

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

DUŠAN DIM
SORRY, YOUR LIFE
DOESN'T EXIST

PUBLISHED BY: CANKARJEVA ZALOŽBA, 2011

TRANSLATED BY: TAMARA M. SOBAN

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Dušan Dim: Sorry, Your Life Doesn't Exist

Excerpt 1: - Introduction: A Call in the Night

A call wakes you up in the small hours. A woman's voice. What do you do? Easy: You go by the Code. You accept her as a Gift that's arrived with a reason. Possibly, you remember Little Richard's *Oo-oo-ooooh, baby. Some fun tonight!*

But what do you do if the woman is someone who's lost her mandate? Who's been switched off? Who ... doesn't exist?

Shaken, you realize the Code doesn't have a rule for this case, despite its extensiveness. No paragraph, no article to deal with this. No example.

Then you sink. Into a torrent of questions. What kind of a test is this? Why have you been chosen? Have you exhibited some unhealthy reaction? Violated the Code? But – the Code doesn't have a rule for this. And when the thundering vortex of uncertainty finally spews you out, you make a dash for answers. Directly to him. The eternally wakeful teacher, the navigator, the advisor. K -- the great supervisor. So that's what I did.

"Mentor?" I whispered into the dark.

The only answer I got was a serene, still, fathomless silence. I lit up the screen, connected to his window. And found what? An inconspicuously shadowed icon: A wise old man with a beard wound around his ears. Quite mute, he didn't as much as blink. I flinched. It hadn't been him calling me then?

You wonder how it's even possible. You recall reports of odd faults. You check the operating of the organism. Your eyes slide down the rows of chrome-green figures. Processes, okay. Air mixture, okay. Power, okay.

Then what?

You go after the one who – or should I say which? – is hiding unbearably close. Under your skin. Inside you. The obsolete, obstinately complacent, but in reality feeble processor that has now finally seen its last hour. There's nothing to it. You'll have to come to terms with it. You promise yourself you'll see about getting a replacement first thing. And you close your eyes.

But what do you do if there's another knock on your aural membranes at that same moment?

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There was a knock all right ...

"Tom, are you awake?" said the female voice, reedy and thin as the stem of a polar flower.

"Who is this?" I asked.

“To think of all the nights we spent adding to the scope of the Kamasutra manual,” she said. “And now you don’t even recognize my voice. Well, I’m not really surprised in view of everything.”

Ena?! No way. Fear sunk its sharp claws into the fabric of my thoughts. Ripping it, shredding it. I had accumulated a whole lot of unhealthy reactions. I’d been upset, succumbed to reminiscing about an unplugged woman. I uttered her name in the middle of the night without notifying Mentor. And to make matters worse, now I was still hesitating. No doubt: I was a liability to the Group, in violation of the Code.

No, it needn’t be too late, I thought. Maybe I can still catch up with my duty. If I start now. I returned to Mentor, about to turn the emergency hotline switch.

My intention was cut short by the voice on the other side.

“Leave the old trickster alone, Tom. Mentor has nothing to do with this. This call is just between you and me. Do you hear me, Tom?”

Suddenly a breeze of relief blew over my fear. What absolute nonsense. Switched-off people talking? Mentor’s asleep and I’m hearing voices in the middle of the night? Diagnosis: A hibernation-related digression! A rare, but by no means unprecedented, scientifically proven occurrence. Another name for a nightmare. Now that was a tangible explanation. Solid, logical, waterproof. So it had been you to get me into this mess... my maladjusted processor, a confused remnant of a discarded generation.

“Are you telling yourself you can hear voices of those who’ve been switched off? That there’s no such thing as someone coming *back* from the Bridge? Well, Tom. It’s time to change some of your old views. Let me blow a little truth into your ear. Something to clear up that unbearable fog of lies Ancestors have shrouded you in. Let’s talk about what you’re really doing. What it’s like to be switched off.” Her words kept rolling over me as inexorably as lava down a volcano slope. “Yeah, let’s do that, I can tell you a few things about that. Straight from the horse’s mouth.

