out out

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a girl?

delius max

for God's sake stay you stay

want to get out

close lid

where are you?

score

THE DISCOVERY OF HEAVEN

A novel

Harry Mulisch

First published in Dutch as *De ontdekking van de hemel* 1992
This translation first published in the USA by Viking Penguin,
a division of Penguin Putnam Inc. 1996
First published in Great Britain in Penguin Books 1998
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PART ONE
THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING

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, or 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 at 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 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 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 each woman in the present, past, and future. That was necessary because even here no one could know when 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 romantic, 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 their 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, her 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 Italians 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: a 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 full 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.

1
The Family Gathering

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 that 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 Quist. 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? Father, where are you? I am looking for you, but I am looking through a glass darkly. There 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, 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 maximo. 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. Soon 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 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. "With 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 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 to 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 lighter-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 institutes, 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 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.

2
Their Meeting

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, free, with 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 of 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; dark-brown hair lay in strange twists across her head, as though an enormous lizard had nestled there, 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; her 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 tea 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 in 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."

3
I'll See You Home

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 Greeks 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 their names, and like Dutch people did with Roman letters. So that in about the ninth century B.C. this 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 maä kheroe sa Ast auau Asar.* Which, being interpreted, is: 'The paut of the gods rejoice at the coming of 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 buggering off to their stupid tulips and windmills. Whereupon he, Onno, inquired whether he had taken leave of his senses, 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 brothers 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 houses, 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's 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 it personally, but a Pekingese can't smell a thing. And

anyway, I'm not a *doctor cum grano salts* 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 hold of them with his gloved hand. The fathers below in the chapel sang:

"Kyrie eleison, kyrie eleison,

Christe eleison, Christe eleison."

In the sky the Great Bear, Cassiopeia, the pole star—around which the axis of the heavens turned. Where was his mother?

He looked at Onno. "Shall I tell you?"

Onno saw that he had touched a nerve. "If it's not intended for my ears, I don't want to hear."

Max, too, was now surprised at himself. Not that he had anything to hide, but it wasn't something to make polite conversation about. He never talked to his colleagues and friends about it, to say nothing of his girlfriends, and he himself rarely thought about it. It was rather like the talent that Onno had talked about: all human beings were of course unique, and they only discovered that when someone else fell in love with them or when no one ever fell in love with them—but even extraordinary circumstances could seem perfectly natural, simply because they were as they were; and in that case the awareness of their extraordinariness only dawned when others found them extraordinary. A king's son, too, only realized later that flags were not put out for everyone in the country when it was their birthday.

The canals were frozen over. In the murky depths people were still skating; silent figures glided past with their hands on their backs, braking with blades scraping the ice when they came to the bridges, below which the ice was unreliable. As they walked through their city, past the Rijksmuseum, across the bridges with their strange sandstone and wrought-iron decorations of sea monsters that had crawled over the dunes, Max told Onno how his parents—as a result of the First World War—had found themselves in Amsterdam, how they met, how they separated, after which he went to live with his mother in South Amsterdam, behind the Concertgebouw. His father did not want to see them anymore, and when the Second World War came along he must have been overcome by some fateful urge. He reestablished contact with his former Austrian friends from the First World War, who in the meantime, since the country's annexation by Germany, had become pan-German generals and *SS-Obersturmbannführer.* In fact he, Max, knew all this only by hearsay; he'd never gone into it in depth. Perhaps his father needed to prove his pro-German attitude. He was still married to a Jewish woman; he had committed "a racial crime," even fathering a child with her, and perhaps that had to be put right first.

Meanwhile, he played a leading role in commercial relations with the occupying powers. His office grew into a semigovernmental institution, in fact specializing in plunder, particularly of Jewish goods, and through a lawyer he informed Eva Delius, nee Weiss that he wanted a divorce. But she refused: her marriage to an Aryan provided added protection against deportation, perhaps even more than the child she had had by him. In fact, that insistence on a divorce was already a disguised attempt to murder his wife. As emerged after the war, he finally enlisted the help of his former comrades.

