
THE DISCOVERY OF HEAVEN
A novel

Harry Mulisch

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PROLOGUE

—Can I have a moment?

—*What is it?*

—Mission accomplished. The matter's settled.

—*What matter?*

—Oh, forgive me. The most important matter of all. The major problem.

—*The major problem? What are you talking about?*

—The testimony.

—*But of course! Good heavens, how terrible! One devotes oneself full-time to the essential questions, one focuses all one's energies on them, and at a certain moment one simply forgets them, one deals with them in a trice.*

—Perhaps you should start delegating a little more.

—*Perhaps you should be more aware of your place when someone confides in you. Delegate more. You still don't seem to understand what's hanging over us. Why do you think this project was set up? Tell me, how long have you been wording on this file?*

—Over seventy years in human time.

—*Tell me about it.*

—Where shall I begin?

—*You're the best judge of that. First tell me briefly about the prelude.*

—I've seldom had to deal with such a complicated program. Thank God we generally let things run their own course, and in earlier assignments I had far more time to play with. However, because for some reason the matter had to be dealt with by the end of the millennium, I had four generations most to come up with someone who could carry out the mission. The usual procedures were no good at all on such short notice. Normally, of course, we could have given the mission to any Spark we liked but that would have been pointless. The problem was that if he was to be our envoy, he would have to remember the mission once he was in a body of flesh and blood—that is, he would have to be capable of hitting on the outrageous idea and, furthermore, have the strength of will and courage to execute it. I say "he" because it didn't seem a job for a "she." Of course, among the infinite human potential at our disposal there was a Spark who met those requirements, but how were we to get him to earth? So first we had to establish the unique DNA sequence in which he could manifest himself. I don't have time to tell you that the coiled double DNA helix containing the information on a human individual, that Hermetic caduceus within the nucleus of each of the individual's hundred thousand billion cells, weighs no more than one hundred thousandth of a gram but, when extended, is approximately the same length as the individual himself, so that the number of possible sequences at the molecular level is vast. If written in the three-letter words of the four-letter alphabet, a human being is determined by a genetic narrative long enough to fill the equivalent of five hundred Bibles. In the meantime human beings have discovered this for themselves.

—*That's right. They have uncovered our profoundest concept—namely, that life is ultimately a reading. They themselves are the Book of Books. In their year 1869 the wretched creatures discovered the DNA in the cell nucleus, and at the time we kidded ourselves that it was of no great significance because they would never have the bright idea that the acid contained a code—and in any case would never be able to break it—but a hundred human years later they had deciphered the genetic code down*

to its subtlest details. We made them much too clever, using the very same code.

—However, a hundred human years later I also achieved what I was after. First we managed to write down the secret name of our man, but that was nothing compared with what we had to do next: we had to find the great-grandparents, the grandparents, and the parents who could produce the desired combination within approximately fifty years. In his unfathomable wisdom, which may sometimes surprise even himself, the Chief arranged things so that in our Eternal Light we have a Spark for every possible combination of a sperm cell and an ovum. At each ejaculation a man emits three hundred million sperm: combined with a single female ovum, that is the same number of possible human beings, for which there are an equivalent number of Sparks—but a Spark is required for every combination of every sperm from every man in the present, past, and future with each ovum of every woman in the present, past, and future. That was necessary because even here no one could know which human beings would invent something that would extend their lives by hundreds or thousands of years. So there is a Spark for a particular sperm from a particular ejaculation of Julius Caesar's, which might have merged with a particular ovum of Marilyn Monroe's. And every sperm in the countless ejaculations of the possible son of that mismatch might subsequently have been able to join with every ovum of the countless possible daughters of John F. Kennedy and Cleopatra, or those of a random sculptor from the reign of the pharaoh Cheops with those of a toilet attendant living in ten thousand years' time—and all those possible permutations and their possible descendants might in turn have joined with all other possible permutations and their possible descendants in space and time, and so on and so on ad infinitum. For example, besides the Sparks for the combinations of all sperm—thousands of quarts of which are emitted century after century in a never-ending stream—with all ova from all ages, there are also those for the alternative generations of what might have been, diverging and branching into hyperinfinity: This is the Logos Spermatikos—the Absolute Infinite Light!

—*Can I ask if you are telling me all this to teach me something?*

—Holy, holy, thrice holy! I am speaking because I am still dumbstruck at the thought of our Light.

—*That does you honor. You are probably trying to say that there's a great deal of it.*

—Yes, you could put it like that.

—*But you succeeded.*

—Just don't ask me how. Decoding the genome, the full, secret name of a human being, is simply a matter of money for human beings themselves now, one dollar per nucleotide to be exact, making three billion dollars, and they're working on the project all over the world. Within the foreseeable future their biotechnology will enable them to produce the genetic essence of a particular ovum and a particular nucleus with a tail more quickly and simply than we can select them with our romantically extremely old-fashioned breeding system—but it simply had to be done before the year 2000.

—*Precisely. And might there have been a connection, perhaps? Have you seen the light yet? It was only seventy-five human years ago that we discovered to our horror how rapidly technical skills were expanding down below and what human beings were going to do with them—not only in biotechnology but in all other fields too. Before long our organization will be reduced to a skeleton staff, after which heaven will be wound up like a scroll. So tell me, how did you manage it?*

—Seventy human years ago, despite all the problems, I suddenly saw a way of getting the required Spark into flesh and blood not in four generations but in three.

—*Well, well. Your creative gifts are even greater than I thought.*

—The only snag was that there was no way of doing it painlessly. I was forced to use a terrible expedient.

—*Which was?*

—The First World War.

—~~Yes, that's an aspect of the same problem. Our alarm at the technological turn that human history was increasingly taking was finally confirmed by that senseless slaughter.~~

—So I was able to give it some meaning at least, in the following way: working back from the necessary sequence of amino acids to a possible paternal grandfather, my 301655722 staff, following my instructions, arrived at an Austrian, a certain Wolfgang Delius, born for no particular reason in 1892. The only possible paternal grandmother turned out to be a certain Eva Weiss, also born for no particular reason, but not until in 1908, in Brussels.

