

Spa

a short story

Hans Op de Beeck

I'm lying full length on a plastic lounge watching a slow, hesitant ballet of worn-out bodies. Everyone is in white swimwear, white bath robes and white slippers. All the hairdos and bodies are colourless. Men and women are interchangeable. They have left their identities at home or here in the guest rooms. I look out over a covered human-sized terrarium that has run wild, a décor of tropical plants and a meandering concrete swimming pool.

On the other side of the pool two workmen are repairing a huge wall clock. The hands appear to have seized up. Both men have produced large quantities of equipment in order to get them moving and the clanging is visibly annoying some of my companions in misfortune. It doesn't bother me; these things happen.

My eldest daughter has banished me to this reservation for the elderly. For three weeks. I don't hold it against her. It's just the way she is. She gets some crazy inexplicable notion in her head and it *must* and *shall* happen. It's a quality of hers. A quality she certainly didn't get from her father. No, I've always been so... serious. She brought my careworn old carcass here in person. Father, she said, you're going to love this. You can swim, go for a sauna, take a steam bath, have a massage, read... It's just what you need. Since I turned seventy she has decided what I need. Like a helpless animal, I let it happen.

The spa is part of a vast hospital complex. The main entrance to the labyrinth is like the foyer of a luxury hotel. This is a place where your suffering is turned into a lifestyle product. The complex is like a technological city, a monstrous machine. The spa, at its southern extremity, a long way from the main building, which thousands stream in and out of every day, is just a detail in the vast scale of the whole. This island of the infirm is tucked away in a hilly landscape, just outside the metropolis. No one is here by accident, since apart from this there is really nothing to do for miles around. Odd how in the West we carefully keep illness and suffering out of sight, banish them to anonymous sites in no-man's-land.

From the outside this architecture has the same interchangeable quality as shopping malls, hypermarkets and megahotels: rectangular precast concrete blocks, occasionally interrupted by a cylinder, or an over-the-top window unit. In my time there was labour-intensive craftsmanship, attention to detail and respect for the environment. Since the 1960s that has all gone for good. All those characterless prefab constructions were put together in far too great a hurry. You can't find your place in them, you feel like no one, you feel you're nowhere. Like here.

Still, this hospital complex is a backdrop to what is essential, a merciless summary of life. Here people give birth on the fourth floor, die on the twelfth, and on all the others suffer, recover, console. On the fringes of the complex is this spa for the elderly, the only section of the site where you receive no medical treatment, but are carefully monitored. If you do happen to feel under the weather here, you can be transferred effortlessly to the hospital.

This place is not at all comparable with spas as they were in my day. They were stylish, with beautiful, stately architecture, staff in stiffly starched linen and a winter garden in colonial style. They were laid out in a clear symmetrical pattern that you could understand the moment you came in. I like that. This building is a labyrinth. A labyrinth within a labyrinth. I'll be wandering round lost for days.

Everything's made of concrete, plasterboard and brushed steel. And glass, lots of glass, thick glass. The windows lack the refinement they used to have. The spa is draped in terrace-shaped sections across a hill. On one side you look out over a desolate autumn landscape. On the other over the succession of buildings which at night look like a sleeping industrial estate. The spotless interior of the spa reminds me of the new pharmacy around the corner from me, of refrigerators and freezers, industrial kitchens, laboratories.

Laboratories have been my life. My muddled mind spent a lifetime wandering round those smooth rational labyrinths of science. Structurally comparable with the hospital site here. My god, what a waste of all those years. The plan was to become old and wise. And look at me now, I've wound up with no results to speak of, a suitcase full of regrets and a handful of platitudes.

Back then I was at the bottom of the heap, at the foot of that incredible skyscraper of science. A naive country boy from an even more naive family. A family of wimps. Then I looked up and saw how half way up the building disappeared into the mist completely. Science was infinite, infinitely high. Now that I inhabit science, am inside and on the top floor, everything is turned on its head. I look down and see how everything down below has become invisible. The basis has gone. Standing up here is what I have longed for so passionately all my life. They didn't tell me that the view down would steadily disappear. They didn't warn me about the last, final ceiling in the research world. But it's there, more emphatically than all the previous ones. It's pressing on my head. The only thing I can do now is stare downwards. What I long for now is right back at the bottom. But it's gone. For good.

All the floors and rooms revealed their secrets to me one by one. In each room I thought up new storeys, corridors and rooms. And in those rooms I again built storeys corridors and rooms. In that way I built rooms within rooms within rooms... Ever smaller, finer, more precise, more exact, more minute. Everything became so small and thin that there was nothing left. Everything became weightless, empty, hollow, absurd, abstract. I too became smaller and smaller, more invisible, lighter. Now I know: this skyscraper is empty. It wasn't a measure of anything. What in god's

name did I expect to find? I have even lost the vanity to want to prove how much I knew about my subject. My subject doesn't matter. A life in science doesn't matter. A life doesn't matter.