“Because I’ve been to the Bridge with a single exit, because I’ve heard the blessing by the standard of the Magnificent Series while my blood turned to ice. On that wobbly Bridge, Tom, with white flashes of explosions all around you, you lose all sense of direction. No one comes to your aid. You’re all alone. Neither here nor there. Powerless, unable to move. Alone, paralyzed. On that awful Bridge you know why switching off used to be called murder before Ancestors twisted all meanings inside out with their trick mirrors. And murder is murder, even if you sweeten the pill by giving it a friendly name and committing it from the plush upholstered shelter of Mentor’s voting meetings. Murder by remote control is still murder.”

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Her words lay heavy on my soul. I barely managed to find my voice, and it was hoarse. “I’m sorry, Ena,” I said.

“That’s alright,” she said. “If you’d acted differently, you’d only get switched off as well. But we’ll talk about this some other, more peaceful time. We’ll meet somewhere safe, remote – just you and me. Outside the network. Where we don’t need to hide, where there’s no one to

eavesdrop. We don't have time now. The line can go dead any moment, and there's something I need to tell you in confidence before it's too late. Tom, are you listening closely?"

"Why did you choose me of all people, I'm just a –"

"Why Tom? Don't run away from me. Don't hide. You know and I know – you're special. You're the only one in the whole Group I can rely on to do this. For this reason now accept the words of wisdom that circles the territories far away from home, outside the reach of the old man's arm, outside Mentor's stifling body armor. To put it plainly, Tom – *they* are ready. They're intelligent, collected, merciless. Focused on a single goal. They've come to finally bust up your apparent order. To subdue your world."

"If this world of ours is a den of depravity and corruption – how come you're so worried about it?"

"I'm not worried about your charade," she replied. "I'm worried about what's coming to replace it. They want to freeze us, switch us off, hollow us out. Me and you and all of us. What's coming is the scourge of god, a perennial ice age, Tom. And something must be done."

"Something must be done, Ena? What are we talking about here? A tube in a lightbox that needs replacing, a bedroom wall that needs painting? Done, you say... Hold on, just give me a sec to locate my instructions manual what to do in case of the end of the world."

"First you need to locate the instructions for unblocking your thoughts. Flush away these questions and get down to the task in hand: In plain words, you must stop them, you must prevent their arrival."

"It wouldn't hurt to know who they are, and how I can recognize them."

"You Mentor's people have created a world of masks. Nothing but masks everywhere. An ideal world for people who want to hide by being inconspicuous. They can invade anytime, anyplace. Maybe even in the guise of Bureau members, gabbing about security. But that doesn't matter, Tom: It'll be their goal that'll give them away."

She paused, collecting her thoughts.

"They're enormously ambitious," she said. "And they're after the shiniest laurels. The heart of the System. Mentor's Being."

Mentor's Being? What an absurdity. That was the holy inner layer; the eternal flame that inspired us with power; the home of the untouchable part of our Ancestors – Conquerors of the Universe, Keepers of History, vanquishers of transience. The Being was sealed when they simultaneously left the imprints of their palms on the Mirror. Forever.

"Tom," Ena spoke again. "Don't let it enter your trusting brain to try and go talk to him about this. Mentor mustn't know about any of this until it's time."

"You know I'm obliged to do just that. I *have* to let him know. I have to –"

"Do you want to go to the Bridge? Would you like to be switched off straight away? No, Tom, he mustn't know because this is..."

"Because this is..."

"Go on, Tom, let's finish this thought together. Let's not mince words anymore, let's not stick to Mentor's threadbare guidelines anymore. Let's speak plainly. There is a secret. A secret

exists. Let's rub this in. A secret... I'm losing the frequency, they must be on to me. I'll get in touch as soon as I can. And you, don't forget. You're all vulnerable. The smallest little thing can bring you down, so don't let anything slip by you, don't miss any sign. And don't accept another..."

"What, Ena? What shouldn't I accept? Ena... Where are you? How can I find you? How will I know the signs?"