—*"Weiss" doesn't sound very Flemish. Shouldn't it be De Witte?*

—Her parents were German-speaking Jews from Frankfurt and Vienna. A family of diamond merchants.

—*Practicing?*

—Completely agnostic. They laughed at us.

—*Hmm.*

—Faith is not so simple for human beings; we can scarcely imagine that. For us there is no such thing as faith, only knowledge.

—*Yes, I can see that you operate at the farthest edge of the Light. Perhaps you should be a little wary of too much understanding. Go on with the story.*

—I received your instructions in April 1914, and that same June in Sarajevo a student, a certain Gabriel Princip, leaped forward and shot the archduke of Austria. That Christian name and surname are bound to make you chuckle to yourself. He was a follower of Nietzsche, the most gruesome figure of the whole lot of them.

—*The name Nietzsche seems to me to have connotations of its own. Nichevo. He was that nihilist who spread the rumor that the Chief was dead. Well, he wasn't far from the truth—but the fact that the Chief can't die is precisely the most dreadful limitation of his omnipotence. He exists by virtue of the paradox, but by the same token he must exist eternally and die eternally.*

—Within a few months the slaughter was in full swing. I was able to use the spectacle not only to bring Wolfgang Delius and Eva Weiss into contact, but also for the following generation, which was to involve Dutch people.

—*Dutch? Isn't this taking us a long way from home?*

—It was the only solution. The German and Austrian high commands dusted off the old Schlieffen plan, which proposed violating Dutch and Belgian neutrality in order to invade France with a flanking movement. However, Dutch neutrality was as essential to my project as the infringement of Belgian neutrality, and through gentle promptings in Moltke's brain I was able to ensure that the plan was only implemented for Belgium.

—*My memory for human affairs is like a sieve these days. Moltke?*

—General Field Marshal von Moltke, the German supreme commander. Wolfgang Delius—or, as he was wont to say in the manner of his region, Delius, Wolfgang—who had just graduated from a Vienna business college, became a professional soldier and fought on the Italian, Russian, and French fronts. In Brussels he was billeted with the Weiss family, where his future wife was still sitting on the floor playing with a doll, already using it for practice, so to speak. Delius was a good-looking young officer in the mounted artillery, highly decorated and with silver spurs on his boots, but with an extraordinarily somber look in his eyes, which everyone put down to his wartime experiences—and which was partly due to them, but not entirely. There was a deeper, underlying somberness in him. In his knapsack he carried Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*. Weiss, very glad to be among compatriots and fellow German-speakers again, was by now driving along the Boulevard Anspach with the military

governor in an open car, which did not escape the people of Brussels. The war had served its purpose and when Germany and Austria capitulated, Weiss, in accordance with my plan, got into serious difficulties. The day after the armistice, all his possessions were confiscated, and in order to avoid arrest he had to flee overnight with his family—to Holland, that is, where I wanted them, because there was no other alternative. Meanwhile, Delius left for Germany on horseback at the head of his company.

—*But they knew each other now.*

—The foundations had been laid. Back in cold, hungry Vienna, Delius found employment as a teacher of commercial accounting in a private school for young ladies, but he remained in correspondence with Weiss. The latter soon began to prosper in Amsterdam. At the beginning of the 1920s he brought his young friend over and gave him a temporary job as an accountant in his diamond firm. Not long after, with Weiss's support, Delius set up in business for himself, trading with Germany and Austria. Within a year the business grew into quite a substantial company, he was naturalized, and in 1926 Wolfgang Delius married Eva Weiss, his benefactor's daughter, who was sixteen years his junior. The girl was eighteen at the time, and the very next year she had a baby boy—but because of a typing error in my department the angelic child died in its crib after two weeks. It turned out to be a dreadful marriage, I'm sorry to say. It was brought home to me yet again how privileged we are in being neither male nor female—but it was necessary for the sake of their second son, who was born in 1933 and whom I needed as the father of our man on earth.

—*Why was the marriage dreadful?*

—Had it not been for your instructions, it ought never to have happened. Everyone on earth always marries the wrong person, that's well known, but seldom were a couple less suited than these two. In some way the young woman and her much older husband must have hurt each other irreparably—not so much by doing or saying or failing to do anything specific, but just by being who they were. In the final analysis they married because we wanted them to, though they themselves had no idea of this, of course. The decisive factor for her may have been the interesting, obscure background suggested by the look in his bright blue eyes, which was eventually to turn against her; for him, precisely that sense of freedom in her that in the end he could not endure. Her spirit was ten times lighter and quicker than his. He was heavy and twisted like an anchor rope caught in a ship's propeller—like that of almost all Austrians since 1918, choking with hate and self-hatred in the *Sadosachermasochtorte* of the dismembered dual monarchy, which a few years later was to cease to exist as a result of the frenzy of another Austrian. In the evenings she wanted to go out, but he preferred to immerse himself in Max Stirner. While she enjoyed herself in town with Jewish friends of her own age and of both sexes, his Germanic husband, with his monocle in place, read about the ego as the Only True Being and the world as his property. According to Stirner, no one should allow themselves to be told what to do by anyone or anything: the unique ego was sovereign, even to the point of committing crime. When she came home in the evenings, she sometimes found him screaming in his sleep, fighting the Italian with his pillow. Perhaps she could have done something about it before the fatal moment, but she did not. Perhaps because she was too young; also perhaps because, in the final analysis, she was even more of a loner than he was. In 1939 Eva left her Wolfgang, taking her six-year-old son with her.

—*Fine. And what about the mother-to-be?*

—Fortunately I didn't have to work in such a roundabout way in this case. In fact it presented scarcely any problems, and certainly no international ones. I was dealing with the Dutch, and among those well-behaved trading folk everything is rather less intense. I won't deny that this is partly because they were able to keep out of the First World War. In fact, the Second World War was their first since the sixteenth-century one against Spain, which incidentally was ruled by a half-Austrian.

then, too. If the Second World War had passed them by as well, they would have become the same sort of frustrated virgins as the inhabitants of the Swiss valleys.

—*I'm not sure I'm too impressed by that view of things.*

—If you like, I'll retract what I said and argue the opposite.