I'm sitting at a desk in my guest room. It must be about two in the morning. The desk faces a large glass wall with a sliding door in it leading to a small private terrace. There's a dog lying asleep on it. The animal has kept me company since the first day. No idea where he hangs out when he's not here. Where does he get fed? He was simply there when I unpacked my bags. I slid open the glass door to the terrace when I was about to light up my first cigarette, and there he was. He looked at me with a typical mournful doggy look and I started stroking him. Now the dog is my companion here. In the terrarium I watch out for his return. He touches something in me that I never knew before. Yesterday he even made me cry. Not that he did anything special. He was simply there and I burst into tears. As if I had been storing up a vat of tears all my life. His look breached the vat. Odd. I'd never been a cry-baby and certainly not an animal lover. So have I turned into a sentimental old codger? All my life I've made fun of sentimentality, the kitsch version of emotion. But these days I get a lump in my throat the moment I see a father and son fall into each other's arms in slow motion in a soap. The border between emotion and sentiment has gone.

For the first time I understand the concept of a pet, the way one can project one's feelings unashamedly into such a creature. Pets console effortlessly. You don't find that in science. Nor do you automatically find consolation in human beings. And a dog like this is handsome. This one doesn't strike me as having a pedigree. Perhaps that's precisely why I think he's so handsome, because of that imperfection. His medium-length beige coat, his long nose, his fluffy tail. He's almost a work of art. The work of art offers consolation and leaves your questions unanswered. It's mysterious. It looks at you full of understanding. Quite simply. And it touches things in you.

Back on the plastic lounge. My lounge by the pool. That's how it goes, however much you may fight against it, your body longs for a familiar route, a repeated ritual. So this has become my chair. My colourless companions in misfortune have got the message. For now they are leaving me alone. I don't regret that.

I haven't yet said anything about my other children, Lauren's brother and sister. Where can I start? Let me put it like this: they don't have Lauren's resilience, or her talent for putting things into perspective.

Joan, Lauren's younger sister, has the same longing for transparency as my wife, only many times more intense. She has a deep long to disappear and harms her body. Has others harm it. The body itself does not want to be harmed, believe me, it *hates* being harmed. Funnily enough, her harmed body strengthens her mind. It brings her closer to me, she tells me.

When Anny, my wife, was struck down by a terminal illness, that also brought my younger daughter closer to me. When Anny died, Joan and I hugged for the first time.

My love for her mother and my pain at her loss flowed into Joan. She often tells me that it was her most complete moment. A discharge. When her first and only child was still born, she and her husband shared such a moment of appalling beauty. Since then they have never again been so close. They live alongside each other.

My son Thomas used to be godlike: devastatingly good-looking, a smooth talker, a planner, clever, good sense of humour. Always surrounded by girls. A brilliant mind, with flair and charisma. Pretty lazy too, since it all happened effortlessly. Became an interior designer standing on his head, picked up postgrad degrees left and right, top placements with the big practices, globetrotting... But then he marries the wrong woman, has a child and collapses after his first big commission. Divorce, courts, alimony.

And that poor little son of his, Elias. My grandchild, my only grandchild. He's a real darling. He's our angel. He has those wonderful chubby cheeks and his tousled blond hair smells so wonderful. That divorce was good for him. A child like that becomes ten years older overnight.

My son has clammed up. He has become almost as silent as his younger sister. He's moved back in with me. Not that I notice him much, since he lives a virtual existence. Really: virtual. The empty room on the garden side of our house has become his body. Every morning he hooks his flaccid body to an improbably complex configuration of computers, screens, cables, amplifiers and all kinds of other devices that I find incomprehensible. A while ago he bought himself a big virtual house in cyberspace and began a new life. He modelled his virtual self on his own image of twenty years ago: a handsome, self-confident, successful guy; the complete opposite of the way he looks now. In the last few years I have watched in sorrow as he – gradually – lost his grip on reality. In his virtual life he is again happily married to a digital version of his ex-wife. I became suspicious, soon sensing that this was going too far. After all, his real child, Elias, my grandchild, had been living in the house with us until very recently. How confusing it must have been for the little darling when without batting an eyelid his father asked him if he wanted to talk to his virtual mummy.

I wonder *where* my son is. I see his body daily. He eats and washes, masturbates, relieves himself and sleeps at the oddest moments and in the oddest places in my house. But where has *he* got to?