One morning in 1942, Max told Onno—the year he was nine—the housekeeper picked him up from school; in the headmaster's room there was a gendarme with a tall cap, boots, and a white lanyard over his shoulder. He was told that his mother had suddenly left for an unknown destination and that he had to go with the gendarme and sort out his things. When he got home, a moving van was already outside the door, with the name PULS on it in huge letters; he remembered that distinctly. A couple of moving men were carrying the piano out.

Inside, men were walking around with lists, noting down everything, except of course the things that they were putting in their pockets. There were no Germans anywhere, just two policemen from the local force. Everything had been turned upside down, in his mother's bedroom, all the drawers and cupboards were open; her clothes lay in a heap on the floor. He was given five minutes to collect his belongings, and then he was taken to some Roman Catholic college. In his innocence, he said he wanted to go and see his father: he did not yet know that he was anathema to his father. His grandparents, the only other relations he still had in Holland, were in hiding somewhere; he did not know where—as little as he knew that his father had meanwhile also betrayed their address—nor that, like his mother, they had been transported to Auschwitz via the transit camp at Westerbork, from where none of them returned.

The collaborator had turned into a war criminal. Everyone called Weiss—and God knows who else from their spectrum—had to be wiped off the face of the earth. Max told Onno that after a few weeks the priests placed him with a childless middle-aged Catholic couple, who did not even require him to cross himself before meals. Occasionally, he cycled past his former house: the front door and windows were bricked up. He only heard about

his father again after the war when he was put on trial, and then only on one further occasion: a short newspaper report of his execution.

"Good God!" cried Onno. "Are you a son *of that* Delius? You deserve a lot of forgiveness, I believe."

They were back on the Kerkstraat. Small, narrow houses with wooden staircases up to the first floor, stone steps down to the door of the basement.

"My grandfather was a collaborator in the First World War," said Max, "my father in the Second World War, and to keep up the family tradition, I shall have to be one in the Third World War." As he lit a cigarette, he turned his head for a moment to inspect the calves of a passing woman.

"Am I correct in thinking," asked Onno, "that you're talking about your mother's death and first make a dubious joke and then look at a woman? What kind of a person are you?"

"I must be the kind of person who looks at a woman while he's talking about his mother's death. Anyway, I was also talking about my father's death."

Onno was about to say something, but did not. It was incomprehensible to him that someone could talk so coolly about such experiences. He thought of his own mother being gassed in an extermination camp and his father shot by a firing squad after the war, but the fantasy did not take any solid shape. In reality, his father had been imprisoned for eighteen months as a hostage in a sort of VIP section of Buchenwald concentration camp, where together with other prominent figures he made plans for the postwar Netherlands—beginning with the setting up of a "special judiciary" and the reintroduction of the death penalty for the worst of the scum. Both his brothers had also been in the resistance.

He looked at Max and felt completely at his mercy. There was of course no question of extending his hand, saying goodbye, and going in. "I'll see you back home," he said.

For minutes on end they walked side by side through the winter night without a word, surrounded by the old violence that Max had summoned up as unexpectedly as a blow with the fist. Max, too, felt completely at Onno's mercy. He had told his paradoxical story differently from the few times he had done so previously. When someone tells the same thing to different people he tells it in different ways, which are as different from each other as

those people—but now it was as though he had told the story to himself for the first time. It had lightened his load to the same extent that it had burdened Onno. In order to say something, he pointed to the bread that had been scattered here and there at the foot of trees.

"There are still some good souls in the world."

Onno had been waiting for Max to break the silence, but he did not feel entitled to ask for details of his story.

"Shall I tell you something? Your father was naturalized on my father's authority. It was during the period of his cabinet, in the 1920s."

Max looked at Onno and laughed. "That creates a nice bond between us. Is he still alive?"

"Of course, my father is still alive. My father will never not be alive."

"Tell him that. The greatest blunder of his career."

Onno was about to say that because of it his own father actually deserved a bullet, too, but restrained himself; he was not sure whether it was acceptable to be so nonchalant, because how thick was the layer of ice around this man? Was there in fact something entirely different beneath it?