—*That won't be necessary.*

—It needed only a slight adjustment to bring her to life. Once again starting from the end result that we required, in combination with the genetic material of Delius Junior, we discovered as a possible paternal grandfather a keeper at the Netherlands Museum of the History of Science in Leiden: certain Oswald Brons, born for no particular reason in 1921. By pure coincidence, the necessary maternal grandmother, Sophia Haken, turned out to be living close by, in Delft, where she had been born in 1923, also for no particular reason. Because of his age, Brons was more or less in hiding in the museum at the end of the war; he often slept there, in the room containing the Surrealist contraption built by Kamerlingh Onnes for liquefying helium, which looks exactly like a monster on the right-hand-side panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the musical inferno, and also like the topmost figure in Marcel Duchamp's *Grand Verre*.

—*What in heaven's name are you talking about?*

—Pay no attention. Because of all that genetic fiddling about, I've still got a loose bobbin inside me like a loom. At the end of 1944, in the last winter of the war, the German occupying forces were in the habit of parking trains carrying V-2 rockets immediately south of the Academic Hospital in the hope that this would deter the English from air attacks. They were fired at London from a launchpad nearby. Nevertheless, one December afternoon, just after midday, there was a heavy raid on the station. Shortly afterward the false rumor circulated in Delft that the hospital was on fire. Although weakened by hunger and despite the cold, Sophia immediately cycled to Leiden to see whether anything had happened to her best friend, a fellow nurse. As she was passing the museum, a few hundred yards south of the station, the second attack came and she took cover in a doorway—but because the English, under my benevolent influence, were frightened of hitting the hospital, it suddenly started raining bombs around her. One devastated a wing of the museum containing brass telescopes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Amid the chaos of fire, noise, dust, screaming in Dutch and German, firemen, ambulances, and police, she bumped into Oswald Brons. Bewildered, with torn clothes and covered in grazes, he was wandering across the heaps of rubble carrying a huge lens in his arms like a baby, and she took pity on him.

—*Minor intervention. Positive effect. How many people dead?*

—Fifty-four.

—*A slight adjustment, you said?*

—Well, what do you want? I didn't invent all that manipulation business, I'm only carrying out your cherubic will. What's more, I prevented the hospital from being razed to the ground. It seems so easy to influence the normal course of events, but reality is just like water; it's liquid and mobile, but it can only be compressed a little by using a great deal of force. When someone falls onto it from a great height, it's as hard as the rock from which Moses struck water.

—*Oh, our Moses . . . you're touching a sensitive nerve there.*

—I'm sorry.

—*When was their daughter born?*

—In 1946, during the baby boom.

—*When did she meet the young Delius?*

—In May 1967.

—*Tell me the whole story from that moment on, preferably without a commentary. Just tell it in fu*

and with all the details, so that I can select when it's my turn to report.

~~—For a fuller understanding, it would be better if I started a little earlier.~~

—*When?*

—On Monday, February 13, 1967, at twelve midnight.

—*Which in fact is February 14.*

—Yes, human time is one great paradox.

—*What year is it down there now?*

—1985.

—*Begin, then. I'm listening.*

At the stroke of midnight I contrived a short-circuit. Anyone walking along the quiet avenue in The Hague with his collar turned up high against the freezing cold (though there was no one at the moment) would have seen all the lights in the detached mansion suddenly go off, as though a gigantic candle had been blown out inside. For those living in the neighborhood, the villa exuded a somewhat somber splendor: it was the home of a legendary prime minister, the strict Calvinist Hendrikus Quispel. In the crowded downstairs rooms, where the party was going on, the sudden darkness and the fading of the music into a fathomless cave were greeted with laughter.

"Time for the young'uns!" cried a woman's voice, itself no longer very young.

"Is anyone here technically minded?"

"I'll see to it. Where are the fuses, Grandmother?"

"On top of the electric meter, in the cupboard next to the stairs down to the cellar."

"Someone must have been messing about with them. You don't get a short-circuit just like that."

"I'll go and have a look up in the attic, at the little ones."

"Ouch!"

"Someone must have been using that wretched toaster again. Coba?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Did you use that toaster?"

"No, ma'am."

"Look and see if there are any candles left in the sideboard."

"Yes, ma'am."

The only light in the rooms was that cast by the streetlamps. In the dark conservatory at the back of the house a large figure now rose from a wicker armchair. Glass in hand, he surveyed the scores of silhouettes.

"No, Mother!" he cried in a loud voice, emphasizing every syllable. "This has nothing to do with the toasters. It has begun!"

"What has begun?"

"It!" He shouted it with his head thrown back, ecstatically, like an enlightened mystic.

"He's off again," said a man's voice. "Sit down and stop drinking."

"It!"

"Yes, yes. It. It's all right."

"That's right! It's all right. It's also dark, and it's freezing outside. It was about time that it began, that thank heavens it's happened. So be it. Amen— so that the infidels may also understand."

"Onno, you're insufferable."

But the very opposition he provoked was an inspiration. He knew that he was making an exhibition of himself, but he was swept along by his own words.

"Does my ear hear the cacophonous voice of my eldest brother, the most bigoted of Calvinists? What is more terrible than being an eldest brother? I shall say it through clenched teeth: having an eldest brother! Father, make that wretched individual shut up!"

"I don't know if you remember," said a woman in the dark, "but we're celebrating Father's birthday. It's his seventy-fifth birthday, do you remember? It's meant to be a celebration."

"Isn't that my youngest sister? The fair Ophelia? Yes, I remember, I remember. I myself am thirty-three—does that perhaps ring a bell in this company of fanatics and zealots? I remember everything because I never forget anything. Isn't this the second time in a week that we've celebrated Father's birthday?"

birthday? Father, where are you? I am looking for you, but I am looking through a glass darkly. The you were the day before yesterday at the head of the table, in De Wittenburg Castle: on your right the queen, on your left the crown princess; at the other end, a ten-minute walk away, our poor mother wedged between the prince-consort and the prime minister; and between you the whole cabinet of eighty-six ex-ministers, a hundred and sixty-eight thousand generals, prelates, bankers, politicians and industrialists as far as the eye could see; and all of you, too, all the pashas and grand viziers and moguls and satraps by marriage. *Hic sunt monstra*. If only my abominable eldest brother were not there, the governor of that backward province whose name still escapes me."

