

The Straggler

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‘You’re a real fighter, Gram,’ Dr. Miami had said, and the paternal, piercing look of appreciation accompanying his words brought an involuntary curl of amusement on to my lips. All of us here were fighters, of course, Dr. Miami continued, everyone here exhibited the talent and perseverance that a top company like Carnitec expected of its employees. But according to Dr. Miami I had something extra. I had the right philosophy as well. Now I could no longer suppress an open smile. Be careful, my department head Dr. Benjamin Miami reacted, raising an admonitory finger and grinning ironically, it wasn’t really necessary to have the right philosophy. I should also be careful not to get too many ideas. It was quite possible to do excellent work at Carnitec even if you based yourself on the wrong philosophy or on none. Philosophy in fact, didn’t matter all that much. Having the right philosophy was just something extra, not really essential, but a welcome bonus. And he felt that I had that extra something.

‘You seem to be composed completely, I’d almost say from top to bottom, of the stuff the future’s made of. I can’t think,’ he said while his gaze glided literally from top to bottom, ‘of another way to formulate it’.

And that was why he invited me and no one else to accompany him to the annual colloquium at Carnitec’s headquarters in Austin, Texas, U.S.A., where participants from the company’s global research and production centres came together to discuss the newest ideas, discoveries and developments. The idea was that I would give an opening presentation for this select audience, ladies and gentlemen, one that would not be too technical but would bear more of a philosophical stamp. The technical aspects will get their turn later.

‘To remind them of what we’re actually working on, to explain our fundamental goals,’ Dr. Mimi explained. ‘You can do it, Gram,’ he observed. ‘You’re the right age, have the right mentality, and you have the nerve. Personal involvement, the personal approach, in short the philosophy. You don’t have to mince your words. Make them shiver or make them laugh, it doesn’t matter. Bombard them with a few arresting abstractions. Not everyone will like it, of course, but don’t let that bother you. It’s only to warm them up, establish the atmosphere and, of course, to bring your promising face to the attention of those who matter.

Flattered, I accepted the invitation and did my best not to beam too much while doing so.

Alas, ladies and gentlemen, I was unable to prepare myself properly for this address because my schedule was disrupted in the days before my departure with all sorts of worries in connection with my father. Just as I was about to put my initial ideas down on paper, I received the message that my father had gone to meet his maker. And as circumstances would have it, I had to take care of his funeral.

I certainly wasn't overcome by grief, and if my father had died a year earlier I would probably have managed to bury his ashes without much trouble or reflection. With the exception of the last year of his life, my father's existence had always been a fairly neutral matter to me. A channel remained open between father and son harking back to some remote beginnings, but it had been poorly maintained, was used only four or five times a year for a courtesy encounter around the family dinner table, and even less frequently after my mother left him. We didn't have much to say to each other. Our conversations were exasperatingly inconsequential. He was the slightly vague, relatively inaccessible guardian of my early years, and when they had passed his role came to an end. I didn't have the sense that my father had taught me anything about life. Neither of us exhibited anything more than a shallow curiosity when it came to each other's well-being. I didn't know whether my father was proud of me or disappointed, and I didn't worry about it. Our relationship was one of moderate, not so say indifferent respect. In any case, that's as far as my sense of obligation went. It seems that sons as a rule are not inclined to be the most grateful creatures, and in that sense I was every inch his son. Yet my father never gave me the impression that I was short-changing him in some way. People cursed with the tendency to psychologise observed on occasion that my distant attitude to just about everything and everybody bore the unmistakable hallmark of my attitude towards my father. They believed that an openhearted and possibly crucial conversation with my father might liberate me and lead to greater receptivity and cordiality, for example towards themselves. But people cursed with psychologising tendencies have never been able to convince me of anything. Just as in their haste to understand and explain they almost always make mistakes, so they were mistaken on this point. I had developed my sense of distance without any help from my father, just as in the same way I had learned to change it into a pose of profound commitment whenever I considered it worthwhile.