The times I've thought: I'm going to chuck the whole digital theme park out of the house. But what's the good of that? He's a grown man, he must do what he thinks he has to do. Of course there's recognition, and – I admit it – guilt. He's holding up a mirror to me. Wasn't my scientific obsession just as much a virtual biotope? Wasn't I just as much alienated from real, concrete existence? So am I supposed to deprive my son of his virtual life? Wouldn't I be killing my own child?

In his maze of apparatus Thomas has found a kind of continuation of himself, an extension, a prosthesis. Perhaps his virtual life is the real, essential life for him. Apparently freed from his own body, he dwells in complete abstraction. Via technology he achieves an existence almost free of matter. Perhaps virtual

relationships and contacts are more open, honest and authentic than our clumsy, physical communication? Perhaps he can finally be himself and not what others want him to be? Perhaps his situation is in fact highly enviable?

It is three in the morning. I stroll through the spa in my white terry-towelling outfit. Not a living soul, apart from the night watchmen. They're obviously content to leave an old fool to his own devices. As I walk past them, I recognise the sound track of my son's virtual life.

The water in the concrete swimming pool is now a motionless, silent mirror. The tropical plants are black dragons, bats and umbrellas. The weak nightlights transform the sterile daytime theme park into a menacing backdrop.

As if willless I am led by my strolling body through places and corridors I have never yet visited. I find an outside door hidden from residents and push it open. The cold seizes me and a knife-like wind whistles round my ears. My body gasps for breath and shivers but goes stubbornly on its way. I am led further and further outside. The hospital is bathed in orange light. Visually the buildings and the surroundings congeal into a single brown vibrating mush. My body progresses through the wet nocturnal wasteland in the direction of the main building. My white slippers are squelching mud, a stray autumn leaf clings to my chest. My white shock of hair dances around my head, my eyes are watering and my cheeks are burning. Half an hour later, like an indomitable tank, occasionally tipping over because of the uneven terrain, I reach the main entrance. I feel a warm drop fall from my nose. They seem to have forgotten the cylindrical revolving door when they locked up yesterday. Or does the thing revolve all night long? The door offers me an open segment and I enter barefoot. I leave my sodden slippers outside.

The floor of the entrance hall is freezing cold. The entrance leads to an incongruously high lobby with a round fountain placed centrally at the far end. Above it are a globe-shaped lamp and a huge dome. I look up and count sixteen floors whose ring-shaped landings overlook the lobby. To the left a rampant spiral staircase winds its way up through the landings. I pass a waiting room where empty, untidily scattered designer chairs stand about like a herd of sleeping animals. Then I reach the escalators. I step onto one and set it in motion. The metal grooves cut into my feet. I always used to find its diagonal movement too slow, but now I stand still and let the machine do the work. At the top there is a large area with twenty or so double lift doors. A lift opens unbidden. Ping. I enter and press an arbitrary number. The doors close, Two seconds of silence. Then movement. A tingling sensation goes through my body. Figures mount up and stop. Ping. Two seconds of silence. Then movement. Doors open. I walk past a glass room where a number of nurses are sharing coffee and a giggle. The laughter subsides and further on the lighting too becomes subdued. For a moment it is as if I find myself in a completely dark vacuum. No sound, no light, no orientation. Then I walk past an apparently endless succession of glass rooms equipped with intensive care units. I recognise the machines all too easily. Then I pass a row of

motionless horizontal bodies, each floating in solitude on a white island of sheets. Each body is tucked in up to its armpits. Chest, arms and heads are woven round with an elegant tangle of pipes and wires sticking in and out of the bodies. The machines send a continuous stream of data scrolling across the displays and make faint, clear sounds. Almost musical. Everything is bathed in the oddest variant of serenity.

I stop at the bed of a young woman. Then I enter her glass cell. I move closer to her. It's not right but with the back of my right hand I stroke her left forearm and feel an inexpressible resistance of invisible body hairs. I smell medication, sweat. How old is she? Twenty? I sigh with my whole being.

The breathing mouthpiece hides part of her face. I lean forward and tip my head to be able to study her face more closely. She has a full head of short hair and a small, nicely rounded forehead. Long eyelashes, straight nose, even eyebrows. The hairs look as if they have been pencilled in, they lie unnaturally evenly next to each other. Her pale skin gleams faintly. She has a small freckle on her right cheek and a small scar beside her tight eye. However close I get to her, I feel no presence. Where is she?

A drop of blood falls from my nose, onto the spotless sheet. Then accelerating footsteps. A woman's voice keeping itself under control. Someone places a cool hand on my neck.