"Now I've had enough, I'm going to punch him in the nose!"

"Calm down, Diederic. You're a terrible nuisance, Onno. You yourself were sitting talking oh so timidly to the Honorable Miss Bob in your dinner jacket."

"Oh God, the Honorable Miss Bob, the sweetie. I told her the facts of life. It was all completely new to her."

Onno was enjoying himself hugely. It was mainly his own generation who were turning against him. The previous one did not say much; the next one, which was still in high school, was amused and admiring. That was the way to be. One must have the guts to be like that.

"I can't find any candles anywhere, ma'am."

A boy came in with a pocket flashlight, which gave less light than a candle. "There are no fuses left," he said.

He put the flashlight on the table, transforming the faces of some old ladies, who were nibbling gingersnaps and drinking their liqueurs, into those of Transylvanian witches. But people's eyes were adjusting to the dark, so it seemed to be getting gradually lighter. Onno still maintained the pose of a field marshal surveying the battlefield.

"Go next door, Coba," said his mother, "to Mrs. Van Pallandt's. Perhaps she can help us. But only if the lights are on."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's less than two months since the birthday of the Lord Jesus," cried Onno, "and there's no longer a single candle to be found in this Calvinist bastion!"

"Can you please put a stop to that exasperating chatter?" asked his eldest sister's husband. "For goodness' sake clear off, man. Go to Amsterdam where you belong."

"Yes, heaven be praised that I live in Amsterdam and not in Holland."

"How many rum-and-Cokes have you had, Onno?"

"In Amsterdam," said Onno, raising his glass, "we don't call this liquid rum-and-Coke. In Amsterdam we call it a Cuba libre, but you'll eventually catch on in Holland. So I shall drink a toast to *el líder máximo. Patria o muerte—venceremos!* He downed his glass in one.

"Long live Che Guevara!" shouted a boy.

"Hey, Maarten, have you taken leave of your senses?"

"The young monkey's showing his true colors."

"Beware of that monkey! That monkey will make short work of you and your horrible Holland. So Coba will be in control here, and then it will be the ex-governor of the ex-queen who will have to fetch candles from the people next door, who won't be called Van Pallandt but, for all I know, Gortzak, or some other honest working-class name. The bunch of you are Holland. Without Quists there would be no Holland, and what a blessing that would be for mankind."

"Onno—"

"Ignore him. Simply ignore him, then he'll shut up by himself."

"Anyway, you're a Quist too."

"Me? Me a Quist? What an unforgivable insult. I'm a bastard," he said solemnly. "A cuckoo in the nest."

next—that's what I am."

"You're cuckoo, all right," said one of his aunts at the table with the flashlight, which was becoming weaker and weaker.

"And who is the father of the cuckoo?" asked his eldest sister.

"Mother and I will never reveal that. Never! Isn't that so, Mother? We have sworn not to."

"What have we sworn?"

"Oh, now you're playing dumb. Don't you remember that handsome prince from that distant country who came to Holland on a white horse?"

"What on earth is he talking about?"

"If you ask me, the fellow's no longer completely *compos mentis*."

Onno put his hand on his heart.

"About the Seventh Commandment, woman."

"Did the prince have a black beard by any chance?" asked his other brother, a professor of criminal law in Groningen. "Was he dressed in a green uniform, with a pistol perhaps?"

Onno faltered, set his glass down, put both hands against the wall, and began shaking with laughter.

"He's enjoying it, the windbag."

"Mother!" shouted Onno with a choking voice. "They know! It's come out!"

"What has come out?"

"That you deceived Father with Fidel Castro."

"Me, deceive Father? Wherever did you get that idea? I don't even know the man."

"Joke, dear, joke."

"Funny kind of jokes they tell here. I've never deceived Father."

"You deceived me!" cried Onno, standing up and raising a trembling forefinger like a prophet. "Witness Father! By conceiving me!"

At that moment his youngest sister, two heads shorter than he, loomed in front of him and took his hand. He allowed himself to be led into the room like a clumsy circus bear.

"That's really enough, Onno," she said softly. "There are limits."

"Who told you that?"

"I don't mind at all, I can take a dig or two, but you're embarrassing Mother. She can't follow your strange sense of humor."

"Strange sense of humor?" he repeated. "I mean every word. Doesn't anyone understand that? Not even you? If even you don't understand me, who will? Oh, where is there someone who understands me!"

"Stop it. You're simply being provocative, and you're enjoying it."

"Of course, of course, but I also mean it. I also mean what I don't mean."

"Oh yes, tell me more."

"No, you don't want me to tell you more at all. When I'm dying I shall crawl to you on my knees, but even you don't understand a thing. No one understands me!" he cried pathetically and suddenly at full volume again.

"That's true," said his eldest sister's husband. "So hurry back to your crossword puzzles, then we'll be here in Holland will make sure you can go on doing your puzzles in peace."

Onno cupped his hand behind his ear.

"Do I detect a shrill tone there? Is that because no one will believe that a certain seedy public prosecutor from the provinces is the brother-in-law of the great, unforgettable, world-famous Onno Quist?"

While he beat his chest with both fists, the door opened and admitted a flock of children, led by a little girl of about seven. She was wearing a white nightgown, which came down to her bare feet. She

cried: "Who's that drunk man?"

Onno surveyed them with a look of horror. "Brood of vipers! Are they all going to become ministers and judges and ambassadors' wives in their turn? Oh God, take those children and smash them pieces against the rocks! Otherwise there will never be an end to it."

"Uncle Onno! Uncle Onno!"

"I'm not anybody's uncle. How dare you? I'm only my own uncle. Misunderstood, sneered at by everyone, and kicked into a corner, I wander lonely and magnificent in the rarefied realms of the Utterly Different."

"That clown is beginning to make me feel ill," said the provincial governor. "Father, can't you put a stop to it?"

There was a silence. Onno, too, suddenly stopped talking. Far away, in the front room, near the plush curtains, sat Quist. Onno could not see him, and looked in his direction, eyes peering, as when one tries to focus on a faint star.

"Oh," said Quist, "the lad will turn out all right."