On the other hand, I also have to admit that in the days between his passing and his funeral I did not succeed in closing my father's dossier with the cool efficiency that could have been expected of me. That didn't mean I sat paralysed next to his coffin, mourning the departure of my begetter. I saw his coffin only on the day of the funeral itself. I didn't even pay my last respects at his deathbed. When the hospital informed me of his demise, I told them I was very busy at that moment but that as far as I or anyone else was concerned they could close the coffin at once. And although I realised very well how callous this must have sounded to the tactful doctor, I simply couldn't see one good reason to do things differently. Nor was I beset by fervent, heart-wrenching memories of what had made my father my father and me his son. Now that he was dead, I did not wish to magnify into something extraordinarily meaningful the fact that I, with half his chromosomes on board, was the extension of his seminal trajectory, I'm telling it like it is. There are plenty of people who feel called upon to make themselves useful in the fervour-and-sentiment department. Any possible contribution on my part could happily be skipped, and as far as my father was concerned, none of it made any difference at all.

'Dead is dead!' he once declared with a decided emphasis that betrayed his desire to impress the listener with his lack of fear. What difference could it make to him? No one was obliged to make a fool of himself at his coffin.

'Just put me in the oven and scatter me about; and please, no ceremony,' he once enjoined me as his potential next of kin, resounding with stoic pride. From me he could get what he wanted, no problem, and I wasn't planning to make a fool of myself at his coffin either. Let the dead bury the dead, I preferred more rewarding activities. Except that I was bothered, genuinely bothered, by intrusive memories of the behavioural changes the man had exhibited, in sometimes spectacular form, during the last year of his life, when which time he and I had become complete strangers to each other. Suddenly he had begun to offend against established routine with peremptory invitations to stop by his house, unexpected visits to mine, and inappropriate outpourings and vivid accusations directed at me, my mother, and a world that, in his feverish and diseased view, was suffering from an unfathomably absurd insipidity.

Two years earlier, just a few weeks before my father was due to retire, my mother had packed her bags. The looming prospect of having her retired husband hanging around the house all day long must have seemed unbearable to her. And, taking advantage one fine day of his absence, she had not only hired a removals company to take away half the furniture, she had also moved in with another man whom she had apparently been having a relationship with for some time without anyone knowing about it. I don't see any need to say more about this individual, and should the need ever arise, it will undoubtedly give me little pleasure. In any event, this sudden and – as was soon to appear – irreversible event had a remarkable effect on my father. He changed from a colourless but self-assured spouse who was under the sincere but mistaken impression that his marriage was one in a thousand, into a deeply enraged, deeply offended, deeply humiliated, at times completely irrational fellow with deep scratch marks on his wooden soul. He was thoroughly shocked by so much infidelity. Although at age twenty-seven I had not been directly concerned for quite some time, I found it astonishing that my mother had not sought her happiness elsewhere much earlier. The fulfilment of her household duties, as disciplined as it was joyless, alternating with periods of dismal tedium and lethal aloofness, her barely concealed fits of weeping in the bathroom, her two or three truly serious breakdowns when she was confined to bed for weeks on end, from early puberty onwards I took all these as clear indications that the relationship between my parents was unusually difficult for her; something actually beyond her strength, like the throes of death or the pains of childbirth, but then without the prospect that, one way or another, it would soon be over. And yet my father believed, almost to the end, that one fine day she would return, back to his bed, not to die or to give birth but to be married to him once more. Indeed, according to him she hadn't left entirely of her own free will, let alone in full control of her mental faculties. She must have been crazy, or spellbound, or bewitched; there was no other explanation.

For as long as I could remember, my father's intelligence had always seemed to be extremely conventional. All his life he had worked as an engineer for a telephone company, and his function and training had led him to believe that he was an utterly rational man whose opinions and manner of life were based on universal logic. Whatever he thought was sound, and whoever thought differently about it was a dreamer. He detested the fantasy-filled imaginings with which people tried to give meaning to their lives. He was a narrow-minded conformist through and through, and considered his conformism to be the most reasonable behaviour imaginable. He had nothing but contempt for the ambiguous, the uncontrolled, the excessive, for the exaggerations and acrobatics of the emotions, or for lapses from common sense. God did not exist and reincarnation was a ridiculous fantasy. In principle, everything that happened had a reasonable explanation. Science was an asymptotic approach to reality, and the rest was nonsense. In this way he had kept going most of his life, and he had been able to ignore whatever did not suit him. Of course, he was in fact more rationalising than rational. He clearly had no clue how imaginative was his conviction that he had a successful marriage. Harshly confronted with my mother's puzzling departure, he even took his refuge openly in primitive, irrational concepts like witchcraft and enchantment.

'Enchanted? By whom then?' I asked.

'By whom? By whom?!' my father roared, who used to be a tedious model of self-control and steadiness. Who other than the man he then unexpectedly described in terms that genuinely bewildered me.