"If your mother was Jewish," he said "then you must be a Jew yourself." He immediately disliked hearing the word *Jew* from his own mouth. Maybe only Jews were allowed to use it after all that had happened; perhaps there was a taboo on it—but on the other hand, should he allow himself to be silenced by the fascists?

"According to the rabbis, I am. According to the Nazis, thank heavens, I was only half-Jewish, otherwise I wouldn't have survived. You ask yourself, 'What half? The top half? The bottom half? Left? Right?' "

"The Nazis were biologists. For them you were a kind of diluted Jew; the Jewish wine had been diluted with fifty percent Aryan water."

"Don't they call that 'adulterating'?" asked Max, laughing. "Do you know, by the way, why that is so—that according to the Orthodox you're only a Jew when you have a Jewish mother and not a Jew if you only have a Jewish father?"

"Tell me."

"It's also connected with biology. Because a man can never be one hundred percent sure that he is the real father of his child. A mother may perhaps not be sure who the father is, but one thing is one hundred percent certain: that she is the mother."

"That shows a deep insight into the basic mendacity of woman as such."

Max burst out laughing. "Are you married, by any chance? Do you have children?"

Onno was glad that the dark cloud had been dispelled. "Children! Me, children! Even I'm not that cruel. I live with a girlfriend on and off, if you must know. One of those good souls who puts out bread." He decided not to ask about Max's love life, because it was probably too dreadful for words. "By the way, didn't you say that you were nine in 1942? That makes us the same age. When's your birthday?"

"The twenty-seventh of November."

"Mine's the sixth of November. So from now on, I shall regard you as my younger friend. You can still learn a lot from me. No, wait a bit . . ." he said, and stopped. "I was born three weeks prematurely. That means that we were conceived on the same day!"

They looked at each other in surprise.

"At the same moment!" cried Max.

Both of them, the driver and the hitchhiker, had the feeling that they had discovered the reason for their shock of recognition, as though they had never not known each other. They shook hands solemnly.

"Only death can part us," said Max in the exalted tone that he associated with Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. At the same moment he also thought of the blood-brotherhood ceremony in the Red Indian books: each cut his finger, after which the wounds were pressed together. It was on the tip of his tongue to say: "Actually, we ought to . . ."—but he did not.

They were back at his house on the imposing Vossiusstraat and arranged to phone each other the following day. Max offered to drive him home in the car, but Onno refused. As he took out his keys, Max looked after him in case he turned around and waved, but he did not. As he looked for the door key in his bunch of keys, he saw the circles and crosses in the palm of his left hand.

4
Friendship

In the next few months, when their work did not take them abroad, not a day went by without their seeing each other. Max had never met anyone like Onno, Onno had never met anyone like Max—as a self-proclaimed pair of twins, they did not cease to delight in each other. Each felt inferior to the other; each was at once both servant and master, which created a kind of infinity, like two mirrors reflecting each other. Because of their inseparable appearance in the street, in cafes and pubs, people sometimes talked of them as "homo-intellectuals." They were surrounded by misunderstanding and suspicion, because it was threatening: two grown men, who were obviously not gay and seemed to have nothing in common, and who in some mysterious way, precisely because of that, merged almost symbiotically with each other.

If they had been gay, there would have been no problem—they would simply have been a loving couple. But as it was, they confronted everyone with a deficiency in themselves, sometimes provoking an unpleasant mixture of jealousy and aggression, which saw one as an eternal student, who simply could not give up playing student pranks, and the other as an arrogant prick. In order to neutralize this, they fully admitted it and even played it up for good measure. They would discuss the question of what was going on between them only when it was no longer there, when all the days had merged in their memories into one eternally unforgettable day. Even the Greeks, Onno knew, who had laid the foundation of Western culture, had no word for *culture.* The words only appeared when the thing itself had gone.