My words drowned in the universe of digital circuits. The other side remained mute, the line dead as a dead-end alley in a ghost town.

I lingered on on my coordinate, feeling as though I had been pushed overboard ship into an ocean of dread in the middle of the night... and was now swept along by poisonous currents... In the morning, there'll be a Session, Mentor's drilling questions, and I... The Bridge... Then... Ena said... The Bridge.

EXCERPT 2: Between Marta and Mentor

To hell with it, I said to myself. Let's go to the source and find out what rules apply in cases of night calls from people who've been switched off. I made my way through the sea of dancers. The stats of the people I was passing flashed on the display: Body temperature, distance between myself and them, their status in the Group. They made me sway, like a water current. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a feeling of losing control, of someone else taking charge of my organism. Mentor? Why would he do that? Was he just playing with me – an old man's capricious joke to amuse himself, to satisfy a whim?

I found what I was looking for at the edge of the crowd. "Marta," I said, spreading my arms. "I admit. I haven't given you a proper reception. Welcome to the Bureau, welcome to the family."

"You?" said Marta. "Does this have anything to do with the two fallen birdcraft? Are you worried about viruses?"

"We're members of the same Bureau. Why don't we have a heart to heart."

"Here?"

I glanced around the Lounge. "Of course not," I replied. "Let's make the most of the opportunity. Let's trans out." I gave her my hand. She took it and we walked across the dance floor to the staircase leading to the edge of the Dome.

I entered the trans. The picture blurred, tearing up. I got lost and reassembled in a desert immersed in a reddish twilight. A warm wind was pushing dried pieces of uprooted shrubs around. Two butterflies fluttering restlessly in the heavy, thick air caught my attention. Before I could work out what they represented they'd transformed into a pair of gleaming eyes. Next,

Marta's shoes came clippety-clopping from the dense purplish haze.

We sat down on the edge of the canyon, on the red metal of an untamed Delahaye 178, year 1948. I reminded myself that Marta had taken Ena's place in the family, which gave her exclusive license to access Ena's archives, and that her tiny waisted body had the shape of the ancient hourglass.

I scrolled down the menu, picking a quinine concoction with drops of gin and lime. Marta chose a beverage called the kangaroo: a mixture of watermelon juice, vodka, and olive-flavored vermouth.

I adjusted the focus on my observation devices while we chatted. Marta's knees were pressed together and covered with a pink skirt. Freckles and thin lines were indicators her skin was not being regularly regenerated in the vitalizing salon, since she was operated by an older-generation processor. But which one? I extracted from the catalogue a string of processors that fit the bill by individual features. There were a lot of explainable elements, but one did not fit in with any of the options. It puzzled me. Her greenish eyes, barely perceptibly scanning her environment, drinking it all in. I had never seen eyes like that before. Not even in the large general catalogue. Or its expanded version.

I said: "People are worried. They feel we haven't done enough in terms of defense against viruses. And what happened today's not going to make things any better."

Marta made smacked her lips. "So far, the presence of any virus hasn't been confirmed. The safety ring may have held, soon there may be no more reason for concern."

I looked at the investigation report on the screen. The diagnostic center was putting the awesome power of its processors into deconstructing the lives of both fallen birdcraft into molecules and atoms.

"What signs are typical of viruses?" I asked.

"High blood pressure, a sense of shortage of oxygen, skin irritations, high body temperature, loss of orientation, mechanical repetition of motions or words. And a few other minor things, less frequent."

"What about hearing voices in your head? Would that be a minor thing too?"

Marta smiled. "The parallel neuro-situation syndrome."

"Was this unintelligible name your way of trying to get rid of me? It didn't work. I'm still here."

"Hearing voices in your head..." she explained, punctuating her words by turning her wrists, "as you call them, are most often a processor malfunction. Any correlation with a virus is highly unlikely."

"But it is possible," I said. Scooping a handful of sand I let it trickle through my fingers down to the last grain. "And do you always catch on to such malfunctions?"