'Come on, dad. Enchanted? That's not your style,' I smiled sceptically.

You didn't leave such a happy marriage as theirs if you were still in your right mind, he insisted.

'Was it such a happy marriage?' I ventured.

'It was an excellent marriage,' he declared categorically.

'Evidently she didn't think so,' I answered.

Slightly hunched, his teeth half-visible, his pupils dilated and, had he been able, his ears pinned back against his head, he threw me a poisonous, threatening glance by which he enjoined me to support such manifest nonsense with facts or else keep my mouth shut. Why was I interfering, anyway? I figured I had already said too much, and simulated more concern than this matter really deserved. Perhaps he could have counted on greater patience and more fruitful conversations, which in turn would have secured him better insights, if he had fathered a daughter instead of a son.

After a short silence, he suddenly provided a different, more reasonable explanation for her departure.

Was I aware that all of her teeth were false, he asked.

No, I wasn't, but it didn't really surprise me, at her age.

She had been without her own teeth for all of twenty-five years, he then revealed to me. Ever since she was thirty she had been wearing a full set of dentures.. As a matter of fact, after my birth her teeth had started to crumble one by one. They were of such poor quality that they were unable to survive even a single pregnancy. That's why she didn't want a second child. Did I know that?

No, of course not. I knew that even less. I imagined I could vaguely remember my mother's sparkling smile, beaming at it with my child's face. So that had all been a sham, if not the smile then at least the sparkle. But what of it? As if that was still my business! Had I not boldly distanced myself from the placenta and after that gradually from the mother, in the end resolutely cutting my ties to a past that had become meaningless and allowing my intellectual tentacles to propel me into a future that made me lose whatever interest I may once have had in the parental theatre and its cardboard marital décor? What on earth did this man expect to achieve with these unpleasant revelations?

My mother, he continued without noticing the look of aversion on my face, was all paint and polish. But she could not hide from him what lay behind the façade. Why had she left him? Simplicity itself. In her vanity, she had come to fear the advancing years. She couldn't live with the idea that the man who had known her as a young woman had now become the intimate witness of her decay. That's why she chose that other fellow. He didn't know how firm and smooth she once used to be. With him, she had less to be ashamed of. And yes, she had grown old, my father observed with a hint of wicked delight in his voice. Not only had she lost all her teeth, but from her fiftieth onwards, the four horsemen of the physical apocalypse (Drooping-tits, Hanging-gullet, Osteoporosis and Wrinkle-ravage) had begun to stir up an alarming cloud of dust on the not so distant horizon. And the farther this sinister quartet continued their advance, the more likely she would be to opt once again for the constancy and security a man like my father could offer her, together with the financial resources he had at his disposal to keep the impending calamity at bay, if only in part.

She was a weak woman, he mused out loud, staring through the conservatory window as if this truth were written in the sky, , and she would always be a weak woman. He had constantly protected her, emotionally and financially. That was why he was so certain she would not be able to manage long without his protection. Without him she simply could not cope. He even compared her departure with a veiled suicide attempt. He was certain that this attempt was doomed to failure.

'Pure gold, that's what I gave her!' he shouted dramatically on another occasion, sounding like a dying Caesar poisoned by his treacherous consort.

'Foolish woman,' he concluded, shaking his head.

Perhaps she simply wanted to seize her last chance, I suggested instead of simply keeping my mouth shut.

'Last chance! Last chance! Last chance for what?!' my father raged.

For what indeed? I had no idea. Last chance for a last chance...

Anyway, ladies and gentlemen, banality may have its claims but we should not become too indulgent. Let us leave the marriage for what it was. That, after all, is what my mother did. The worst was still to come. In the course of his career my father had made regular business trips abroad, always to the relief of my mother, by the way. Even after his retirement and her departure he continued to travel, but this time he chose the destinations himself. He may have been embittered but he clearly had no intention to leave it at that. The Kingdom of Thailand could rejoice in several visits, just like the mafia-ridden Republic of Ukraine and the Cuban people's democracy. And although he initially maintained a demure silence about the real purpose of these trips, the nature of the destinations aroused certain suspicions. He didn't travel to examine exotic temples or foreign cultures, to study the spirituality, mentality or morality of far-off peoples, let alone to admire landscapes, rain forests, gorges, mountains or volcanoes, the unusual design of our biosphere. It was more a question of a run-of-the-mill, small-scale sort of design that was for sale all over the world, although its supply was more open, more copious, more varied, cheaper, and more hospitable in some places than in others. And he made this public during the last year of his life, in the same impetuous tone of obsessive candour that would be his until his breakdown.

