were together, so close. I used to touch you before falling asleep, and when you slept I delicately stroked your forehead and blew off the hair that tangled over your face. I was with you my dearest until you turned your back on me and condemned me to a renewed non-existence. Don't you know that the only chance to keep me alive is your thoughts? Have you forgotten that only the sight of you can save me from nothingness, and you, oblivious to our shared moments, betray me with that disgusting Dutchman through the wall....?*

Ulla stopped reading and put the letter down on the table.

"That's absurd!" she said loudly. She looked in disbelief at the yellowing sheet of paper covered in faded quill-written words. Johann had been dead for three hundred years, and apart from that, how had he got the Venetian address? She read it repeatedly, crying every time he asked her to think about him

more often. She knew it was impossible. The dead don't write letters, but Johann had described her most personal experiences in such detail that it was difficult to remain aloof from it. Maybe El had planted the letter? He was the one who controlled the thoughts of those inside the palazzo....

She read the letter once more, and once more wiped away the tears. She felt guilty. The mixture of sadness and embarrassment at Johann knowing of her strange affair with Hette suddenly evaporated to be replaced by sheer horror. Someone knew all her thoughts, even the most intimate ones. Paralysed with fear, she didn't move from the table all night. In the morning she took a bath. Then, returning to her room, she found a doll on her bed. It had a blue dress and ribbons pinned in its platinum curls. She recognized it immediately-- it was her favorite childhood doll, the most beautiful one. The one she'd wanted to turn into. A gift from her father for her fifth birthday. She could even remember the smell of his stiff collar as he kissed her and wished her a happy birthday. The starched collar hurt his delicate skin, so he had stuffed rolls of cologne-soaked cotton wool under it. But the doll had vanished when they moved to Copenhagen just before her father's death. Ulla had been eighteen then, had gotten a place at university, and was reading all the myths of the world.

The doll from her father and the letter from Johann. She couldn't understand any of it. Looking over the doll's angelic features, she realized she wouldn't like to be it any more. It was hard to explain why, but now the doll reminded her of Anna--like her, it blatantly announced to the world, "Look how beautiful I am, admire and adore me, or die." She tossed the doll onto the bed and lay down to think it all over, but the doll refused to leave her in peace. She didn't want it near her, even under the bed. She'd put it in her bag and dump it somewhere on the first floor, or else give it to Anna and tell her it looked like her. Yes, that's what she'd do, that would be the best revenge. But the letter, what should she do about the letter? She could no longer make love to Hette through the wall. She'd spoiled everything. Why had she betrayed Johann?

"Why am I such a whore?" she asked aloud.

A thought crossed her mind: "Maybe I wrote the letter to myself...When, though? I would know, wouldn't I...In my sleep? But the quill? No, it must have been El, that damn rapist." She'd had enough--Johann's letter, her secret relationship with Hette being exposed, her darling doll that had become the overbearing Anna. No, that was really enough! She turned onto her stomach and sobbed. She'd decided. Now she would lie in bed and suffer. Yes, exactly as she'd done before. Not for others, though, for herself.