I'm lying on my belly on a narrow massage table. A physiotherapist does mechanically what he's supposed to. A kind of esoteric muzak is playing. I don't buy that kind of funny business. Scientists like concrete things, not airy-fairy stuff. I don't like the sickly smell of incense and oils either. But the time when I got irritated about such things has long since passed. Now I let it happen. My body is too tired, my senses too tame. Habituation to – or is it acceptance of – my chronic pain has made me more tolerant of trifles. My vanity died quiet death years ago. It amazes me that many of my companions in misfortune can still summon up the enthusiasm to tan their bodies under the sun lamps that are here in abundance. What's the good? Is a grandchild happier with an orange granddad? I still shave, though. I want to stay neat and tidy.

Yesterday I tried swimming. I was reminded of a polar bear that I once saw swimming endless circuits in a concrete bath, much smaller, but comparable in shape, which was also surrounded by a painfully inadequate simulation of nature. You could observe the creature under water through a large window. Languidly and joylessly it pushed off with its hind paw from exactly the same spot each time, before swimming exactly the same circuit. He couldn't get enough. I could. After two circuits I was helplessly out of breath.

'Sir, what on earth are you doing here? What are you doing in this section so late? You've no business here. No one has any business here. And you're bleeding! From your nose! Where is your room?'

'...'

'And why are you walking around here in bare feet?'

'I'm sorry, miss. I...'

'You? You...what?'

'I'm afraid that I was... that I was sleepwalking.'

'Sleepwalking?'

'...'

'Do you know this patient?'

'No...'

'Where is your room? What section are you staying in?'

'I'm staying in the spa.'

'In the spa? The spa? Did you walk all the way over here in the cold?'

'Looks like it, doesn't it?'

'But wait a minute? Aren't you Professor Van Beek?'

'Ver-beek.'

'Professor Verbeek! I know you from the television. Do you remember that I was at school with your daughter?'

'Really? Which one? Joan? Lauren?'

'Lauren! At secondary school.'

'Well, what do you know. Haha. It's her fault I'm wandering round here.'

'Why's that?'

'She used a mild degree of force to get me into the spa.'

'Ha, that's just like her. That doesn't surprise me in the least. Even at school she was very good at telling people what to do. Everyone sometimes hated her for that, but all in all everyone thought her heart was in the right place though she blurted out whatever was on her mind. And yes, she was always there for you. And such a laugh!'

We walk back to the night team's glass room. Her colleagues look at us for a moment in silence and then go on chatting. With what sounds like genuine interest she asks: 'How's she getting on?'

'All in all, not bad. She keeps my family together more or less single-handedly. Her brother and sister... aren't having an easy time. Her mother, my wife, died last year and her old father... here he is in front of you. A pathetic old sleepwalker!'

'I'm sorry. My deep condolences about your wife. But er... you still look in pretty good shape.'

'Oh, my dear child.'

'Would you wait a moment. Put these on your feet. You'll catch your death of cold like that. I won't report your sleepwalking here in the clinic. Let me see your nose a moment... Do you mind, a little closer. There we are, a nice little wad. Go ahead, have a seat. Here's a chair.'

'Not that it's any business of mine but...'

'Oh yes. Christel. My name's Christel. Nice to meet you.'

We shake hands rather ceremoniously. Her handshake is surprisingly strong. I say:

'Cáspar. Call me Caspar.'

'Was there something you wanted to say?'

'Yes, not that it's any business of mine, Christel, but... is everything all right with you?'

'With life in general, I mean? I can tell by looking at you that you're not the carefree type.'

'...'

'What? What's wrong?'

She dries her cheeks with a pink handkerchief that seems to appear from nowhere.

Almost in a whisper: 'I... I'm afraid... I can't tell you all of it just like that. It... Look, I'm the only child of a single mother. My mother in turn was also the only child of a single mother. And now...'

'Are you yourself the single mother of an only child?'

'How do you know that?'

'What an extraordinary dynasty! Wonderful!'

'Wonderful? The fathers disappeared out of our lives without so much a by your leave. Cowards... all three of them.'

'I assume all three of you also became mothers very young?'

'You understand people, Mr Verbeek.'

'Cáspar.'

'Caspar...'

'Oh child, understanding people. We all cherish the illusion that there's such a thing as fate. Understanding people, no, that's doing me too much honour. All my life I've buried myself in science. Far, far away from human relations. I was looking for things that are perfect. But let's make no bones about it, people are not perfect, Though situations, relationships or patterns sometimes are. What does your mother do for a living?'

'She's worked in a supermarket all her life. Every working day she spent shut up in her half a square metre, her tiny cubicle next to a till and a conveyor belt.'

'Wonderful!'

'You think it's all wonderful again?'

'Yes. All her life your mother has seen people of flesh and blood file past her. The whole spectrum. Like a frontier guard she guarded the line for them between offer and possession, between wish and fulfilment.'

'You're romanticising it all.'

'All we have is language to give things a meaning, isn't that so? We have language to dream in...'

She bites on her lower lip and her gaze wanders upwards. Then she looks at me again. She says softly: 'Maybe you have a point.'