"Such malfunctions present an extreme risk for the entire Group. When they occur, when a Group member is affected, the security shield immediately initiates the procedure. Luckily, these malfunctions have been virtually eradicated. New processors don't even know such malfunctions:"

Her words had me thinking. "The procedure" was just another name for switching off, for taking a walk across the bridge of no return. I downed the diluted sherry and vermouth and wished to down much more of it. Okay, ladies and gentlemen, tonight, for you: Boogie Woogie Man. Jerry Lee Lewis. The Killer. Let it rip, Jerry. Hit them keyboards. Hit them hard. So hard they'll hear you in the last row.

"And how's the interceptions?" I said. "I mean, have you had any luck lately, these last days?"

She rose, walked around the dark, disappearing momentarily to reappear on the other side. The lights of the cars speeding through the desert night reflected in her eyes.

"I don't understand you, Tom. Why are you asking me these strange questions? You're not implying something I..."

"You saw the birdcraft. Their crash was not exactly in accordance with all the standards. In times like these we shouldn't be closing our eyes to other, more daring hypotheses. Have you intercepted any voices?"

"No," she said. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

We sat on, in silence, on the edge of the canyon, with cars cruising far down below us like homeless lizards. They'd pull up, pull off, overtake one another, make U-turns. A Cadillac drove up to where we were. Seated on its ribbed seats were a boy with grease in his hair and wearing a leather jacket and a girl with bangs. They stared at us with the solemn expressions of teenage importance – as if called upon to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders.

I met Marta's eye and we burst out laughing.

Immediately, the Cadillac's tall tail wings swooshed through the night air. The boy and the girl sped back to the Golden Fifties.

I stared at my black suede boots. Funny, I thought. It felt as though I'd found it. A glimmer at the end of a weird chain of events. The sign Ena had warned me about. The sign I had been looking for. As fleeting and minuscule as the key that opens a trinket box. A single glint of Marta's green eyes and everything was different. As though the sky-high wall of the Event had a hole in it, and the gap that separated our eternal time from the former limited times had been breached.

I leaned over to the dial and set it to a track by Del Shannon. *Runaway*. Yeah, right. The way I heard things was definitely different than ever before. The mask of time had been pulled back, I had found a connection with a long-gone era. I had a secret I couldn't share with anyone. Like Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, little brother Perkins, and Big Bopper I was weak and vulnerable and... I could be switched off. I felt why their songs emanated the premonition of all the ill-fated roads, drunk driver, crashed airplanes, with the impressions left by coincidence lying all around – coincidence which our era had squeezed out, expelled, ejected.

Coincidence – the great secret. The possibility of this being the last time you are looking at the sky, standing above a canyon, with white rivers rushing below. The feeling that it could all

break your heart. The fire of possibility ignited inside me. Now I knew why they used to sing about girls. Because they were a secret, too. Now I knew what it felt like to have a girl with a ponytail. *Peggy Sue*. My secret girl who got away from the Bridge and came dancing to me in the middle of the night.

Marta said: "Why is it you feel different, changed?"

Changed?

A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-lop-bop-bop!

Pushing the soles of my feet against the large chromeplated bumper I got up. "Come," I said. Marta's hand slipped into mine.

Richard started singing.

I got a girl called Daisy! She almost drives me crazy!

We jumped into the sand.

Tutti Frutti, aw-rooty.

Standing there in my suede boots and gold coat – a rock'n'roller on the edge of a canyon, at the city's final frontier – I had a secret.

Ooh, my soul.

A tornado swirled above the desert when our request for additional Energy was authorized. We were able to switch to the next phase.

On the backseat, Marta let down her hair, took off the yellow cardigan and undid her pink skirt. I dimmed the interior and waited for her to lower herself down to me.

Putting my arms around her, I listened to her breathing. Her breath touched my face. Her words penetrated me. "You forgot to turn on the autopilot," she said.