Naturally, each of them had a circle of friends, who now also got to know each other, but at the same time Max and Onno became estranged from them, drifted away, leaving them behind in a joint shaking of heads. They generally met at the reading table in Cafe Americain, beneath the art nouveau lamps and surrounded by murals depicting scenes from Wagner operas. Max had often already eaten in Leiden, or had made himself a quick snack at home, while Onno was still having his dinner—that is, there was

always a plate with four or five meat rissoles on it next to his newspaper, which he washed down with four or five glasses of milk. He never ate vegetables. "Salad is for rabbits," he was wont to say. He seemed to be totally out of proportion with his body, and perhaps that was why he was so impressively present; his meals were as slovenly as his unbrushed teeth and his clothes. Once, when his face was dripping with sweat, Max said, "Onno, you've got a temperature,"—at which Onno wiped his forehead, looked at his gleaming palm, and said, "Christ, you're right!"—only to forget all about it the following instant.

Max, on the other hand, sat regularly in the waiting room of his Communist GP, staring at a large photo of striking Belgian workers in berets, eye to eye with a heavily armed platoon of militia, while there was never anything wrong with him, apart from the occasional dose of clap; and however great his imagined fear of death, his tie never clashed with his socks.

Once, Max started talking about death, which immediately irritated Onno beyond measure.

"Talking about death is a waste of time. As long as you're alive you're not dead, and when you're no longer alive you're only dead for other people."

But that was not what Max meant. He said that on the one hand he was convinced that one day he would die of a heart attack in dreadful pain, but on the other hand he might be immortal. A person could determine his life expectancy by adding the ages at which his parents had died and dividing by two. But both his parents had died violent deaths; if that had not happened, they might have been immortal. And because, according to Cantor, infinity plus infinity divided by two was also infinity, the proposition was proved.

"An extremely embarrassing logical error for a natural scientist," said Onno. "In reality it follows that you have a fifty percent chance of being murdered and a fifty percent chance of being executed, which means that it's a hundred percent certain that you'll die a violent death."

When the rissoles were finished they walked into town, where the wintry cold had disappeared from the air. Sometimes they went to the movies first, to see a James Bond film, or the latest Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey,* in which a computer called HAL took control of a spaceship. When they emerged into the street—in the washed-out state in which reality grates on one like a gray file—Onno asked why Max thought the computer

was called HAL. Because of the association with "hell," suggested Max. Damn, Onno hadn't thought of that. But suppose Max counted one letter on from *H,A,* and *L* in the alphabet.

"I," said Max, *"B,M.* IBM!" he cried. "I take my hat off to you, sir!"

Onno assumed a modest expression. "It's a gift."

While they were drinking a cup of coffee somewhere, with Little Richard wailing from the jukebox, Onno maintained that his eye for that kind of thing was a result of his Calvinist upbringing: it came from reading the Bible, "containing all the Holy Scripture." For him, truth could only reside in what was written, and could not, for example, be seen through a telescope. That higher form of reading was something that the Calvinists shared with the Jews; Catholics never read the Bible, and usually didn't have one— Catholics were illiterates. Pictures and photographs; that was what they understood.

Moreover, the Calvinists were more concerned with the Old Testament than with the New Testament, like the Catholics—who in a supreme display of primitivism actually sang the text. When the Jews were persecuted, Calvinists therefore joined the resistance much more often than Catholics, who were anyway the inventors of anti-Semitism—as often as the Communists, who also derived truth from a book, namely that of Marx, another Jew.

It was as though Max could see his friend's trains of thought sweeping through the air like a lion tamer's long whip, and they inspired him in turn.

"Have you ever noticed," he said, "that the area of Protestantism coincides with the area covered by polar ice in the Ice Age? In the Netherlands the border runs right through the middle: where there was ice is the territory of the Protestants, as far as Hammerfest, and where grass grew is Catholic, as far as Palermo. And where did Calvin live?" he suddenly thought. "In Switzerland! The only Protestant country in the Catholic area when there are still glaciers!"

"I'm shivering," said Onno. "There are shivers running down my spine. Only someone who is not Dutch could make such a shameful discovery. Get thee behind me, Satan! You don't belong here at all."

"Where do I belong, then?"

Onno waved an arm. "In space. You view the Netherlands from space, like an astronaut; but I'm in the middle of it, frozen in the Calvinist ice, like

a mammoth. Don't get me started. Holland belongs to me and not a lost Central European woodcutter like you."