When Onno heard this, he put his glass on the windowsill and made his way to the front room between the heavy pieces of furniture and the outstretched legs—a journey in the course of which the average age of the guests gradually increased. At the other end of the suite his father was sitting in the winged armchair like a dark red boulder: a last erratic stone that had come to rest, having been driven along by the terminal moraine of his times. Beside him was the oak lectern, on which lay the massive seventeenth-century Authorized Version, as large as a suitcase, with silver trimmings and two heavy locks. Onno could not make out his face. He dropped to his knees and pressed his lips to his father's high black shoes. The leather was warmed by the feet it was covering.

Onno sat up, and suddenly said in a lighthearted tone, "Farewell, all. I'm going home."

"What time is it?" asked his mother. "Surely there are no more trains running?"

"I'm going to hitch a lift."

"What nonsense, you can sleep here."

His brother-in-law laughed. "I wouldn't dream of giving a lift to such a sinister figure in the middle of the night."

"We've got a bed too," said his eldest sister. "You can come in the car with us. We're all going home; it's twelve-thirty."

"I'm going to Amsterdam. I've got a date."

"Stop being silly. You haven't got a date."

"Let him have his way," said the public prosecutor.

Had the insults already been forgotten? Obviously, his family regarded him as a natural phenomenon: after the storm, the branches that have been blown down are cleared up, and there's an end of it. He spread his arms wide in farewell and went into the hall whistling softly.

"You can't find a thing here in this Stygian darkness," said his youngest sister, with the almost completely extinguished pocket flashlight in her hand.

As he began rummaging among the piles of coats, the key squeaked in the lock. "Heavens, you're muddling everything up," said Coba, retrieving his coat as she passed.

"Shall I drive you to the main Wassenaar road?" asked his sister, while he unbuttoned his coat again and this time rebuttoned it symmetrically. "It's over half an hour's walk."

"I'd like a bit of a walk."

"You're restless."

He gave her a kiss on the forehead and went out. As he closed the garden gate, the lights came on again all over the house.

The Hague lay silent in the darkness. There were scarcely any cars about. The houses were lighted

colored than in Amsterdam, but almost all the windows were dark. The civil servants were asleep and dreaming of putting an end once and for all to the disturbances in the capital that had been going on for years, with tanks on the street corners and dive bombers firing rockets at the university institute after which they would be appointed governor of the pacified city.

In his heavy full-length winter coat, Onno walked in the direction of the main road to Leiden. Although it was freezing he was not wearing gloves, but he did not put his hands in his pockets: he held them on his back, where they gradually became purple with cold, without him noticing. Here, where he had spent his whole youth, he knew every stone, but that awakened no nostalgic feelings in him. Moreover, he did not look around him; nor did he reflect on the evening that had just passed. Stooping a little, with a slightly labored gait in his clumsy, and as always unpolished, shoes, he walked through the deserted streets, with a circular clay tablet constantly in his mind—sometimes on one side, sometimes the other.

He suddenly seemed like a different person. He kept his tongue on the left side of his mouth between his teeth and chewed on it gently, as he always did when he was thinking. There was a sleepy look on his face, but that was not because of tiredness or alcohol; it was the sleepiness of thought. Thought is never action, forward, up and at it, as people think who do not know what thinking is; it is not like a forest explorer cutting back creeping vines, but more like someone letting himself relax into a hot bath.

The tablet, the so-called Phaistos disc, was the size of a dessert plate. Both sides had a pattern which resembled nothing so much as a hopscotch diagram of the kind that children draw on the street with chalk: a spiral moving inward in a clockwise direction, ending in a central point. It looked like a maze, but it was definitely not one. It was impossible to get lost in it—there was only one way, and that led to the center. The diagram was divided into compartments filled with primitive signs, such as a helmeted head, a number of human and animal figures in profile, an ax, something like a portable cage, and many other illustrations. Onno looked at the rebus, whose 242 signs and forty-five syllables in the sixty-one compartments he knew better than his own body, and which in another sense was still a maze—while ever new connections formed in his mind, disappeared, emerged again in modified form, linked with other linguistic facts and signs, Philistine, Lycian, Semitic . . .

There was a great silence around him.

As Onno Quist was leaving his parents' house, in another, considerably less distinguished, area of The Hague a man of the same age had reached orgasm in four or five waves, accompanied by loud cries.

"Well, well!" he gasped when it had subsided, both surprised and appreciative. "Thank you."

He was lying on the floor, and with his eyes closed he stroked the woman who had collapsed on top of him like a half-empty balloon; and somehow, something was wrong. He felt a leg where in fact there could be no leg; her head was at a point where he expected a foot. He stroked a rounding that was probably the beginning of a breast but might also have been that of a buttock, raised his eyebrows in resignation, sighed deeply, and dozed off. . .

He had met her in Rotterdam a few hours earlier. Some students from the Economics University had organized a "revolutionary carnival" there, and he had read the announcement on a noticeboard in Leiden, where he worked. He lived in Amsterdam, but because he had nothing to do, he had driven to the party later that evening after work. Deafening music in decorated rooms, people dancing everywhere; even the stairs were full. At an improvised Cuban restaurant, *Moncada*, he ate a hunk of meat, and in a Flemish tavern, the *Racing Shorts*, he ordered an orange juice. In a side room an "occult market" had been set up: at trestle tables all kinds of individuals were offering their services, from Tarot cards, horoscopes, pendulums, crystal balls, and I Ching paraphernalia. He searched the throng for girls he might be able to chat up, but everyone was accompanied, had dressed up—there were scores of boys in Che Guevara berets—and were enjoying themselves; he soon began to tire of the relaxed, unerotic atmosphere. Human beings were not on earth for their pleasure, he believed—fucking was an imperative—and after an hour he decided he might as well go back to his car. He was tired, but he mustn't give in to that, either; there was still time to fix up something in Amsterdam.

On his way to the exit he again passed through the room with the wizards and witches, but in the meantime it had virtually emptied. As the atmosphere became more intense, interest in higher things had disappeared; most people were already busy packing up their supernatural equipment. Only by the stall of a woman in a purple sweater was there still a girl sitting with her hand, palm upward, in that the lady, like a saint showing her stigmata.