'There's no whores like Cuban whores. You can't find that kind of youthfulness and generosity anywhere else,' my father told me after one of his jaunts.

'Don't look at me like that. I'm not doing anything wrong, am I? I give them something and they give me something, it's a question of mutual profit. You could even consider it a form of development aid.'

Or Olga the blonde Ukrainian, man, could she give blow jobs. As if her life depended on it. Well, to some extent that was the case. As a single mother with two young kids, she could definitely use the money he slipped her, since the local social services were nothing to speak of. Did I know that my mother, after the onset of her dental problems, so roughly since my birth, had never again wanted to give him a...

'Dad, please,' I interrupted sharply.

'Please what? What now?' was his aggrieved response, this unchecked satyr, unscrupulous pleasure-fucker and uninhibited sex consumer who had no problem comparing the relation between price and quality among women from low-wage countries with that of his own, much more expensive wife. I actually didn't need a father anymore, he continued, at least he wasn't planning to play dad any longer; he thought we could now finally speak to one another man to man.

No, he was right, I didn't need a father anymore, but as someone to speak with man to man I needed him even less. I couldn't stand his candour. And more than once his agitated communicativeness pushed me close to the edge of losing control, me, the champion of reserve and disinterest.

After a while he announced he was no longer going to Thailand. The place was overrun with potbellies, too many Teutonic fatsoes for his liking. Everything in Thailand clearly revolved around money. You almost felt like a sex tourist, he said. Cuban girls, on the other hand, didn't like fat guys, money or no money. They preferred men who were still in good shape. They were still genuinely sensual. And fortunately he was still in good shape, that was plain to see, and you didn't even have to take his age into consideration. He was simply in excellent shape, he told me with so much enthusiastic conviction that I feared he would try to demonstrate it in some way. And that is what he did. He popped a CD with salsa music into the CD player and began to dance. Life was a fiesta! And I, who had never seen the sometime stick-in-the-mud who was my father dance before, didn't know where to look and watched with blinking eyes as he let himself go, more or less swaying his hips, snapping his fingers, completely off the beat, his belly hanging over his belt, to

rhythms that were supposed to turn life into a party. Boy, was he popular in Cuba. After this scene all his trips, including his last, would have Cuba as their destination.

It was not a sense of moral queasiness that was playing tricks on me, ladies and gentleman, I'd like to make that clear. I'm generally little bothered by morality. It was, rather, the unavoidably emphatic manner in which his behaviour drew my attention to the fact that my father was not just any stranger. If some random piggish old fart had treated me to such stories, I would have felt nothing more than tepid disdain for the bluntness and vulgarity with which he tried, without making even the slightest impression on me, to convince me of his *savoir-vivre*. The merest raising of a single eyebrow would have been enough to parry his arrogance, and my deadpan face would quickly have functioned as a stop sign to his verbiage. But when it came to my father I wasn't always capable of keeping my cool. My entire adult existence had been lived on a planet that was tens of mental star systems removed from the villa in which he spent his. Now I was constantly confronted with an alien at my door, a pile of merrily vibrating plasma that seemed to have cruised the light years with the sole purpose of telling me a dirty joke or sleazy anecdote. And this absurd creature bore an uncanny resemblance to my father.

'Don't make that face,' he would say unruffled or 'What do you know about life?' with a sneer, or 'What a child you still are!' resentfully.

Resolutely breaking off every form of contact with this man did not square with the stable attitude of neutrality I had developed towards him over the years. I didn't want him to make me angry, although, had he lived longer, it would perhaps still have come to that. As a consequence, there was nothing for it but to collide time and again with what I came to see as the true personality of a father I had never known very well so long as he had been bound by the rules of marriage.

'You think I'm just a middle-class fuddy-duddy. But I've got my secrets too, you know,' he reassured me more than once, not without pride.

'I'm sure you do,' I answered.

'Do you want to hear them?'

'I'd rather not...'

What was the man thinking? That I was interested in his secrets, that I wanted to share them with him? But in his excitement, which was a bit like permanent inebriation, my father did not seem capable of distinguishing friend from foe. Not that I really was his foe. But how inappropriate it was to want to see me as a friend.