It was true. Max could not imagine what it felt like to be part of a people, a nation, a race, a religion—in brief, when one was not alone. He was Dutch, Austrian, Jewish, and Aryan all at once, and hence none of them. He belonged only with those who, like him, belonged with no one.

"I feel as Dutch," he said, "as Spinoza must have felt."

"Why Spinoza, of all people?"

"For a number of reasons. Partly because he was a lens grinder."

But their unending stream of theories, jokes, observations, and anecdotes was not their real conversation: that took place beneath these, without words, and it was about themselves. Sometimes it became visible in a roundabout way, like when in the past North Sea fishermen located a school of herring from its silvery reflection against the clouds.

In a pub in the newspaper district, full of journalists from the morning dailies, as well as the evening papers, where he ordered his first rum-and-Coke, Onno once told Max about the Gilgamesh epic, the oldest story in the world, deciphered in the previous century by his colleague Rawlinson, written as long before Christ as they were now living after Christ. Cheops's pyramid had already been built, said Onno, because that had always been there, so to speak; but Moses, the Trojan War, all of that had yet to happen.

The first story was the story of a friendship. The Babylonian king Gilgamesh dreamed of a frightening ax, with which he fell in love and on which he "lay as on a woman." His mother, obviously well acquainted with the theories of Freud, interpreted that ax as a man on which he would lie as on a woman. And a little later the man appeared: Enkidu, a tamed savage, with whom he ventured forth and slayed the monster Chuwawa. However, that deed eventually led to Enkidu's death. In his despair Gilgamesh went in search of the elixir of immortality, but when even that was finally stolen from him, by a serpent, he resigned himself to the inevitable like a Candide *avant la lettre* and found his life's fulfillment as the architect of the battlements of Uruk.

"Magnificent," said Max. "Why don't I know all that? Why doesn't everyone read that?"

"Because not everyone knows me."

"What a dreadful fate that must be, not knowing you."

"The very thought strikes me as unbearable."

"I too lived for a long time in that hell."

With the calculated precision of someone who has had too much to drink, a man sank into a chair at their table.

"Can I inquire what *les boys* are talking about?"

Onno looked into the journalist's cynical face with distaste.

"Of course you can't. That would confront you fatally with the abyss of your own worthlessness, day laborer that you are. Your sense of history extends no further than yesterday's evening paper, but we—we survey eons! Landlord!" he called to the bodybuilder who served as a waiter. "A big order! Another Cuba libre and a freshly squeezed orange juice!"

Max leaned confidentially toward the man opposite him. "Personally I like you well enough," he said softly, "but why does everyone else hate your guts?"

The man continued staring at him for a moment, digesting the insult. Then he leaped forward and grabbed Max by his lapel; perhaps he was going to pull him across the table, but while Max was helpless in his grasp, Onno jumped up and did the same to the journalist himself, causing Max to tumble from his chair. While he kept the man pressed down against the table with his left hand, he raised his right hand high in the air, as if to give him a deadly karate blow to the neck, looked around the pub, which had fallen silent, and said, "He attacked my friend—he must die!"

Max knew nothing about Gilgamesh and Enkidu, although astronomy had first originated at that time and in that place, but he did know something about different kinds of men, like Leopold and Loeb. While they had been debating in a pub with Red activists that day—or some other day—and were walking back through the city after midnight, across the square with the ruined synagogues, he told Onno the story of those two American law students, bosom friends, age eighteen and nineteen, sons of wealthy Chicago families. They read Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil,* and came to the conclusion that they were *Übermenschen,* above all human laws. In 1924, in order to put this to the test, they decided to commit a perfect crime, motiveless, apart from their own private motive. They murdered a fourteen-year-old boy, made his face unrecognizable with sulfuric acid, hid his body in a sewer, and went to dinner in a chic restaurant. However, Leopold, an expert ornithologist, had left his glasses behind, and everything came out. They were given life sentences plus ninety-nine years. Loeb, the charmer of the two, was later

killed in a fight in prison; Leopold, the brains, had been released about ten years ago, and would now be sixty-two if he was still alive.