'Supermarkets are architectural disasters, but I like their muffled directness. Straight down the line. A nice, clear, calculated structure. An ordered park, a city, a place to

linger. Carefully planned paths of seduction, walks through a cornucopia... What does she do now, your mother?’

‘She retired early. Now I have to do a lot of night shifts here, she looks after my child.’

‘A daughter, I assume?’

It is getting too dark to write in the dull light from outside. The window is misted up. The dog has done some calligraphy on it with its wet muzzle. All day long the landscape has looked dreadfully melancholic in this rainy weather. In the sauna a man told me something nice, so nice I wanted to write it down. But now I’ve forgotten it again. Perhaps it doesn’t matter. Perhaps the most important thing is that someone told me something nice today.

I look outside. The dog yawns and shifts its paws.

In the past few days I have found a couple of soulmates here. They are a pair of loners just like me. Our faces betray the same deep traces of loss and resignation. Our eyes mirror the same desolate vistas. In our uniforms we look like triplets. Just as I claimed my plastic lounge last week, to be able to observe the daily spectacle of worn-out bodies, Balh and Mel did the same. One day we realised simultaneously that we had developed the same ritual and that all three of us were alone here. For a second I thought of the three vanished husbands of Christel’s tragic matriarchy. At first we just nodded to each other from our regular spots. Our loungers are arranged in a strategic triangle; an all-seeing eye that has a perfect view of the ancient body ballet. No, they can’t be washed-up scientists like me, that’s for sure. Their way of moving gives that away. To be honest, I don’t know what their lives were all about. We don’t talk about that. A simultaneous look at each other made us all realise that all three of us were starting from scratch after a lifelong illusion that we had clung to too long and too stubbornly.

Not that we now break into comfortable banter. That’s the remarkable thing. This is a kind of bond that came about almost without language and which – I hope – will stay like that for the rest of our time here. Our contact consists mainly of silence. True, we exchanged first names and a few commonplaces one evening, but we decided, almost conspiratorially, that not much more was needed. This relationship is nothing short of an undreamt-of success for a dying autistic character like me.

My son Thomas has e-mailed me, for the first time since I’ve been here. It must be years since he decided to stop using the telephone, except in dire emergencies. He

has a wonderful voice. Why does he use it so little anymore? He seems to be banishing every physical form of communication from his life. Even now he lives with me he is more likely to send an e-mail than speak to me directly at the kitchen table. Funnily enough, I've come to like the son I know from the e-mails more than the son who wanders round my house. We've never been able to speak so openly about difficult things as in our electronic conversations. At the same time I've never been so distant from his physical self than since he moved in with me.

Dad daddy-o,

How's the old boy doing? How's things there in that spa that our know-all Lauren forced on you? You let yourself be bossed around by her far too much, Dad.

The house is very empty right now.

I miss having you here, even though we don't talk much. I like hearing a door slam or when you're on the terrace smoking a cigarette seeing the living room curtains billowing in the wind. You are the snatch of sound that wafts from that lousy old radio in the kitchen. You're the blanket I find over me in the mornings when I've once again fallen asleep on the sofa. You're the smell of toast and coffee. Come back.

I've already given you a life in cyberspace. It's fun playing you. You're very popular. Nevertheless I've modelled you 100% on yourself. You're a very marketable item. In your cyberversion you already have a new girlfriend. Her name's Mary. Haha. What's more she gets on very well with my virtual Helena.

Yesterday the real Helena was here with Elias. It wasn't a visiting day, but she couldn't find anyone else, so once again I would have to do for our child. He started playing computer games straightaway. So again we didn't say much. And before I realised, his mother was at the door again and they were gone.

Now you've gone I've lost all grip on the transitions from day to night. You were my clock. My sense of time has gone. Everything is dissolving into a huge timeless zone of directionless contacts, images, words, sounds.

Am I crazy, father? Am I crazy now that I consider my love of fiction just as authentic and sincere as my love of reality? Am I crazy when I sit staring at a photo of Elias for a whole day but don't look at him when he's with me here? Have I gone as crazy as my little sister?

Tell me straight: do you think I'm crazy, father?

Love,

Thomas

Tired, tired, tired. The mornings are the worst. Every morning I wake up with shattering exhaustion. A leaden blanket over me. And then those throbbing and piercing pains in my back, shoulders, neck, legs and feet. Unrelenting. I can't

remember what it's like to live without pain. Perhaps just as well. One gets used to everything, to a certain extent.

My tiredness and I have again slumped back into our plastic lounge. I look at the other side. It looks as if the wall clock is a hopeless case. After the tinkering of the two workmen a week or two ago, the thing was no longer touched. The still motionless clock looks like a lost orphan, to the extent that a clock can look bereft. Time looks orphaned here.