I looked at the screen. The info box was filled up with messages about the failure. *Professor Tom, you have forgotten to turn on the autopilot... Do you require any help? ... Set the automatic...*

Marta whispered: "Has that ever happened to you before?"

I knew this was a statistical discrepancy. That a thing like this was a rare occurrence. For others.

"You want the truth?" I said. "I'll tell you the truth if you promise not to laugh. You know how it is. Commanders, we love to laugh, but only and always at the expense of others."

"Okay. The laughter sector's locked. I want the truth, yes."

I rapped my head with my knuckles. "It's probably its fault. My corroded processor's. What happens is... Well, whenever I switch to the autopilot there's always this one track... If I could turn it off, I wouldn't mind the autopilot at all. But they hadn't thought of that option in the R&D. Obviously, the problem is me. R&D has nothing to do with that."

"You can't stand the default Golden Fifties track?"

"It makes me bileous."

"Only You?" Marta started laughing. "Only You? But that's the absolute favorite for situations like this. According to the statistics, 78.9% of all couples can't imagine completely open communication without that song."

"Apparently I'm not among them."

She could not stop laughing.

"And, I don't need an extra explanation from you," I said. "Let's leave that to one of the million algorithms."

I turned on the autopilot and initiated the procedure. "Only You" promptly came on. Already the first bars triggered an adverse response of my nervous system – a valve started pulsating in my belly. When the accompanying vocals sang a harmony I felt nauseous. It passed as the autopilot took neurological control of my organism. It pulled the joystick away from me. I began to get lost in the communal rhythm. My heart beat excessively, my thoughts melted. My reason was shutting down. I felt a growing urge to ask a question *about Ena*. Had she known her? Did she know anything about her now? Why weren't the switchings off 100%? Marta put her arms around me, undid my golden zipper. Laying me on my back she whispered in my ear.

"So you want to bring your memories along into the embrace?"

I pulled back. "No. What gave you the idea?"

"What do you want to do with them?"

"Let it go..."

Her fingers grabbed at my skin. I wanted to disengage myself, get away. But I was in the grip of the autopilot and Marta and the damn smart-bed system. I wished I could cry out and interrupt the communication. But Mentor would be sure to hear me. Despite his power saving mode. He would surely hear me. He was ubiquitous. There whether you needed him or not. I didn't need him now, but he was here nonetheless, probably even closer than I thought. Steering me around like an instrument. He had sent me here, it had been his decision.

"Proceed to next stage?" asked Marta.

I nodded. As the sheets began to rustle and the autopilots sought statistically most suitable positions and we began to approach, all I could think of was how I could keep my secret safe. They'll wrench it from me, demote me like Ena. Switch me off, right? She was breathing next to me, driving me crazy. I felt her kisses, the rhythm of the autopilot. It kept increasing...

The arms around me locked tighter, as if to suffocate me. The words fused into an indistinct murmur with only fragments of words rising to the surface: list... power... no... Ena... Ena, hold me tight. She had occupied me. I was drowning, losing touch... I had never felt anything like that before. She was alive all right, no doubt about that. Hold me tight, Ena... Marta...

Then a voice pierced me. *Tom. The communication has expired.* Before I could process the message I strong gust of vertigo sucked me in and dragged me with it. I lost sense of direction. My gravitational center was desperately searching for something to pin on to and seconds stretched like elastic.

Slowly, the spatial components started to resettle again. The image recomposed into a recognizable whole. Marta and I were standing on the edge of the Dome, on the same spot where we'd gone into the trans. Bewildered we watched the commotion. Something was clearly very wrong. The Lounge dance floor was emptying and red signal lights were flashing everywhere. Urgent mail was filling the inbox. A message from Mentor: Emergency session.

We exchanged glances. There was something frightening in those green eyes of hers. I wonder who she'll play the tapes of me to? For whom will she copy the diagram of my heart? For whom?

Don't wait, Tom, join the others. That's what the voice inside me said. Him. My loyal companion who had never let me down. Mentor.