Onno said nothing. He knew at once what Max was really talking about. They had not talked about Max's father again since the evening of their meeting; it would certainly crop up, but Onno felt that it was not for him to decide the moment. Max, for his part, naturally understood what Onno understood, but he did not broach the subject, either. Instead, he said, "Who shall we murder, Onno?"

He was given no answer. Onno breathed in the night air deeply and said, "I smell a presentiment of spring."

Grating and sparking, a rail-cleaning tram approached across the deserted square. As it passed, they shouted "Bravo!" and applauded at the sight, whereupon the tram stopped and one of the workmen invited them to take a ride. In the iron interior, full of heavy, dirty tools, there turned out to be another passenger, a seedy-looking girl, full of drink or something else, standing on a box muttering incomprehensible words to herself. When Onno saw Max looking at her, he said sternly: "Keep your hands off her, you disgusting swine."

Feeling as though he were making a voluntary sacrifice, Max also decided that it would be advisable in this case.

"Gee up, coachman!" cried Onno to the driver.

Grinding the rails and making sparks, the tram set in motion. Onno stood with his feet wide apart, put his hands on his hips, raised his chin, and with a heroic, Bismarck-like look, cried: "I am the god of the city!"

This was how Max liked to see him; he would never forget such moments. For the workers of the transport company, of course, he was an oddball, one of many who hung around the city at night, but Max realized that he wasn't just yelling something at random, but really was personifying a god, with all that fire at his feet, a Pythian oracle on a box, and surrounded by three or four synagogues; and Onno knew that Max was the only one who understood.

And at four in the morning, in the Sterretje pub, surrounded by seedy taxi drivers, whores, pimps, thieves, and murderers, it suddenly emerged that Onno had never read Kafka's "Letter to my Father," and they went to Max's place to make good the omission.

When Onno had climbed those three flights of stairs for the first time and seen Max's flat, he said while still in the doorway: "Now I know for certain

that you're crazy."

"All right. Let's assign roles once and for all: I'm crazy and you're stupid."

"Agreed!"

Onno had seen at first glance that nothing had been put down or wound up anywhere by accident. Not that it was aesthetically empty, or anxiously tidy; on the contrary, it was full, with books and folders on the floor, and on the baby grand too, but there was never a larger book on top of a smaller one, or a folder on a book, and nothing looked as though it could be lying in any other way—like in a painting. This harmonious composition extended naturally to everything in the apartment. There was no question, either, of a particular style; there were modern things, antique and semi-antique, but everything fitted in and the eye was never offended by something like a colored plastic object or an advertising brochure or even a ballpoint pen. The desk, too, was full of books and papers, but everything was carefully arranged, in parallel, at right angles, without creating a manic impression. What Onno called "madness" was admiration for something that he himself totally lacked in his everyday life.

Human nature is so conservative that in someone else's place one always tends to sit where one sat for the first time. So Onno sank into the olive-green chesterfield armchair, had a bottle of Bacardi and a bottle of cola set down next to him, together with a dish of ice cubes, and Max went to his "shelf of honor" on the mantelpiece. Between two bronze book ends, laurel-crowned satyrs with cloven hooves, were the ten or fifteen books that at a certain moment represented the sublime for him. Now and then there were changes, but what was always there was his father's copy of *The Ego and His Own,* signed "Wolfgang Delius—Im Felde 1917," which his foster parents had been given with a few items of clothing from Scheveningen prison in 1946; all his other possessions had been confiscated and had disappeared. Kafka's *Preparations for a Country Wedding,* containing his "Letter to My Father," which had never been sent, was on the shelf of honor.

The two of them there in the middle of the night—the three of them in fact, with their fathers! For hours, stopping only for their own commentary, Max read the letter aloud with no trace of an accent. Kafka, who was stripping his soul bare, wanted to get married, could not get married in the shadow of his sire, who at an early age had announced that he would "tear him apart like a fish." Each time some terrible passage like that came, Onno

sank farther into his chair as though hit by a salvo of bullets, until he finally lay shaking euphorically on the ground. Max had finally gotten up with the book and shot the words vertically down at him from a height, while Onno cried:

"Mercy! Father! Not the worst! Yes, I will even make the *sacrificium intellects* for you, yes, I will worship you forever, like the lowliest creature, I, worm that I am, not worthy to kiss your feet, crush me, that your just will may be done!"