She was an attractive girl. She was no more than nineteen or so, with her blond hair in a ponytail. With feigned interest he stopped and listened to what the palmist had to say. With a slim pen she drew lines, crosses, and circles alongside significant twists in the lines of the hand, which reminded him of markings on astronomical photographs. In general the patterns seem to present a favorable picture, but certain side branches of the lifeline did give cause for alarm: they pointed to a serious illness at the age of about forty; it was also better not to have a grille on the Mount of the Sun. The girl looked at her hand and nodded in understanding.

"I think what you're doing is quite scandalous," he said suddenly—first and foremost, of course, to make himself known to the girl, but he also meant what he said. "I hope she thinks it's all nonsense because that's what it is; but meanwhile it's been planted in her head—your threat about that illness. For twenty years." The two women looked up at him, the girl with an amused look, the astrologer with a morose glance over her semicircular reading glasses. She was his own age, perhaps a little older. Her dark-brown hair lay in strange twists across her head, as though an enormous lizard had nestled there like an iguana. Something in her face immediately grabbed him. He saw her small breasts in her sweater between them a pendant with a flat metal hand on it—and at that moment he knew that he wanted to go to bed not with her client, but with her.

"Scandalous," he said, still looking at her.

Perhaps the girl had seen the change; she got up, said goodbye politely, and left.

"I think we have a bone to pick with each other," he said severely.

When she got up to pack, she turned out to be very slightly built: her beastly crown did not even come up to his shoulders. Without a word she put on her coat and went outside. Wondering how he was to break through that silence, he followed her to the car park. When she had put the key into the door of a small car, she suddenly turned to him and gestured invitingly.

He burst out laughing. "I've got one too. I'll follow you."

A little later, in his dark-green sports car with the white cloth hood, which was raring to go faster, he dawdled behind her along the road to The Hague, with a constant semi-erection because of the situation.

"A fortune-teller!" he cried as they passed Delft, and banged his wooden steering wheel. "That's all I needed!" He felt in his element and began singing a Mahler song: "*Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht fröhliche Hochzeit macht ...*" Tears welled up in his eyes. Melancholy, lust, music—suddenly everything overwhelmed him as he watched the red taillights.

"I'm alive!" he shouted. "I'm alive!"

She lived in a pedestrian apartment building, plonked down crudely in a street full of nineteenth-century workers' houses. Even as she walked along the back balcony she remained silent. In a small warm apartment she lit candles and incense sticks, and handed him a bottle of wine with a label that did not inspire confidence. As he took the bottle between his knees and stuck the corkscrew into the cork, sitar music filled the room.

"Of course," he said. "Ravi Shankar."

They clinked glasses and drank, still looking at each other. He did not like the wine and put down his glass. What next? He was sitting in the small armchair; she was on the sofa. He got up, knelt down in front of her, and laid his right hand palm upward in her lap.

"Right, now let's see what you can do."

He felt the warmth of her thighs, but she moved his hand to one side like a book that she did not want to read and took hold of his left hand. The hand lay in hers like an item of lost property; his small hand was warmer than his, which aroused him still more. She had still not said a word; they did not even know each other's names. After casting a glance at his short, slightly deformed thumb, she began drawing crosses and circles again—but suddenly she faltered and looked at him in alarm. He was also alarmed. He read something in her look that he would not believe but which he did not want to hear.

He withdrew his hand and laid it on her hip, putting the other on her neck. Pushing his fingers into her thick hair, he pulled her head slightly toward him, which she willingly allowed him to do. He gave a short grunt, and then suddenly leaped forward across her, while she immediately parted her legs. At the same moment they were writhing and biting like fighting dogs, pulling each other's clothes off. Yelling, screaming, they were caught up in a whirlpool and dragged down to a depth of which no memory usually remains...

He woke with a start. He had slept for no longer than a minute. He turned his head to the side. Above the slowly fading glow of an incense stick, a thin white cone of ash bent further and further forward and broke off.

"I must be going," he said.

Again he studied the topology of the chiromancer. It was as though she were also a snake-woman: her posture was an impossible one, like in an Escher drawing. Her curls of hair had worked loose and lay over her shoulders and back like congealed lava, but it might also have been her breast. Without waking her, he wriggled out from beneath her and opened a door behind which he suspected the bedroom lay. He lifted her up. She was as light as a child; he laid her carefully on the bed and pulled

the blankets over her. She had not woken. Because he felt agitated, as though he were in a hurry, he did not take a shower; he washed with cold water in the kitchen, dried himself with a clammy towel, dressed quickly, and scrutinized the flat.

In the Swedish whitewood bookcase there was a postcard of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, perhaps because of the pregnant bride's hand, which lay palm upward in that of the bridegroom. The back of the card was blank. He pulled a yellow pencil with an eraser on the end out of his inside pocket, produced a small pencil sharpener from a side pocket of his blazer, sharpened the pencil meticulously in an ashtray, and wrote: "I'll never forget this.—Max." For a moment he considered leaving his telephone number, but did not. He carefully placed the card on her small desk against a polished veined-pink stone, perhaps invested with magic powers, but perhaps simply a souvenir from a southern beach. Then he blew out the candles, left the incense burning, and gently closed the door behind him.

Sexual satisfaction had washed every part of him clean. He was reminded of a vacation in Venice when violet-colored mountains suddenly appeared on the horizon after a storm. His tiredness had gone and with Schubert's First Symphony on the radio—probably the Berlin Philharmonic under Bohm—he drove haphazardly down the empty winter streets. He was free! He wanted nothing more now! This was as wonderful as fucking itself, or the certainty beforehand that it was going to happen. Or was it even more wonderful? Was the reason that he wanted to sleep with a woman every day, a different one every day, ultimately to achieve this aim: not to want to for a short time? What a happy old man he would be. But of course that was not how it would be; when that time came, he would want to want what he was no longer capable of. Happiness was not freedom from chains but release from chains. Chains were an indispensable part of happiness!

He had no idea where he was, but by driving straight ahead as far as possible he was bound to reach the edge of town. The Hague was not that big. Suddenly he recognized a junction. On the deserted pavement stood a large man in a long overcoat, who raised his hand.