A shiver ran down my spine. I had slipped up. I kept trespassing in the forbidden zone. Not heeding advice. Not taking up good offers. Not having fun at a party. I had isolated myself from the Group, argued with the members of the Bureau, mocked the celebration of our glorious achievements. Enough? No. I'd scoffed at the choice of musical accompaniment, torn off my mask, praised history that was dead and gone. Enough? No, not yet. I had let myself dwell on the memories of a woman who'd been switched off. A traitor. Enough? Not enough. Why not look around a bit and find this woman? Sent to the Bridge? No problem, you can return from there. The Bridge of No Return? Just an old man's trick. You know. You can never trust him completely.

Except when he comes to get you...

In a matter of seconds, all members of the family were sitting in the Staff Room. Mentor had fixed us a beverage and saw to it that there was a pleasant breeze in the room. The peaceful atmosphere whipped my anxiety into frenzy. It occurred to me that everything was giving me away. There was no point in lying. I was lost. I didn't stand a chance of avoiding being switched off. Or the horrific Bridge. That was what lay ahead of me. Being switched off and the Bridge.

Excerpt 3: Take off the masks!

At one of the dances I spotted a different mask in the gyrating crowd. A dangerously attractive one. It covered the woman's entire face, only her eyes scrutinizing me through barely visible slits. I felt I just had to have her.

When she realized I was homing in on her, she tried to get away. That cleared up the opaque fog of my cocktail-induced stupefaction. Warmth spread through my body. The thrill of mystery. Better than anything else. At last something had taken hold of my heart! The stranger had rekindled in me the fire of interest, which the long period of partying had almost completely extinguished. I hadn't felt like that since... since Ena's nighttime call.

Ena. Did this mysterious figure know something? Why was she running away? And where to?

Slipping through the crowd, the disguised figure descended the stairs illuminated by flickering candles. I followed her to the ground floor and out across the courtyard. I almost caught up with her by the pool, but she slipped away from me again, mingling with other masks. I pushed my way through to the footpath that meandered into the forest. There, I found a silk scarf lying on the flagstones. I snatched it up. An embroidered letter stared at me.

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I plunged into a part of the wood thickly planted with standard oak trees. People strolling along moved out of my way, showering me with interest, but I only noticed them as blotches. All my attention was focused on the masked stranger.

I switched over to hyperview, zooming optically, zooming digitally, scanning the radial field with the telescope. I scanned full circle. But: I couldn't spot her – the mask-woman was gone. I stood still, perplexed. Absent-mindedly my gaze palpated the footpath around me for some clues.

That's why I almost bumped into the woman standing under a tree. Her green eyes jabbed into me without any trace of docility.

"You're upset," said Marta. "I'm inclined to think you're looking for something. Am I right?"

It felt like being out on an open, oil-calm, moonlit sea and suddenly crashing against rocks. My ship wrecked and me thrown into stormy waters of doubt. Had I come upon the part of the realm I didn't have access to right here in this copse? Did Mentor have any special reasons to challenge me like this? Why was I feeling powerless now? Why did he send her?

"Marta," I managed to utter.

She came closer. "I don't want to spoil your fun. But since you're the first among the equal, I'm obliged to inform you."

"Speak up, your grace," I said.

"We've discovered something new about the viruses today."

"Viruses? I thought the invisible little creatures had gone down together with rock'n'roll."

"Some of them have no statute of limitation," she said. "But we'll have to get out of here if you want to learn more. Go to the Dome – if you still remember it."

"Not much better than Ike Turner's songs. Let's roll."

We reassembled in a grove above the complex of R&D buildings. A gentle breeze was ruffling the tall grasses, and the sky above the Dome was covered with pictures of R&B singers filtered through a dreamy mist. We started down the slope. As we neared the laboratory buildings my ear canal was filled with a whooshing sound. The curves in the sound mixer oscillated wildly.

Marta made a moue of distaste. "Let's make a detour," she said.

We followed the sound, stopping at the northernmost of the lab buildings.

"This is where the future members of the Group are made," said Marta.