Max slammed the book shut and pressed it against his stomach as he laughed. They were unique, immortal! No one would ever understand, but it was not necessary for anyone to understand. Onno hoisted himself back in his chair, refilled his glass to the brim half with rum and half with cola. Max said that the letter was the key to Kafka's whole work. *The Trial* could only be understood via this piece. Josef K.!

"You were brilliant enough to trace the origin of HAL, but I've discovered where that 'Josef comes from. 'K.' stands for Kafka, of course, and the man who comes into his room at the very beginning of the novel to arrest him is called Franz like Kafka himself, but why is K. himself called Josef, and not Max, after his friend Brod, or Moritz?"

"Franz Joseph!" cried Onno.

"That's it. The arresting officer, the man arrested, and Kafka himself are the trinity of *Seine kaiserliche und königliche, apostolische Majestat,* His Imperial, Royal, and Apostolic Majesty.

The night advanced, the earth rotated on its axis, and they talked about the problem of why a flag in the wind, a stiff current of air, flutters and why the waves in Max's hair did not move as his hair grew but remained in the same place, just the opposite of the sea, where the waves moved horizontally but the water remained in the same place; and about the war, about Adolf Hitler, whom they called the *"A.H.-Erlebnis,"* and about the twin daughters of Max Planck, the founder of quantum mechanics: the first gave birth to a daughter and died in childbirth; the other looked after the child and married the widower, became pregnant herself two years later, and also died in childbirth. Added to that, one son died in the First World War, while his second son was shot in the Second. Planck's constant!

Later they might perhaps regret not having kept any record of those days; but if they had taken notes it would not have been like it was. Onno might not then have told him what he told him as morning approached: that his

mother had hoped that he would be a girl. He was an afterthought, and until the age of four he had walked around with long curls, in pink dresses with ribbons. But he had systematically destroyed the evidence; not only were there no more delightful snapshots to be found in his parents' photo album, the albums of his brothers and sisters had also been purged on devious pretexts.

Max looked at him and nodded. "Now tell me," he said, "what you will really never tell anyone."

However much Onno had had to drink, there was always a point where he was sober. He put down his glass.

"Dreadful! As a student I was living in a rented room, where I was trying to get the philosophy of the concept of law into my head. Next to me there was an unmarried mother, a girl with a baby that cried nonstop. God knows what got into me. One winter evening I ran into her place, at the end of my tether. She was sitting at the table sewing baby clothes; the baby was screaming—for a father, of course! There was one of those old-fashioned coal stoves, boiling hot. I snatched the brat from its cradle, held it up by its ankle with my right hand, grabbed the poker with my left hand, raised the lid of the stove, and held the child above the glow with its head down. I said nothing, I just looked at her. She was frozen. She looked like a photo of herself. The baby, too, was silent for the first time. Terrible! I ought to have been arrested for that and thrown into prison."

He fixed Max's gaze.

"Well," he said. "Now you know. But you didn't just ask me this for no good reason, because you knew I was going to ask you in turn. You asked me because you want to tell me something yourself that you would never tell anyone. Get it off your chest."

Max nodded. "When my foster father was on his deathbed last year," he said rather flatly, "I got a letter from my foster mother. I only saw them rarely by then, because it seems you never forgive someone when they've been good to you. She wrote that he wanted to see me one last time before he died."

"That's enough," said Onno.

The alcohol had worn off instantly. After a while Max stood up and replaced the Kafka book. He stood there aimlessly, and in a sudden impulse lit a candle that was on the dining table. He turned around, looked at his watch, and said, "It's seven o'clock. I'm hungry. Let's have breakfast in the

American Hotel—and come to that, I'm feeling in need of a romantic escapade. Perhaps there'll be an early bird there—you never know."