

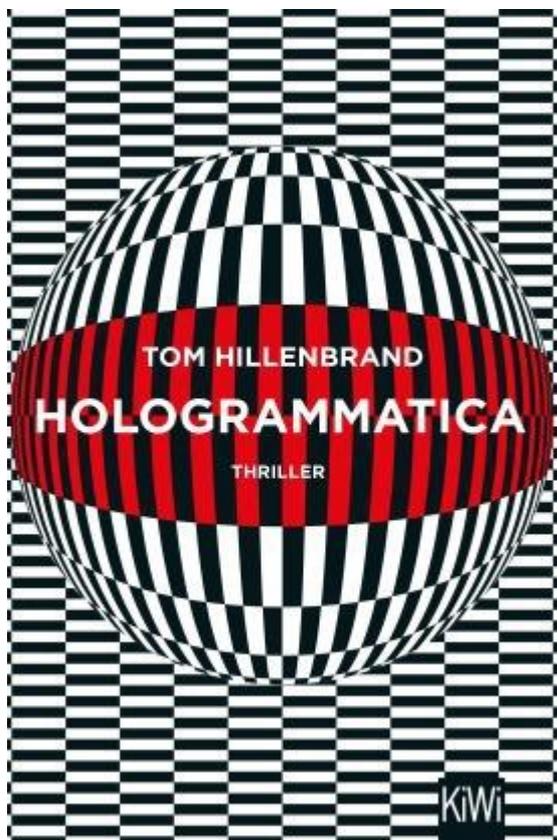
Sample Translation (pp. 9-40)

# **HOLOGRAMMATICA**

**by Tom Hillenbrand**

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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Publication: February 2018 (Paperback)

560 pages

ISBN: 978-3-462-05149-0

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Iris Brandt: [ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de](mailto:ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)

Dorothee Flach: [dflach@kiwi-verlag.de](mailto:dflach@kiwi-verlag.de)

**I nearly had it.** There's this spot in the middle where the tenor saxophone sashays around the trumpet like a drunken gigolo, moving away and stalking back over again. When Trane plays the passage, you can actually hear the blue train thundering through the night. My 'Blue Train' sounds as if the stoker had fallen asleep by the boiler. But this time I was quite good, at least I was closer than ever before. The sax did what it wanted. What it was supposed to do. The Tao of bebop. I nearly had it.

But then the doorbell dragged me out of it. Which means that the train has gone for today.

The bell's already ringing again. I set the instrument down with a sigh. John Coltrane gives me a quizzical look.

'That was better,' he says. 'Try it again.'

I ignore the holographic music teacher, put the instrument down on its stand and tell the house to establish a connection with the intercom. A window appears in front of me, showing a woman with Asiatic features. I guess Japanese.

'Can I help you?' I say.

'Good evening. May I come up?' she asks in English, with a faint French accent.

It's gone ten. Not that I have opening times, but most of my clients show up between eight in the morning and five in the evening. Which isn't to say that I haven't sometimes been dragged out of bed by the phone at midnight. But somebody in flesh and blood dropping by at this time of night? Rather unusual.

'Evening. Is it about a job?' I ask.

'Yes.' Short pause. 'It's about your specialist area.'

I'm sure she doesn't mean my sax playing. I ask her up, fourth floor on the left, the door with the frosted glass and the inscription: 'G.K. Singh. Quaestor.'

There's no lift. That gives me enough time to move from my flat to my office, across the hall on the same floor, and take up position behind my desk. In passing I glance at the wardrobe mirror. I'm wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt with a prominent yellow stain on the belly (there was vindaloo). And I could use a shave. In fact I can always use a shave, those damned Bengali genes. For a moment I think about projecting a suit over my leisure wear, but decide against it. Anyone turning up at this time of night is going to have to take the frog prince as they find him.

I listen to the creak of the stairs. A little while later I hear her opening the front door, which I'd left ajar, and coming in. A few seconds later she's standing by my desk. She's about sixty, and about as curvy as an x-ray. Her black business suit is definitely too

unwrinkled for the time of the evening – holopolish, presumably. Has she digitally ironed her face too? I get up and extend a hand. She takes it. Mine is nice and warm. Hers is icy.