Surely a mugger would not operate like this, he thought, at one in the morning in the freezing cold. He signaled, pulled over with a rapid movement, and stopped. He saw the man come jogging up in the mirror; he turned off the radio, leaned over, and wound down the window on the other side.

Onno, bending low, looked into Max's narrow, fanatical face. It reminded him of an ibis, the Egyptian *Ibis religiosa*, with its thin neck and curved beak; there was something dangerous about it like an ax. Max, for his part, surveyed Onno's full, domineering features. The transition from the forehead to the straight nose was classical, with no curve; beneath was an equally classical small mouth, with curved lips, scarcely broader than his nostrils. It struck him as vaguely familiar.

"Where are you headed?"

"Are you going toward Amsterdam?"

"In you get."

Onno took a step back and surveyed the car disapprovingly. "But under protest!"

"Please, I beg you," said Max in amusement.

Once, with some effort, he had managed to sit—or, rather, lie—down, Max put his foot down and the car leaped forward like a racehorse.

"Nice motor," said Onno with an expression that indicated he thought his benefactor was not quite right in the head.

Max burst out laughing. "Oh, this is nothing. When I grow up, I shall buy a white open-topped Rolls Royce, and I'll sit on the back seat in a white fur coat, with a beautiful woman at the wheel."

Pulling a wry face, Onno was forced to laugh a little too, and turned his head to one side. He already

had the beginnings of a double chin. "Why don't you buy a pram right away?"

~~Max glanced at him for a moment. They had found each other—this was the moment. Did they both realize it? With those few words a bridge had been built. Max knew he had been seen through by Onno as never before, just as Onno felt understood by Max, because his aggressive irony had not met with resistance, as it invariably did, but with a laugh that had something invulnerable about it. They had recognized each other. A little embarrassed by the situation, they were silent for a few minutes.~~

Once they had left the stately avenue through Wassenaar behind them and reached the dark motorway, Max accelerated to a hundred miles an hour and said: "I have the feeling I know you from somewhere. Wasn't your photo in the paper recently?"

"Of course my photo was in the paper recently," said Onno, as if he had been asked if he could read. "For what reason?"

"Can't you remember? Have you already forgotten?"

"I confess my shortcomings."

"My photo was in the paper," pontificated Onno, "because I received an honorary doctorate from Uppsala."

"May I congratulate you belatedly? And what was it for?"

"So you can't remember that, either. Tell me, what do you know?"

"Almost nothing."

"It was because I made Etruscan comprehensible. The greatest minds in the world had failed—even Professor Massimo Pellegrini in Rome was too stupid—so I thought I might as well do it."

Max nodded. Now he remembered: the large man in tails, pretending to be astonished as he received the diploma from a lady in an academic cap, as though it were a complete surprise to him.

Onno looked sideways. "And what about you?" he asked. "What do you do for a living? I can't recall ever having seen your photo in the paper."

"What a shit you are," said Max, laughing. "I do astronomy." Motioned right with his head. "Over there. In Leiden."

Onno looked at the town on the edge of the bare fields. "Don't you need to turn off here, then?"

"I live in Amsterdam, thank God. That's why I have a car." Onno put out his hand and said, "Onno Quist." Max shook the hand. "Delius, Max."

Onno never answered curious questions about his discovery. "You can read all about it in *the Journal of Near Eastern Studies*," he was wont to say. "I don't work overtime." Now, however, in response to Max's question how he had deciphered the script, he explained patiently that it was not a matter of deciphering, seeing that it had been legible for donkey's years. It consisted largely of the Greek alphabet, but it was not Greek; it was incomprehensible. It was as if someone who knew no Greek were to learn the Greek alphabet and then try to read the *Iliad*. The Etruscans were an Italic people, he lectured, living in what was now Tuscany. The Roman conquerors called them "Tusci." Latin was full of Etruscan loanwords, such as *persona* for "mask," but apart from that there were only a few words whose meaning was known, such as those for "god," "woman," and "son."

The problem was that there was no long *bilingue* as there had been with Champollion's Rosetta stone, with the same text in Etruscan and a known language. So they were connected with the Greek in some way, and at the same time their language was totally unconnected with Greek. They wrote their language phonetically with Greek characters, like first-year high school pupils did with the names, and like Dutch people did with Roman letters. So that in about the ninth century B.C. the people came from somewhere where there were also Greeks. However—and that was the decisive flash of inspiration—it was of course also possible that the Greeks had once borrowed their alphabet from the Etruscans in order to write their own language, Greek. Of course it was a totally crazy idea, but following that line of reasoning, supported by all kinds of archaeological considerations, he arrived at the Cretan languages, Linear B, deciphered fifteen years previously by his late colleague Michael Ventris, and Linear A from the eighteenth century—which in turn had Semitic origins . . .

"In short, my dear Watson," he said as they were passing Schiphol airport, "through combination and deduction and a lot of luck and wisdom, I found the answer. It's true that Professor Pellegrini still regards me as a fantasist and a charlatan, but that is largely an indication of his autistic nature."

"What did you study?"

"Law." Law?

"It's a family disease."

"But all those languages. . ."

"A hobby. I'm an amateur, like the great Ventris, who was an architect by profession. If I have to, I can learn a language in a month. I could read by the time I was three."

"How many languages do you know then?"

"I'm bad at counting. That strikes me as more in your line. How many stars are there?"

"We haven't counted them all yet, and anyway, the number isn't constant. In one galaxy alone there are about a hundred billion. As many as a human being has brain cells."

"Speak for yourself."

"In addition there are about a hundred million known galactic systems, as many as I have brain cells, so you can work it out. A one and twenty-two naughts. How many languages are there?"

"A mere nothing. About two thousand five hundred."

"Can you read hieroglyphics too?"

"What kind of hieroglyphics?"

"Egyptian."

"Nothing to it. I can speak them too. *Paut neteroe her resch sep sen ini Asar sa Heme nen ab mheroe sa Ast auau Asar*. Which, being interpreted, is: 'The paut of the gods rejoice at the coming

Osiris's son Horus, upright in heart, whose word is absolute, son of Isis, heir of Osiris.' "

"Goodness me! What does 'paut' mean?"

