

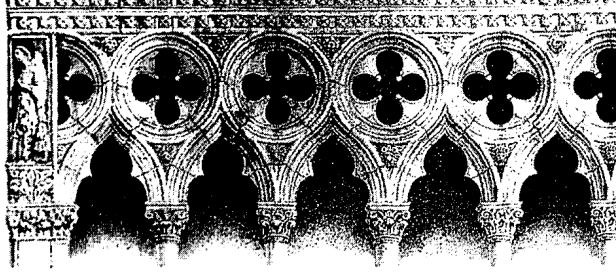
THE HYPNOTIST



LECH MAJEWSKI



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PUBLISHERS 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 mouldering 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 him-

self. 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, archivolts 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

sheep 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.

3

Yes, I went back. I got my act together enough to climb back to the top of the bridge and look again at the facade of that damned building. First I looked at my window on the second floor, then my eye sought out Anna's window on the floor above. I remember how much I wanted her from the first moment. Now I miss her even more. Our story is so peculiar, I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't been a witness and guinea pig myself. My memory buried those experiences so deeply, they might never have happened. It was only my desire to quit smoking and a session in New Haven with an Indian hypnotist that changed the picture. Rather than reacting like the other patients, giving in to the disgusting suggestions intoned by the hypnotist, I began remembering the events that took me back to Venice – to stand face to face with the algae-stained palazzo, face to face with the hidden past.

Our brains had been programmed to forget. It was only another programmer, much less skilled, who managed by chance to re-align the gears of memory. He brought back emotions and images that would have been lost forever, unless the man who held us in the palazzo designed their return after a certain time. However it was, not a day went by when I wasn't reminded of things so unlikely that returning to Venice was a way of pinching myself to check I was awake. I am a scientist, well aware that in telling this story I risk my reputation. That said, I have spent a lifetime distinguishing fact from fancy; what counts isn't whether a story is probable but whether it is verifiable. Mine is. And exactly as a scientist I will not, and cannot, suppress truth, no matter how outrageous and disturbing.

It all began for me during one of the astronomy lectures I gave at Yale University in New Haven. During the last class of the spring semester, I distracted my sophomores from their pre-exam jitters by announcing that there's hardly any matter, since its average density in the Universe is no greater than one hydrogen atom per cubic meter. And the atom itself is empty space. To help the class visualise this, I invited them out onto the football practice field – an outing that made them ecstatic, as it was a beautiful day in

May. Once on the field, I took a pea from my pocket and dropped it theatrically in the middle of the turf.

“Let’s imagine this stadium is a hydrogen atom,” I said. “That’s its nucleus I’ve just dropped, and an invisible electron the size of a pinhead is orbiting round the edges of the stand. There’s nothing between that and the nucleus, but the size of an atom is measured as the diameter of the electron shell – in other words, the stadium.”

Not many of the students were listening, most were clowning around, making the most of this unexpected break – and that’s when I caught his gaze for the first time: cold pupils that grabbed me and held me tight. I didn’t know yet that I had no way out – only that the strange penetrating look broke the flow of my lecture. I forgot for some time what I was supposed to say, helplessly shifting my weight from one foot to the other. I wasn’t sure whether the watcher was one of the athletic staff, maybe the coach, or whether he just happened to be passing. To me, only a psycho stared like that, and it crossed my mind that he might have escaped from the nearby mental hospital.

After a few minutes he vanished, and I could continue my lecture in peace. One of the students asked how big a grain of sand would be if its atoms were the size

of pinheads. I made some mental calculations, took out my notebook and counted again.

“It would fill a cube with sides almost a mile long.”

“Impossible!” shouted the student.

“Why?” I turned to him, “All you have to do is scale up the actual measurements – the atoms in quartz are so much smaller than a pinhead that an unimaginable number fits into a grain of sand.” I was surprised to see the rest of the students had begun to listen, and their attentiveness filled me with verve. I talked of the strangeness of the empty universe, which constantly, every second of every day, expands – giving birth to space. And I said how it’s not the galaxies that rush through the stillness of space, but vice versa – the rush of space pulls galaxies along behind it, counteracting gravity. I talked of the strange attractor, which our whole group of galaxies is flying towards. Just as I was getting into full flow, I realized the lecture time was up, and I had to thank the students for their attention and wish them luck on their finals.