‘Good evening, Mrs...?’

‘Pierrette Mumeishi.’ She lets go of my hand. ‘Mr Singh? Mr Galahad Singh?’

‘At your service.’

We sit down. She rejects my offer of a drink. Instead she takes a file from her briefcase.

‘I’d like to commission you to find someone.’

I nod. She waves around in the air, and the one-in-three holo of a woman appears on my desk. She’s slim and dressed entirely in plain black. Her dark blond hair is tied up – practical-looking, over all. She could be in her late thirties. Her dark eyes tell me that she’s intelligent, and unhappy. There might be a connection.

‘Juliette Perrotte, thirty-seven, lives in Paris. She’s a software developer and works for Cryptocarbon.’

‘Doesn’t ring a bell,’ I reply.

She looks at me for a moment before realising that I don’t mean the missing girl but the company.

‘Small but powerful. Cryptocarbon develops encryption processes for uploads.’

I tap my finger against my temple and give Mumeishi a quizzical look. She nods.

‘That kind of upload, yes. Juliette didn’t show up for a business appointment on 14 April, a personal meeting with her boss, eleven in the morning, not far from the Trocadéro. At least that’s my best lead. She may have disappeared before then – she was working at home for the two days before that. We don’t know exactly what her private life was like, who she went out with in the evening. And we can’t tell with any degree of exactitude...’

‘Sorry to interrupt you for a moment, Ms Mumeishi. But could we go back a step for a moment?’

She looks slightly irritated; she’s obviously annoyed that I’ve interrupted her when she’d built up such momentum. I think of my derailed sax solo. It’s compensatory justice, nothing more.

‘Back?’ she asks.

I smile a tad too broadly. It’s one of my tricks. My dark complexion makes my smile look particularly radiant. I also open my dark brown eyes wide. That seldom misses the target. But Ms Mumeishi doesn’t seem receptive to my eyelash-fluttering.

‘Could you tell me first of all what your relationship with Miss Perrotte might be?’

‘I’m a lawyer, Mr Singh.’

I knew this of course. Mumeishi speaks quickly and she speaks a lot, always a sign of jurisprudence. My father likes to say: If you want to shoot a lawyer, just aim at the mouth. Impossible to miss.

What I actually want to know: who gave Mumeishi her mandate? She does me the favour.

‘I’m working for Chenelle Perrotte, Juliette’s mother,’ she says. She snaps her fingers. A pure white visiting card appears in her hand. She throws it. The thing whirls in the air and lingers there. ‘P. Mumeishi. Avocat. 45 r. Érard, 75012 Paris.’

I tell the system to archive the card, and it floats to the desktop and gradually becomes transparent. Silly gimmick. Lawyers for you.

Next Mumeishi tells me the story. It’s like most of the stories I hear, all of them, in fact. After little Juliette has dissolved in the air, her close relatives, in this case her *maman*, start getting anxious. She calls Juliette’s ex-boyfriend, her ex-ex-boyfriend and her best friend from school. None of them has seen the missing woman, for years. At that moment, if not before, it dawns on the mother that she knows shockingly little about her daughter’s life and knows no one from her social circle. Next Chenelle Perrotte goes to the police to make a missing person report. The officials tell her that it’s everyone’s right to take a spontaneous trip to the mountains or the sea for two weeks without telling their mum.

‘Madame Perrotte is extremely wealthy,’ Mumeishi goes on. ‘With the help of her Amanuensis she tapped into a huge number of data sources. But nothing at all came of it. That’s why she’s convinced that Juliette must have been the victim of a crime.’

‘Hasty conclusion,’ I reply.

‘In what sense?’

‘An Amanuensis like that isn’t very clever.’

‘Mr Singh, believe me, my client has the best one money can buy.’

‘Sure. If the missing woman doesn’t turn up even after several days of observation, she may have been kidnapped. Or else,’ I point to Mumeishi’s perfectly fitting trouser suit, ‘she just changed her appearance because she doesn’t want to be found.’