My two soulmates have taken up their positions. We nod to each other. That delectable grey lady on the swim bed could be my Anny. The same figure, the same way of moving. Oh, she was a darling. But what a life. She always effaced herself for me. And for the children. A life in the shadows, it's called. A spectator of life. She was a shadow, even when she was a child. People always looked past her. She was... transparent, almost. And she was silent. She had a tragic air of passivity, and with my egocentric vanity I was helpless in the face of it. But how I loved her. My God.

As a young woman she worked in a little coffee bar in a terminal at the airport. For years she was surrounded by the comings and goings of planes that were constantly transporting thousands of passengers to thousands of evocative destinations. She stood and watched. Darling Anny. Typical of the kind of person she was. A silent spectator in a duty-free no-man's land. And who should she meet there of all places? The busy, self-absorbed man I was then, on his way to the umpteenth conference. All her life she watched everything happening. She saw life happen and said nothing.

It's now a year ago since she died and it's beginning to dawn on me: the shattering awareness that that I never took the time to learn to talk to her... Surely I could have done that? What a farce. Oh, nothing's as useless as an old man full of regret. Anny is deep in my heart. She is the only jewel I wear. But was she wrong? I'm left with that massive guilt. She didn't suffer from that, guilt. She said nothing and perhaps she simply knew better. Meanwhile our children are as crazy as I am. Who would have thought that my talent for emotional failure would have been so much greater than my talent for science?

My brain, a splendid machine, but what do I do with it? I made the most beautiful connections, looked for links, went further than was thought possible. What happened to the great all-embracing insight? Did I do it for the sake of beauty? Probably. For aesthetic pleasure? Yes. The pleasure of seeing things add up? Yes. Why do people want things to add up? Where does that desire come from? That unrelenting striving to make things add up, for the beauty of perfection. Is something that is beautiful also good? Worthy of striving for? Is beauty truth? If beauty is nothing but a sweet lie, is goodness the same? Is it good to strive for beauty? Is it beautiful to strive for goodness? I now think that beauty and goodness are not beautiful or good in themselves, but that striving for them may be beautiful and good. Striving for something is at odds with the fulfilment of that striving. An aspiration fulfilled becomes ugly and evil because it demands sacrifices and kills desire. Is it worth sacrificing for an aspiration? Is making a sacrifice beauty then?

I have sacrificed a lot. Too much, that's for sure. Sacrifice seemed to me a sacred duty. The sacrifices that still surround me are not beautiful. They seem more like the leftover props from a play. That damned striving. Not striving is held against you, and if you do strive you end up holding it against yourself. Is there a solution of this dilemma? A nice solution that... adds up?

Balth, Mel and I have decided to stay true to our uniform and to put on the white bathrobe over our normal clothes. We escaped from the spa and after a long walk through the wind and weather arrived at the nearby bridge over the motorway. My terrace dog skipped cheerfully along behind us for a while and then disappeared just as cheerfully.

We are now leaning, three distinguished, hilariously attired gentlemen, in an identical pose over the railings of the bridge staring at the night-time traffic roaring beneath our feet towards a foggy horizon, or coming towards us. Disappearing red lights on the right, approaching white lights on the left. Two nice, clear directions. The strange thing is that very few words were necessary for us to set out on this incomprehensible expedition. But we are not alone. I know for sure that at this moment millions all over the world are doing exactly the same thing, staring at the endless traffic from a motorway bridge. You see those leaning, staring, insignificant men everywhere. It's like peering at the water, endlessly moving, but always the same. I used to go fishing occasionally with Thomas. We sit and stare there too. At the water, not even at the float. Even as a child he soon realised that it wasn't about catching but about fishing. Passing time. Waiting for nothing. And being content with that. When we did occasionally get a bite, we actually disliked all the fuss.

It must have been a lovely sight, three old men in a row, with waving hair and in white bathrobes, on a motorway bridge. Without any demonstrable aim. It's not all beautiful. Not for us either. Traffic is traffic. Yet I sense a kind of restrained elation in the three of us. The fact that we're doing this together. Like old tearaways. That here of all places we can find something essential.

Dear son,

I'm very touched that you should miss me, really. It's a great compliment for your old father. Oddly enough the emptiness and routine here in the spa suit me fine. Yes, I even find I like being bossed about. The depths a person can sink to, don't you think?

No, Thomas my boy, I don't think you're crazy. You're a product of another generation. You're simply being consistent. In fact, you're ahead of your time, I think. Is that a good thing? No idea. What is good? I don't want to and cannot condemn you, let alone declare you insane. A son who still dares to declare his love for his father can definitely not be called crazy. Exceptional, certainly.