Every time we met, I was afraid he would shamelessly add new details to the chronicle of his escapades, and my fear was confirmed time and again. I never thought he might be ill. I was indeed thinking of secrets. I was simply of the view that a covert sex clown, at least one not intended for children's eyes, had sprung forth from my petit-bourgeois father. Of course, this sex clown was in essence an equally petit-bourgeois figure.. At issue, I thought, were the dull and simple secrets of a dull and simple soul. I wished that his tales had been more perverse instead of merely obscene; perhaps then they would have aroused my honest interest. If they had possessed more cruelty, if they had breathed a darker, more ambiguous spirit and had been marked by harrowing, irreconcilable contradictions, who knows, I might indeed have seen in my father a man somewhat worth speaking with. But they spoke of nothing more than the implausible, purely carnal pleasure of overexposed common-or-garden porn. Disgustingly monotonous, they bore witness to an uncomplicated hunger for the cold cuts that constituted the opposite sex. I was caught in the web of this rancid mixture of banality and vulgarity. It didn't excite me but it did oppress me, and all because it emerged from the mouth of my father.

It was as if he had shoved his dick, wrapped up in filth, under my nose. 'Look, son, this is my dick, that is what it's all about. You should hear the stories it can tell. Listen carefully, you might learn something, it knows what's good for you. It knows what's good for every man.'

And for me, even for me, the paternal dick was evidently a dick different from the dick of anyone else. Because even though it had nothing memorable to say to me, the extraordinary revulsion it aroused in me identified it as a special dick.

He, and no one else, was incontrovertibly my father. He, and no one else, was my father. But there was nothing in the world I needed less than having my memory refreshed with respect to this undeniable bond.

When a few weeks after his breakdown and forced admission to a psychiatric institution, we got the diagnosis explaining that we shouldn't take his behaviour too personally, that it didn't mean much, that it was due to an exceptionally virulent syphilis infection that had been diagnosed much too late, one that was eating away at his prefrontal cortex and reducing him to a maniacal sex robot who had lost any sensitivity for norms or relationships, I took it as liberating news. While his personality, in my deluded view, had acquired a more definite form, it now suddenly turned out that in fact it had simply been eroded. As a healthy, responsible person my father had never been able to make much of an impression on me.. It was a relief to learn that I should attach no more significance to the lively impressions he had left behind as a sick, unaccountable person. They no longer needed to be interpreted as expressions of some philosophy of life or other. From now on, they could be dismissed as the arbitrary symptoms of destruction.

Nevertheless, these impressions suddenly laid claim to my thoughts again after his unexpected death and in the run-up to his funeral, with even greater force than in the months preceding it. In an effort to deprive them of their source of nourishment and give oblivion its due, I tried to think of nothing, and my thoughts became light and loose as sand. I didn't take them seriously, I did not immerse myself in them or make any effort to hold on to them. I let them drift where it suited them and tried to avoid allowing them to lend the memory of my father a substance which, let's be serious, it did not at all deserve.

That is why, although I was neither sad nor reflective, I made such a confused, absent impression at his funeral. Some might interpret this state as a form of silent mourning, I experienced it rather as sterile boredom, as a dust storm of rejected sentiment that I had to shelter from until it had passed. What nuisances the dead are!

Not until the next day, in the taxi on the way to the airport where I was to board a plane to Austin, Texas, USA, did I regain the breathing space to concentrate a little on the address in which I would have to explain to you two days later, ladies and gentlemen, what our ultimate goals were, in which I would have to remind you of what it is that we at Carnitec are actually working on.

The future will be a future without fathers and as a consequence a future without children. It will be a millennium of pure intelligence that only knows of intelligent means to maintain or reproduce itself.

Whatever has no significance will receive no significance. Only what works will actually be real. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the future Carnitec is working on.

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'Ms Boven just said that it sounds as if we consider Baby to be a new god, created by humans. What do you think of that?' he asked me.

'Or alternatively an idol, perhaps,' Anita Boven added suggestively.

Indeed, what did I think of that? I couldn't immediately come up with brilliant response to the observation, certainly not with all those inquisitive faces aimed at me.