‘Of course a holomask is entirely imaginable. But my client thinks this explanation is unlikely. She knows her daughter very well. Juliette would never do anything like that.’

I’ve heard those words many times too.

‘So. Will you take the case?’

‘I’d be happy to,’ I lie.

‘Your price?’

‘A thousand Eurodollars a day, for the first ten days. Plus costs. Five thousand in advance.’

Mumeishi looks put out. ‘That’s a considerable sum.’

‘Yes. But I’ll pursue the case personally. No automated search routines. Handwork and legwork on the spot.’

‘And what if you don’t find her?’

‘You have a choice. Either you take my quaestorate away from me. Or I keep it going at a low level. Then it’ll only cost a thousand a week.’

Mumeishi raises her eyebrows. ‘So automatic search routines.’

‘Search routines based on data from ten days of personal investigations. I will turn her flat upside down, interview her acquaintances, inspect her whole life. That considerably increases our accuracy. But if she doesn’t turn up in the first ten days it’s likely that she won’t be found at all, statistically it’s less than one percent. Then it’s really more of a case for an Amanuensis.’

She rests a hand on the file. ‘There’s one other special condition.’

‘Which is?’

‘You can talk to anyone but her mother.’

I frown. ‘Why not?’

‘She’s very vulnerable, her health has been affected. The business with Juliette has really taken it out of her – she’s her only child. If you have questions for her, you’ll have to ask them through me.’

‘Fine by me. One more thing.’

‘Tell me, Mr Singh.’

‘Why me? Why not a quaestor from Paris?’

‘For reasons of discretion. Everyone in Paris knows everyone else. And I’ve heard good things about you.’

‘Hm. Then we have a deal,’ I reply.

She pushes the file across to me. ‘These are all the relevant documents that my client and I possess. There’s also a key-card in there, for Juliette’s apartment.’

‘Fine. I’ll get in touch as soon as I have anything, Ms Mumeishi.’

We get up. Without looking at her, I say, ‘People sometimes do strange things. That’s why every detail is important. If anything occurs to you, give me a call, whenever you like.’

Then I turn towards Mumeishi and extend my hand. She takes it and looks me in the eyes, as briefly as possible. Then she turns on her heels and leaves my office. I stand by the desk until the sound of her stilettos has faded away.

\*

I go back into my flat. It consists of a bedroom, a small kitchen, a big gym and a loft-like living room through which one has a spectacular, meaning a spectacularly ugly view of the railway junction north of King's Cross. My ex always wanted us to holograph in a panoramic view of Regent's Park in its place, or maybe the Thames embankment near Tower Bridge. Not with me. I want to see the real London Borough of Camden.

My two saxophones, a tenor and an alto, stand in a corner near the sofa. Behind them is a white wall about six metres long, my milk carton wall. I turn towards it now. The thing about the milk cartons is a rather macabre joke that no one understands these days. About a hundred years ago the faces of missing children were printed on drinks cartons. I can't find out why they did it. The police were clearly of the opinion that it would bring in useful evidence, if they made drowsy people stare at a vanished child over their breakfast cereal. It sounds crazy, but that's how it was. That's why we also call our missing people milk cartons. I admit it's not all that funny. Unless you have a screwed-up sense of humour like I do.

The milk carton wall isn't really white. It's covered with notes, but you can't see them because they're covered over with holotexture. Even though it's my job, even *I* don't want missing people staring at me over breakfast. But now I ask the house system to dissolve the holocamouflage. Three photographs appear on the wall, two men and a woman. The girl came in the week before last. One of the men has been up there for months. But his relatives go on paying nicely, they refuse to give up hope. No one understands that better than I do. The other male milk carton is a special case, a long story.