Children were running around the grassy magnet yard, riding a carousel, climbing jungle-gyms made of cushy Spandex. A kindergarten.

“Have they already been classified in alliances?” I asked.

“These are pre-alliance kids. As we speak sensors gauge their every move, watchful eyes monitoring all their reactions. Individual characteristics will then be implanted in accordance with the measurements and the wishes of interested parents. Only then will they be handed over to the alliances.”

A boy with corn-blond hair broke away from the group and trotted up to us. Marta caressed his hair. “The Ural genotype,” she said. “His face is so full of sensitivity. Look at his little nose, his lips. He almost seems to feel the changes lying in store for him. He seems ...”

Marta’s soft fingers wandered through the little boy’s hair. Watching him it occurred to me I had grown through this stage myself. But was that me? There was nothing in my memory storage from that stage. No digital trace at all. The Code was specific on the issue: This was an unimportant, non-personality-forming, test stage of development, and any traces of it remaining after its completion were removed by technicians by resetting and upgrading. Could I then even claim to have lived through that stage – or was that not me, but someone I never knew? And if that was correct, who was then my predecessor? Who appointed him and chose him and deleted him?

The little boy watched Marta with large eyes.

“But he can’t feel, can he?” I said.

“No, of course not.”

She took her hand away and the boy ran back to the group.

Marta’s eyes followed him even after the boisterous crowd engulfed him.

I wondered what she was like in that stage. Which of the girls could she have been? Seen from the side her face softened. Was that trait apparent even back then? Or was it added later – in the stages that followed?

A thing I’ll never know. A thing we didn’t have in our records. Mentor’s archives contained all known history. All the battles, all values of currencies, all the books from the time before the great victory over transience. When the last unfortunate mortal died, also History lost sense. And so the old, limited, fragile world passed away as well. And also after the Event Mentor’s meticulous collecting continued. He preserved every little occurrence, every millisecond, every fragment on the time tracks. Everything broken down to its prime factors in several dimensions at once. Recorded, kept, remembered. Our collective Memory grew wider, more unlimited by the day.

But the time of the pre-alliance stage – could we call it the time of childhood? – wasn’t kept. Formally, time did not even exist outside the cycles. We had Memory, but we had no memories. Anything unnecessary to developing the Identities was forgotten. Also our memories of our member Ena were discarded. At first she was with us. We communicated with her, made love with her, had cocktails in the Lounge. Then followed the trial, the sentencing, her place became vacant, to be occupied by another member, and we started over the cycle.

We had Time, but did we have time?

Thinking along those lines amassed surplus unhealthy Energy in me. Mentor warned me of that. He extracted surplus energy with the turbo procedure, but the reserves filled up

immediately. I had to get my thinking back on track as soon as possible, return it to the standard frame.

"Marta," I said. "How are these children connected to the virus research you mentioned?"

"Something's going on under the guise of apparent peace." She walked across the yard and I followed by her side. The children ran about all around us, and Marta took me to a high bar from which children were swinging heads down. Among them there was a little girl in a purple and white dress with her hair in two ponytails. Marta took her off the bar and the girl rolled off into her arms with a smile. As different as they were, they both seemed to be linked and covered by the same silky look. A softness that was therefore present even in this early stage and continue to shine, subdued, in Marta's face as something that had survived subsequent resetting – like a reflection of her childhood.

"She has it too," Marta said. "The virus inhabited one of the copied processors that are often used also in donors. We've recalled the entire series, removed all related models from circulation, and we're taking even broader measures."

"What about her?" I asked. "Will she need a procedure? Surgery?" Marta kissed the girl on the cheek and set her on the ground. The little girl trotted off on her short legs over the grass carpet. Jumping up she grabbed the high bar with both hands and swung into her original position.

Marta's eyes bore into me. It seemed as though she had put on another mask. Without the slightest modulation in her voice she said. "She'll be switched off. Today."