"Well, that's a bit of a problem. How annoying of you to ask. Most experts believe that it refers to the primeval substance the gods are made of; but in fact it's even more complicated, because in the Book of the Dead the god creator says: 'I created myself from the primeval substance, which I made. But I won't weary you with such archaic paradoxes.'"

"They seem quite modern to me," says Max. "Where do you live? I'll drop you off at your door."

Both turned out to live in the center, not far from each other. As they drove into the city, Onno told Max that he could read hieroglyphics by the time he was eleven, and that he had taught himself with an old English textbook, which he had bought in the market for twenty-five cents, so that by using a dictionary he learned English at the same time. That had been in the last winter of the war—when hunger and cold had finally broken him, he said—immediately wondering why he was telling something like this to a total stranger. At home, when he was young, he didn't talk about his language studies. He thought that anyone who made the slightest effort could do it.

It was always the same with talent: a writer could not imagine that there was anyone who could not write. Onno only realized that it was not so ordinary on one occasion after the war when they were on holiday in Finland. They were in their hotel in Hämeenlinna, somewhere among those depressing lakes and pine forests, and the evening before their departure the food was cold, or barely warm. His father called the manager, who then pretended to tell off the waiter but in fact said that he shouldn't worry about those stingy cheeseheads, because the next day they were already bugging off to the stupid tulips and windmills. Whereupon he, Onno, inquired whether he had taken leave of his sense speaking about his guests like that, or whether perhaps he wanted his head smashed in with a Dutch clog. Everyone was speechless. He could speak Finnish! After three weeks! A Finno-Ugric language. And when he saw his father's perplexed face, he thought: I've got one over on you, Your Excellency.

"Are you a son of *that* Quist?" asked Max in surprise.

"Yes, *that* Quist."

"Wasn't he prime minister or something before the war?"

"Would you mind speaking a little less casually about my father, Delius, Max? The four years of the Quist cabinet are among the darkest in human civilization. The Dutch nation languished under the theocratic reign of terror of my honored father, against whom I will not hear a word of criticism, and certainly not from someone with such a ridiculous automobile."

"At least it got us home," said Max, stopping the car. "You can't even drive, if you ask me."

"Of course not! What do you take me for? A chauffeur? There are things one simply isn't allowed to know how to do. For example, something else that you are not allowed to be able to do is serve food with a fork and spoon in the fingers of one hand, because that means you're a waiter. Of course you can do it just as well, but a gentleman like me is not used to serving himself. A gentleman like me does that very clumsily, with two hands, and even then I drop half on the tablecloth, because that's the way to do it."

In the light of the streetlamps in the narrow street they could now see each other better. Onno thought Max was actually far too well groomed to be taken seriously; he was wearing the sort of Anglo-Saxon bourgeois outfit, with a blazer and checked shirt, that Onno also disliked on his brother and brothers-in-law. Max, in his turn, felt that Onno would not cut a bad figure as an organ-grinder around his ears and under his chin there were also various places he had missed while shaving. Perhaps he was short-sighted, having gone cross-eyed from poring over ideograms.

Onno proposed driving to Max's house; then he would walk back. They noted with satisfaction that there were still people in the street and that there were still lights on everywhere in the house, whereas in The Hague all life had been totally extinguished. At the high gate into the park Max locked

his car and put on his coat; Onno saw that he was also wearing brown suede shoes. He was about to say goodbye, but now it was Max who said: "Come on, I'll walk along with you for a little way."

There was the sound of police sirens from the direction of the Leidseplein: something was going on, perhaps the last throes of a demonstration against the Americans in Vietnam.

"Are you also an honorary doctor of the university of Uppsala?" inquired Onno, "like me?"

"I haven't got that far yet."

"You're not an honorary doctor of the university of Uppsala?" cried Onno in dismay, and stopped. "Can someone like me really speak to you?" Suddenly he changed tone, still looking at Max. "Do you know that your face is all wrong? You have steely, extremely unsympathetic blue eyes, but at the same time a ridiculously soft mouth, which I wouldn't like to be seen with."

Max looked up at him. Onno was almost a head taller. "That's right," he said after a moment of hesitation.

"No, that isn't right."

"It's right that it's not right."

"And that nose of yours would be better cloaked totally in the mantle of love."

"Hunting dogs always have long snouts—they're better for sniffing with. You mustn't take me personally, but a Pekingese can't smell a thing. And anyway, I'm not a *doctor cum grano salis* like you, but a real one, with a thesis and all."

"I can hear it already. You're one of those fools who think that achievement is more praiseworthy than talent. What was your thesis on?"

"Hydrogen line spectra."

"What in heaven's name is that?"

"You won't understand. You have to be very clever for that."

Max mentioned that he was an astronomer at Leiden Observatory. He had recently had an offer of a fellowship at the Mount Palomar Observatory in California, where a Leiden colleague of his was presently in charge, the man who had discovered quasars; but he was more interested in radio astronomy, with which you could see what was invisible, even during the day. Optical astronomers were pale nightwatchmen, and if a cloud appeared they could just as well get on their bikes and cycle home into the wind; apart from that, he had better things to do at night. He went regularly to Dwingeloo, in Drenthe, to the radio telescope there. A huge synthetic radio telescope was being built near Westerbork, consisting of twelve mirrors, of which one was completed. It was going to be the biggest telescope in the world, and he had high hopes for it.

"By the way, you just said that it all began in the war with you—perhaps it was the same for me. In the middle of town the night sky had a clarity that today you find only at sea, or on Mount Palomar. At a certain moment I was in a kind of boarding school, run by priests. When they sang vespers in the chapel at night, I sometimes woke up and leaned out the window. I think that those quiet nights and those stars and that Gregorian chant and the war laid the foundation for my choice of career, for want of a better word. Maybe because those stars had nothing to do with the war." At the word *stars* he glanced upward, but the glow of the city was now reflected by a gray blanket of clouds.

"So you were brought up as a Catholic. Or are you still one?"

"I was brought up as nothing."

"How did you wind up in that institution, then?"

Max said nothing. He turned up the collar of his camel-colored coat and crossed the lapels, keeping them in hold of them with his gloved hand. The fathers below in the chapel sang:

*"Kyrie eleison, kyrie eleison,
Christe eleison, Christe eleison."*

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