I take out Mumeishi's file. The sheets in it are holographed, of course. First I clip out Perrotte's photograph and stick it on the wall, in such a way that there's plenty of room for notes beneath it. Then I slump on the sofa and read. Essentially I learn what Mumeishi has already told me, enriched with additional details. Juliette Perrotte seems to have been a very talented programmer. But instead of signing up with a multinational she worked as a senior software developer for Cryptocarbon. Her flat is in the Marais. Perrotte's mother doesn't do anything, she's just rich. There doesn't seem to be a father.

Every now and again I keep getting up and write on the wall with a holopen. I also put up a few blank cards: 'flat', 'masks (?)', 'friends' and 'work. These are the points that I have to work through as soon as possible. Better get on with it, before the trail goes cold. The police follow the rule that the first forty-eight hours are crucial. After that the witnesses' memories are no longer trustworthy, footprints fade, DNA particles disperse.

With missing people it's not quite as dramatic. If they've been victims of a crime, even for quaestorates the forty-eight-hour rule obviously still applies. But if the milk carton in question has headed for the hills, it keeps on giving out data. No one can hide forever in a remote motel. Sooner or later he or she has to eat, stretch their legs, satisfy dark desires, whatever. All of this plays into the hands of the quaestor. Particularly if he knows the missing person, with all his quirks. So an apartment search is the first thing that I have to do. After that I want to talk to Juliette's employer. I find the address of Cryptocarbon and dictate a mail. Next I ask my Amanuensis software to show me the connections to Paris. The last flight from London Britannia leaves in half an hour, the one after that at six fifteen tomorrow. I ask about alternatives. On a nightcar I'd be there by four in the morning. I always sleep incredibly badly in those rolling coffins. But some sort of emotion tells me it would be a mistake to wait until tomorrow morning.

Sighing, I tell the Amanuensis to call me one. Before I go into the bedroom to pack, I give the tenor sax a nostalgic glance. I was so close. I nearly had it.

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An unpleasant noise reaches my ear. I must have dozed off shortly after leaving the tunnel. Now I'm lying in the reclining seat of the nightcar, rubbing sleep out of my eyes.

'Where are we?' I ask.

'You've reached your destination,' the nightcar buzzes. I sit up and look out of the window – without a doubt it's Paris, without a doubt it's Perrotte's address – 75, rue Vieille du Temple. According to the display it's half past three in the morning. What lunatic driver got me here? No matter, let's get on with things. After I've had a good yawn I bring the seat upright, pick up my bag and get out. The nightcar hisses silently away. After the journey in the slightly overheated vehicle the cool fresh air feels very pleasant. I look down the rue Vieille du Temple. A pretty street, with old buildings, cafés and small boutiques. On the ground floor of Perrotte's house there's a patisserie that I might seek out later. Above it looms a building from the seventeenth or perhaps even the sixteenth century, four storeys.

Juliette Perrotte owns one of the attic apartments. In the old days a building like this would have been unaffordable to mere mortals. But in times of underpopulation you no longer have to be obscenely rich to live like that. By now even office workers can afford such a place. I tap in the digicode from the file and push open the front door. There's a lift. I take the stairs in the hope that it might get my circulation going. Once I'm at the top I take Mumeishi's key card from my jacket pocket and hold it against the door. The lock snaps open.

The corridor is long, with a parquet floor and a few paintings on the walls. They show gloomy figures, including a giant devouring a human being. I hold the ring on my finger to it and ask the Amanuensis software. Goya, it says. They're not prints, the paintings look real. But what does that mean these days.

Before I continue, I take out my stripper goggles. The flat is rather untidy, but all the surfaces look spick and span. It may have something to do with Juliette Perrotte having a cleaning bug. It's more likely that she plastered the walls and floors with holopolish. Almost everybody does. We're living in a superficial world.

My strippers are only level III, but that should be enough. With the goggles I can make the upper layers of the holonet disappear. Now that I've got them on I notice smaller deviations. The parquet floor is a little more worn than could have been seen before. The pretty chest of drawers to my right is now defaced by an unlovely scratch. Minor details, but perhaps one of them is important.