‘No, the word idol is absolutely inappropriate,’ Dr Miami answered in my stead. ‘We at Carnitec are fully aware of what we are doing. There’s nothing obscure or superstitious about it. Of course, you can always refer to Baby as a god. The term costs nothing and is even back in fashion nowadays. That’s the reason why people who have nothing more to contribute are evidently unwilling to admit defeat. But the word is never used at Carnitec. How would that help us? To be honest, as an American I feel a particular revulsion towards the word “god”. You Belgians are sitting pretty in that regard if you ask me. You’ve got a pope nobody listens to and a couple of crazy Islamists you can lock up if it suits you. But state-side it is full of popes who can’t be locked up because they’ve got an unhealthy amount of power. The semi-religious atmosphere that surrounds power, politics, culture and even science in the States has permanently instilled in me an absolute distaste for the very sound “god”. It’s a sound that should evoke elevated feelings, but in my case it evokes nothing more than a sense of intellectual nausea. They’re religidiots, who claim to have faith. But faith in what? They don’t even think about that. If they were to take their faith really seriously for just half an hour, they would lose it. Actually, of course, they don’t take it seriously for a single second. It only serves them as a means of endlessly pestering what they consider to be a faithless world. Spirituality! Don’t make me laugh! The entire content of their so-called faith consists of nothing but the unbelief of others and their resistance to that. Feel free to call Baby a god if that clarifies things for you. As long as you also note that he is a god no one has to believe in. What say you, Gram?’

I nodded in agreement.

‘That’s a very definite point of view,’ Anita Boven said when it became clear to her that I had nothing further to add. ‘I posed the question only because you yourself employ concepts that as a rule one is more likely to hear in a religious context. You spoke, for example, of eternity...’

‘Yes, eternity. That is indeed a classic divine attribute. But I shall explain what I mean by it. Look, you could conceive of intelligence as a measure of flexibility, of the capacity to adapt. In that sense we humans can be described as reasonably intelligent. At the individual level we are perhaps not so terribly smart. Beyond a certain age an average individual grows rigid in his established conceptual and behavioural habits and is barely still able to adapt to new circumstances. Collectively we do quite a lot better in the flexibility department. There are Eskimos and Bushmen, cosmopolitans addicted to relocation and home-loving neighbourhood types. Mankind as a whole knows a thousand-and-one different lifestyles and survival strategies. Or take sexual variation, for example. I assume I don’t have to draw you a picture. I wouldn’t even be able to do it, so complicated is it. The majority do it with members of the opposite sex, a minority with members of the same sex. Some do it in all possible combinations. And I haven’t even started to talk about what they do. Most people want a partner of roughly the same age, but many prefer a younger partner. Others consider an older partner more exciting. You get my drift...’

See, now that was an example of what I would call long-windedness.

‘I think so, yes,’ Anita answered expectantly. ‘But I still don’t see where you are heading.’

‘All biological systems we are familiar with – think people, animals or plants – act within a limited situation. They try to adapt themselves to this situation in the best way possible and, inversely, to turn the situation to their advantage as much as possible. They want to attune themselves to the situation. No matter how flexible they are in principle, in practice they always strive towards equilibrium. To the extent that they succeed, they are able to settle into their situation in order to exercise their biological functions, what in the end mostly boils down to procreation. We measure the success of a system against its capacity to populate the timeline with successive reproductions of itself. For example, you want to have children too, don’t you, or maybe not? Or you already have children?’

She smiled distantly but did not reply. An unintended silence resulted.

‘All I mean is: most people want children,’ Dr Miami resumed. ‘Procreation seems to them the only alternative to extinction. Baby on the other hand is an entirely different kind of system. He, too, acts within a limited situation. But he doesn’t try to settle there. Now that is the difference with well-known, standard organisms. If Baby gathers information about a situation it is not in order to manipulate it in such a way as to make himself feel at home in it, but rather to find a way out of it. Humans, to mention the organism we are most familiar with, want to turn any given situation into a life situation. Baby has been programmed to see every situation as an emergency he must try to escape from. He exists in a permanent state of alertness, a chronic condition of stress that would be fatal for us biological beings. Humans regularly need to have a good sleep. Baby never needs to sleep. He’s not looking for a spot to exercise his biological functions undisturbed, because he hasn’t got any biological functions. Hence his flexibility, which I’m tempted to call infinite. He is homeless in the most fundamental sense of the word, and nothing can tie him down. We look for ways to master our environment with the intention of finding ourselves a home in it. When Baby explores his environment and tries to fathom it, it is so that he can definitively leave it behind.’

‘But what would be the goal of such a machine?’ the girl wanted to know. The question was addressed to Dr Miami, who looked enquiringly at me in turn. I cleared my throat.