They ran off in all directions, leaving me in the middle of the field. I didn’t feel like going to my office or the library. My last lecture; I was free. I lay down on the grass and thought it amazing that the majority of us educators don’t think over what we teach, and so it loses its freshness. Maybe that was why Pauli, at the

age of 29, wrote, "I know too much now to solve the unsolvable." Eyelids shut, I saw quite clearly the nebulae and galaxies connected in a single stream. What immense force must be acting to choreograph their movement, yet my colleagues and I scarcely know how to begin contemplating it. The more science advanced, the more mysteries we revealed. As I thought these thoughts, and watched the stars swarm and nebula dust swirl through my mind, I could make out the man who'd interrupted my lecture - his features becoming ever clearer. I shuddered. At once I stood up and looked round. Was somebody watching me from the grandstand? No. I couldn't see him among the students studying or sleeping here and there on the benches. He wasn't there. I knew that - his gaze would have immediately caught mine.

I went home to my little house on Olive Drive, made myself some coffee, turned Bach's sonata in C major on at full volume, the way I like it, and sat down by the window. I wasn't officially expecting company but I couldn't take my eyes off the driveway. The house fell silent. The coffee thickened to tar. I didn't understand what was happening to me when I couldn't get to sleep. I rarely had trouble sleeping, but when I did I switched on the lamp and read, knowing that you can't fight insomnia. You've got to just wait till it goes

away to be replaced by its nemesis. This time, though, I didn't put the light on. I didn't want to, or perhaps I couldn't. I skulked in the dark silence of the house I was unwittingly preparing to leave.

I rose at dawn and packed. I went into the University hungry. I waited outside the Dean's office to inform him I wanted an unpaid holiday.

"What, now?" He seemed astonished.

"Yes."

"You have papers to grade, exams to give."

"I know."

"So what's wrong?"

"I'm really ill..."

The Dean fixed me with a serious look.

"And who's going to replace you?"

"And what would you do if I suddenly passed away?"

Of course, the travel agency where I bought my plane ticket had a poster of St. Mark's Square in Venice. Of course, the young Chinese woman with the pink-dyed hair asked me where I wanted to go, and I pointed a finger at the poster. She smiled, whispering confidentially that she had a super promotion on flights to Venice, and I, of course, had no idea what I was doing or why. She offered to book me into a hotel, and I accepted, although I knew I wouldn't need it.

The flight stretched out immeasurably. Again and again I glanced at the illuminated electronic map on the monitors, and whenever the airplane symbol wasn't moving, I concentrated on it, willing it to get going. I took a taxi from the airport to Piazzale Roma, then got on a water bus called a vaporetto. It swayed on the huge canal as dreamy marble palazzos floated past my eyes. From time to time we bumped and rattled to a stop, throngs of people pushed on and off, then the palazzos once more moved, parading slowly by.

I was happy. Yes. I hate to admit it, but I shed a few tears. I'd never imagined that suddenly, during the semester and in the middle of my scientifically and didactically full life, I'd find myself in Europe. Sure, I'd planned to see the old world – a place I guess all Americans feel respect for, but I wasn't a casual traveller and hadn't imagined visiting Venice until I retired. And here I was, cast in some trippy movie; and, the most absurd and best part, I had absolutely no idea why. All I knew was that when the vaporetto approached the arch of the Ponte Accademia, I was to get off.

I wheeled my suitcase along behind me and got caught up in the stone net of narrow alleyways. On

every corner stood lost tourists staring at street maps and rotating them this way and that – it occurred to me that the only reason they'd got lost was that they knew why they were here. Two more bridges, a narrow crossing under a house (known as a sotopor-tego) and I saw the gothic gateway with a lock eaten away by rust, clearly unopened in years. I squeezed the rugged handle, but it didn't buckle or anything, it just left orange husks of rust in my palm. I tried once again, with similar effect. I knocked. In reply came silence.

I didn't leave. I repeatedly pounded the gate. The passers-by, who were obviously lost (the side-street where I was standing led nowhere, straight into a canal), clearly took me for a madman, breaking into some abandoned hovel. After a while I sat down on my bag and stayed sat there all day, until sunset.

4

Hette awoke on the floor, or rather on the stairs. His head ached horribly, and he 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 fulfillment. 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.