Strange how in the last few decades we have started denying our bodies, or at least objectfying them too radically. Do you remember how in another life you flew all over the world? Your body spent, say, eight hours in an air-conditioned box and suddenly you were on the other side of the world. The physical experience of that distance has completely disappeared, abstracted into a comfortable waiting room kilometres high. No idea of the dizzying height you are at, of the dreadful freezing cold surrounding you, of the oceans... Today man is constantly buying one after the other denials of time and space. Everything reaches us easily. It is all coming dizzily close, past the boundary of our bodies.

The first twenty, thirty years of my scientific research were very linear. I was able to go further and further. From one step to the next. The world seemed like one extended road. Not even a motorway. Now there are no more straight paths. There is no distance, no backwards or forwards. There is no longer anything glimmering on the horizon. Everything is next to everything else or on top of everything else. In innumerable layers. In an infinitely extending field. If I were a young man today, I don't think I'd go into science. What good would it do? Things have become all too relative. What choices would I make? Would it be art after all? Would I make images? Wonderfully beautiful images without a linear progression, without solutions?

*A kiss, and one for Elias too,
your father*

'Wait, let me help you, Mr... er, Caspar.'

'Is this your own car?'

'Yes. I saved up for it for long enough. Even if it's a little crate.'

'I can walk back OK, really.'

'Are you crazy? In this cold?' On your own? What if you fall over? It's nothing short of a miracle that at your time of life you've survived such a rotten distance sleepwalking. The quagmire around the buildings here is full of potholes and puddles.' She holds the passenger door open for me and says in a motherly voice: 'Let me help you. Give me your arm.'

The cluttered interior of the car smells of dog, cigarettes and mud. I am sitting at the front. She shuts my door. She walks round the front of the car, placing a number of fingers on the bonnet for a moment as she does so, opens her door, swings herself into position behind the wheel in a single movement, and slams the door shut. Then, just as in the lift of her hospital, there follow two seconds of silence. I say: 'Christel, you're beautiful, do you know that?'

'What do you know, am I perhaps going to be the first one in our tragic family to end up with a man? Excuse me, but I'm not looking for a father figure right now. Despite all that psychoanalytic nonsense.'

'No problem, I'm already a father, as you know.'

She starts the engine, the engine cuts out, she swears remarkably loudly. A sigh. She starts again, successfully this time. She pulls away in fits and starts. She drives recklessly. Our bodies tremble and are slung to and fro. We say no more till she abruptly stops the car and immediately stalls outside the entrance to the spa. Again two seconds of silence. She says: 'I...'

She puts her mouth close to my ear. Again she puts a cool hand on my neck. And whispers: 'I...'

Late afternoon. Changeable weather. Heavy clouds. I stand on my terrace and smoke a cigarette. The dog has not showed up for the last few days. I can still smell him and realise how much I miss him. I've become very attached to the smell of his coat. When Thomas was still little, he pestered me endlessly for a dog. No, I never allowed the children that pleasure.

I place my elbows on the railings, catapult my cigarette end into the landscape, and exhale the last of the smoke with a sigh. In the distance is the roar of the motorway. The muddy undulating landscape is a deceptive setting. There is something charming about it, but at the same time it is a landscape found in detective series on TV: raw, boggy, next to a motorway. Here is where deals are done, suitcases exchanged, bodies dumped. Here is where many square kilometres of desolation are combed by police and volunteers, desperately searching for a girl who's disappeared. Here is where plastic bags with the most gruesome contents are found.

In these little villages silent families live in damp houses, and things happen indoors that must never see the light of day. Here there is unemployment and people kill time, boredom or each other. It is that kind of landscape, in this difficult weather. But when the sun shines and the birds sing this is the dream of two-income families with weekend cottages here. A district full of hamlets with only one baker and one working man's cafe. An idyllic spot where everyone says hello. A setting for carefree childhoods and endless summers, for paddling in the knee high river that a little further on has a picturesque watermill churning through it.

I have always believed that reality is unimaginably banal. And hence violence too, or rather, the way violence is carried out. A man fucks his daughter without batting an eyelid, someone buys a pistol and just guns someone else down, someone poisons his lover without feeling a thing. Unhappy, traumatised souls who do what no one had expected of them, they themselves least of all. He was such a sweet man. He was such a sweet father. He always said hello. They were such a nice couple, the two of them... Many are caught in a vicious circle; victims of incest later become the perpetrators. Many do not want to be cruel or do not even understand what it means. Which doesn't mean that that I approve of their dreadful deeds. Strangely enough it is the impassivity, the immobility in committing violence that strikes me most as a spectator. When the protagonist of a tragedy drives a knife into his own heart in complete calm and tranquillity, tears roll down my cheeks. If the same

protagonist does the same with theatrical gestures and a contorted face in a spectacular setting, I burst out laughing.