‘What is our goal?’ I mumbled – but I was forced to leave it at that. I was still not yet in top form, and I was pretty sure that I wouldn’t ever get back into it.

‘Well put, Gram,’ Dr Miami reacted obligingly. ‘What is our goal?’

‘To live as long as possible. Just a random thought,’ Anita said.

‘Could be. But then you do have to ask yourself what the goal of that is. One way or another, our shelf life is limited. Everybody knows it. If we don’t want to be erased by time, we have to opt for additional strategies. Some people strive for eternal fame. But that remains a chancy business, and only a few have the talent for it. Besides, you remain dependent for that eternal fame on mortal people with transitory interests. A less glorious but more secure way of leaving your mark is, as I said, procreation. Not everyone has talent, but even the biggest klutz has a genome available that he can saddle a future generation with. That way he hopes to continue to exist in the time beyond his own when his own time is up.. Baby, however, has a completely different relationship with the temporal dimension. Every local environment has its own local passage of time. Baby doesn’t ask himself how he will be able exist in a time after his own. Baby’s intelligence is aimed at always being a step ahead of the local passage of time, so that he has already located the exit before the local environment he is acting in collapses – and every environment collapses sooner or later.

We noticed Anita briefly blinking her eyes.

‘You could also put it another way’ Dr Miami tried to explain himself further. ‘Our individual intelligence is always trying to catch up with our death. Our individual death is a horizon beyond which our individual intelligence can never look. In the best case, this horizon reduces us to silence, or else it gives rise to all sorts of foggy conjectures that you would be hard put to call intelligent. But even our collective intelligence, our science, say, has its horizon, its limitations. And I don’t mean just our collective disappearance, which of course is unavoidable, but also the fact that even our combined brainpower continues to be bound to its human, environmentally dependent origins. Even our science is a function of our instincts, and our instincts are aimed at putting down roots in our earthly niche. Our science is not genuinely free. It is marked by human inclinations and human failures. To be sure, it has acquired a certain degree of autonomy, but it remains the child of its parents, to coin a phrase. By contrast, we call our super-machine Baby because he is the only intelligence who will be born complete, who will have radically severed the umbilical cord connecting him to the maternal substratum. He won’t be flesh of our flesh, spirit of our spirit, and ultimately not even the product of our hands. To the extent that his self-reparatory capacities grow, he will be able to constitute himself from elements other than the silicon molecule he now depends on. He is the ultimate survival machine, pure and simple, an irreversibly outward-oriented

intelligence, who retains from his origin only whatever provides him with the means of detaching himself from that origin.'

'But the kind of machine you describe... Leaving aside the question whether something like that is technically feasible, why should people invest in a system that will ultimately abandon us?'

'Oh, in the early stages we will derive some benefit from Baby's capacities. Thanks to Baby, we will be able to control and organize our planetary environment better than is presently the case.'

'But one fine day he'll be gone, if I understand you correctly.'

'That's got to happen, yes,' Dr Miami smiled, 'After all, that's how he's been programmed.'

'But then we still have to ask what benefit it is to people, why they should devote scarce resources to an unimaginable programme like that?'

'Ah, the people,' Dr Miami responded airily. 'We shouldn't overestimate the people. They'll do that without our help. But at the end of the day, what do the people have to contribute? The people, Gram, who are the people, anyway?'

This unexpected question took me by surprise.

'Perhaps Ms Boven is referring to the readers of her newspaper,' I improvised in a slightly bored tone. I had just been asking myself what I was actually doing here. Surely I shouldn't have to play the helpful straight man in an interview Dr Miami was more than capable of conducting alone. Not that he meant to force me into such a supporting role. But I feared an impression like that might easily arise in this young woman's mind.

'No,' she reacted doggedly. 'I mean people in general. People who count on science to alleviate their needs. We're not exactly running short of illnesses and defects that science might devote its best efforts to. Surely science shouldn't think up a solution for something no one experiences as a problem? That science is human to the core doesn't have to be a problem. As your colleague Valeria Bitschkowa, who has recently made a big name for herself, puts it: Science is for the people, people are not for science.'