Switched off. This... little girl? Her words cut my breath short. As if the claws of the Siamese pancat had grabbed at my throat. I thought of the party, of another dose of the opiate cocktail. Luminosity degraded and dimmed, my sensors became covered with darkness. Marta discolored into a silhouette, her words dragging. The next moment I saw her all in white. She had soft features. Like the little girl...

Damn unhealthy Energy! My eyes scanned the diagnostics. Hey! What was that? I was in the red zone all right, but below the evil limit! Mentor, stop your gadget, it's gone berserk. You can't! Look at the diagnostics.

And in that moment Marta disappeared. The unhealthy Energy vacuum sucked her up, not me.

All that remained was the official notice. Marta has just opted for an available session in the Counseling Office. She's gone to the White Room for a first-class treatment: free diagnostics, cleaning out memory wrinkles, and application of top-of-the-line processor cosmetics from the laboratories Fournier.

The little girl spun around the bar, arched her body, pushed herself off the bar and landed in the grass. She smiled.

"Can you do that?" she said.

"I could but I forgot."

The Counseling Office was an isolated sector where beneficial concentrations of healing nectars flowed in telenetworks. Behind one of its doors you could stock up on advice and genes from various periods. You could get instantly rid of all your bad memories in the Repository. And entering the Game Room you were filled with positive Energy to the brim. Behind a white door there was the White Room, where Doctor refreshed and replaced processors.

Sitting in the waiting room I watched the doors behind which all these good things could be had, vehemently declining offers of painless processor replacements. Finally the white door opened. Marta came out. As she approached, unease grew in me. Her exterior looked fresh, every hair in place, her movements soft. She had the after-massage glow. But her green eyes... as if they had been subjected to the deep-freeze program. Something icy glittered in them.

She beat me to the greeting: "Have you come for a processor replacement too?"

"Erm... not now," I said. "It's just that you left so suddenly I never got to say goodbye."

"Oh, that." She waved it off as though it was a highly insignificant etiquette nicety. She grew immediately livelier when she could go back to her opener. First-hand promotion of the White Room, straight from the horse's mouth. "You don't believe it until you've tried it," she said. "These new generation processors are really different. They open so many dimensions. And besides they're preset for refreshing and enhancement. It's best if you opt for a replacement straight away. This is an ideal opportunity. I'll wait for you and then we can go to the party together. If you like I can speak to Doctor for you."

"Thanks for the graphic presentation. But it'll have to be another time, Marta. They miss me in Bellevue. I have to get back as soon as possible."

"Fine," she said. "I have work to do too. Plenty of research still to do."

Oh, right, research. I have an idea for some research. Take a microscope, polish its lenses, and then zoom it on yourself. Straight into yourself. And try to figure out why you've become a different person in the time between entering and exiting the white door. Negligible? I don't think so.

But I never said a word. I just detransformed.

I climbed the palace staircase, walked to the far end of the gallery, and leaned on the balustrade. On the dance floor below me a steady beat thundered. Masks saturated with stimulants drowned in it.

Masks, masks, masks... The age-old elements were from the time before the Event, before the legalization of eternity, before the conquering of Space. From the other side, where ephemeral people were sentenced to an end of their lifespan at birth. Sentenced to mortality. Perhaps masks helped them cope with it. Perhaps they provided a refuge. But – it was as if these extinct Mortals knew that this magic object only had its power under certain conditions. They only used them on special occasions for ritual ceremonies. Masks were cleansing for them.

What about us? We had erased that condition as well, like everything else. We keep putting

on masks all the time. And changing them. Grab, put on, discard. Grab another. Another mask, another Identity, another meaning.

But haven't we missed their point? Aren't we only abusing them?

Are we really free of the past and the future? Is it really pointless to try and understand what is going on? Isn't this partying that is getting faster and crazier by the day only a delusion to help us avoid answering anything? Shouldn't we answer a question at least every now and then?

Oh, yes. All these masks – crowded together, in their thousands, discarded at the next turn – are only covering a great void. Now is the time to open our eyes and really look inside, to again find the way we've strayed off of, lured by the sweetness of oblivion.

"Clear the room!" I called out.