I sometimes think that we are so fond of making violence so pathetic in books and films in order to give ourselves the reassuring feeling that it is far removed from us, far from how we are and how we live, far from our banality. If we stage violence in a setting that is all too banal, it brings us too close to the proximity and arbitrariness of violence, with the potential monster lurking in all of us good souls.

Ahead of me and behind me heads are bobbing on the surface of the water. I am part of a slowly drifting necklace of lives that are over. The water is unusually warm for a swimming pool. Every day here they manage to raise the water temperature so close to body temperature, that you don't even notice the transition from air to water. It's as if you are floating.

Swimming is going better and better, within my limited capabilities. In fact it is a lot easier than walking. I'm not even out of breath. Is this the boundless floating that Thomas has found in his virtual existence? What a release. My scientific research came down to compulsive striving, constant reaching for, looking doggedly ahead... What's more, the smaller your research area, the more you have the illusion of having a monopoly of wisdom, of being a benchmark, of being important. Being able to let go of that laughable striving and simply be with things, to dissolve in infinite expansion, to disappear in a mantra of movement, is a healing experience.

Wood and sweat. Moisture. Searing heat. In the saunas here we sit unusually close together. And unusually naked, let it be said. All my life I have been too embarrassed to show my naked body to outsiders. Now it's no longer a problem. It is also very sobering to give up one's vanity and prudery. The body reaching the end of its existence is certainly not a pretty sight. Apart from that those dreadful images of naked bodies packed together from the concentration camps keep going through my head.

Here among our dripping bodies Thanatos and Eros are jostling for supremacy. Sexuality is a strange thing at my age. Arousal sometimes seems to have gone for good and suddenly it's there again, completely unannounced. Here there is a lot of intense observation and assessment. What on earth is there left to look at? But I understand the reflex. The exaggerated cossetting and carefree atmosphere here cranks the old game of seducing and being seduced back into action. I am still too much of a man of reason to allow myself to be taken in tow, but a germ of lust occasionally rears its head.

The carefree world that Thomas finds in his perfect virtual life and thanks to his perfectly modelled virtual body will undoubtedly also arouse the deepest sexual urges

in him. We've never talked about it, but I'm convinced that sex is more than daily bread to the virtual Thomas. Derailment is just around the corner. Raw violence is also sure to germinate in him sooner or later. People strive for an existence without conflict, but when the conflicts have disappeared, they create them for themselves. It's nonsense to think that we learn from history. Comfort is the mother of conflicts. Anger the father.

My last day. My bags are packed. My terrace dog showed up again yesterday and I said goodbye to him. Those tears again. From the restaurant I'm now looking out over the swimming pool, which from this considerable height, even more than before, can stand comparison with a cage in a zoo.

'So, here you are then, Daddy.'

Lauren. She looks beautiful. And in a temper. I say: 'Hello, darling.' We kiss.

'Well? Enjoy your stay OK?'

'More than I dared hope. To start with I took a fairly gloomy view, you remember?'

'I remember.'

'I'm not what you'd call a philanthropist.'

She brightens up: 'You don't say, haha. Hear anything from Thomas during your stay?'

'Yes, we e-mailed now and then.'

'Last week too?'

'No.'

'Funny. I haven't anything more from him either. Well, anyway. That's how he is, isn't he? Swim?'

'More than ever before.'

'Read?'

'Not a word.'

We get up. She bends forward for a moment to take my case. A strip of sunlight curves round her body. She glances at the terrarium. Says rather sarcastically: 'Look, there. There are two men waving at you.'

'Oh, them. Bye, guys!'

'Who are they?'

'They're... You don't want to know, darling.'

She rolls her eyes. And then, in histrionic tones: 'My father is speaking in riddles.'

To my surprise I see that the big wall clock in the terrarium is working again.

As we leave the building, a bath of sunshine empties over us. Unusual sunlight. For a moment the hospital takes on a benevolent air. We get into her car. As we turn onto the motorway I see an old man standing on the motorway bridge. We've started a trend; he's also wearing a white bathrobe. The monotonous journey sends me into a temporary trance, and for once Lauren doesn't even feel the urge to fill the silence with nonsense.

Before I realise it, I'm standing with my suitcase outside my front door and there is no sign of Lauren anywhere. Did I kiss her goodbye? Thank her? I don't know. I open the door. Although everything looks exactly as I left it, something seems to be wrong. I go down the hall and open the door of the living room. Before I realise I feel an urgent embrace at knee height. Elias. He buries his face between my legs. I'm overcome by a terrible vague feeling. I sink to my knees and turn his face towards me with both hands. He looks at me with a look I've never seen before. We go in silence to his father's room.

The room is empty.