'True,' Dr Miami answered, 'that renowned colleague of ours is the darling of the press and Carnitec's PR department too. But I would just like to point out, entirely as an aside, that in the eyes of the scientific staff she is not nearly as important as she appears to be on TV. The way she tries to persuade people that they have an importance and consequence they don't have at all, I consider to be really quite inappropriate even blatantly cynical. She ought to know better. And she does know better. In the midst of the excessive accumulation of knowledge and capital in the developed world a dynamic is manifesting itself that will ultimately culminate in something that goes beyond our exigence. We are contributing to this development and also benefiting from it, but in the end we are not its limit. Hasn't man always striven to break out of the inherently rather pointless cycle of regeneration and degeneration? Hasn't he always wanted to be a non-biological animal? Hasn't he always eagerly imagined having something like a non-biological vocation in addition to his biological destiny? At the individual as well the collective level, man has so far been able to realise this vocation only with the aid of fantasy and self-deception. Over and over, his efforts have resulted in some form of disillusionment or other. But we, the Carnitec collective, can at last realise this vocation in a very concrete and material way. We know that man is an animal, that he is one-hundred percent constrained by biological parameters he will never be able to escape from. Let us draw the necessary conclusions from this. Let us abandon human intelligence as the highest criterion. Let us put it into play as the animal springboard which the phenomenon of intelligence can use to reach a higher, non-biological level.'

'You say strange things. But aren't you afraid that people will have trouble discerning intelligence in this non-human intelligence?'

Dr Miami shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

'I once heard a so-called thinker on TV claim the following. According to this man, intelligence equated with the extent to which someone was able to assimilate information in such a way that it could increase his problem-solving capacity and enable him to do things that would be valued in at least one culture. Yeah, sure, if you happen to hold that kind of human definition of intelligence, Baby is extremely stupid. In which culture could Baby expect to be valued? But on the other hand, what is a culture, really? A more or less established way of rearing people and keeping them peaceful. Newcomers are welcome, but they're not allowed to damage the furniture. A justified concern, I have to admit. Unformed people can be a danger to life and limb. But it's hardly a genuinely intelligent enterprise, is it? It is aimed at control of the situation with the objective of keeping the situation livable. But human comfort is not a matter of pure intelligence. It is also dependent on tradition, taste, and custom, and other subjective-local factors. You can't expect Baby to allow himself to be involved in a project like that. If laughter were an option for him instead of a sheer waste of time, he would probably burst out laughing if anyone mentioned the word culture.

'There are still plenty of people who are attached to their culture and don't consider it a laughing matter,' the journalist said.

'No doubt. There will always be people like that, but their significance will decline. It looks more and more like we're in an irreversible state of growing cultural disintegration. I can see that people are worried about this. But it also has a good side. For example, it creates the intellectual space, detached from every form of prejudice, to understand what genuinely free intelligence actually consists of... What people think, and I cannot emphasise this enough, is ultimately of no importance to our project. What Baby really is an issue that will always to some degree exceed their capacity to understand. It goes without saying that this won't detract from his reality. It's a bit like with death. Although we don't understand it, we die all the same. A key difference, of course, is that death is merely an extremely random disintegration of material, and Baby an extremely purposeful contraction of material. And I think that's a difference people should be able to grasp, right, Gram?'

'Eh... indeed...' I confirmed.

'You notice, I'm not the only one to say so-called strange things,' Dr Miami again addressed Anita Boven after my enlightening clarification.

'I'm not sure whether the difference you're talking about will make much of a difference,' she said.

'Oh, and yet I foresee at least a couple of interesting consequences on the human plane. If we make just a small effort to see things from Baby's perspective, there will be an end to the all too dominant outlook that divides people into winners and losers. Winners have an uncontrollable tendency to credit themselves with some extraordinary capacity or other, like remarkable insight or uncommon intelligence. The losers, in turn, feel themselves belittled by the self-satisfaction of the winners. But looked at from Baby's perspective, all of us are simply losers. It is a perspective that exhorts us to adopt a profound humility. Victories will lose their aura of intelligence. They will be seen as the temporary result of coincidence and sheer good fortune, rather than as the result of superior insight. Wouldn't that temper the pretensions of the winners and soften the humiliation of the losers? Baby will reduce mankind to a self-help group for stragglers. That may give rise to a somewhat disenchanted and levelled-down mankind, but at the same time a much more relaxed and solidary mankind. That way there's even a moral side to the story. An optimistic side, even, if you look at it a certain way. Your readers won't have any reason to complain,' he concluded with a grin.

'That remains to be seen,' Anita Boven answered. 'But in the meantime let me thank you for the interview, Dr Miami and... eh...'

'Gram Goetleven,' I finished the sentence for her.