Four doors lead off the corridor: bathroom, kitchen, sitting room, bedroom. I look briefly around all the rooms. As I do so I keep switching between the complete hologrammatica and the trimmed-down stripper view. When I've fished I make a coffee in the kitchen and sit down on Perrotte's designer sofa.

Mademoiselle didn't need to project anything on her windows. The real panorama is spectacular enough. I open the glass door and step out on to the narrow balcony. As a real tourist should, I look first of all for the Eiffel Tower. My geographical knowledge of the city is quite rudimentary, but you should really be able to admire it from here. However it's nowhere to be seen.

Oh, of course. Clearly one coffee wasn't enough. The Eiffel tower, the original steel one, was blown up fifty years ago, by terrorists. What kind of terrorists? I've forgotten. At any rate the new Eiffel Tower is a hologram, twice as tall as the old one, so that you can see it better.

The fact that *I* can't see it is down to the goggles, which are still on my nose. Public buildings are level IV, which is why my stripper goggles leave them out of calculation. I take

the goggles off. Opposite me are geraniums in a balcony window box, neon advertisements flicker on and off on the fronts of the houses. And the Eiffel Tower appears above the roofs of Paris. It's really beautiful.

Ok, enough sightseeing. Time to do some work. I start in the living room. Perrotte clearly likes leather furniture – leather sofa, leather armchair, leather beanbag. There are more paintings on the walls. This time they're old photographs. They show men in helmets and protective goggles, and vehicles. They seem to be some kind of archaic racing scene. There are a few books and magazines on a shelf. I see a lot of French classics, but also a bunch of Russian stuff in the original. Goya, Chekhov and Camus confirm my first impression that this milk carton is the brooding, melancholy type. And she's also untidy. There's stuff lying around all over the place.

While I'm picking through the drawers and the little writing desk in the corner, I put on a bit of music.

'Play the last ten songs again', I order the house system. It immediately springs into action. Perrotte listens to classical music. These days philistines call even my old jazz classical, but this is the real thing. Tchaikovsky, I think. After the first piece, however, I get Sib Stuk, booming, computer-generated music, not necessarily my thing.

I don't find much of interest in Perrotte's desk apart from an envelope with an invitation – laid paper, printed, not holographed. 'Aubrie invites you', it says. It seems to be a birthday party. It's happening tonight, in a club called 'La Marmotte'. The dress code is mentioned on the invitation: 'Crazy Funky India'. A smile creeps across my face. I can go as I am, as an amusing Camden Town maharajah. I get up a map of Paris and have it show me the place. Then I put the invitation in the inside pocket of my jacket.

Next I interrogate the kitchen. It tells me that Juliette hardly ever eats at home. In fact she only keeps Cosmostars breakfast flakes there and, as far as I can tell, quite good coffee. There are also a few cookery books, but they don't exactly look well-thumbed. I'm about to leave the kitchen again, when I'm struck by a fat book bound in green cloth, between *The New Siberian Cuisine* and *99 Brasserie Classics*. It looks like an old-fashioned photograph album. I open it up. It actually is one. Prints on white sheets of paper, and underneath them handwritten captions. I turn on the stripper but the pictures don't disappear. They are quite seriously stuck to the paper.

I sit down at the kitchen table and start flicking through it. There are pictures showing Juliette as a child, on a beach, maybe at the age of five or six. Underneath it says in meticulous printed letters: 'Corsica, winter 2060'. Then there are a few in which she must be

ten. Juliette wears blue shorts and a t-shirt, a woman is kneeling next to her, presumably her mother. She's wearing hiking clothes – khaki shorts, checked shirt, stout boots. And yet you can tell that she's beautiful. There's a man in the picture as well, also in walking gear. But he is standing on the edge – an arm, a leg, nothing else. In the background you can make out an arch, like the ones you see in a medieval fortress. The inscription under the picture reads: 'Hiking with my family'. I take a photograph of the picture with the cameraring. Perhaps the Amanuensis will be able to identify the place later.

The further I flick, the older the girl in the picture becomes. There can no longer be any doubt that it's Juliette. When I've nearly reached the end, there's a page without a photograph. There are still traces of the glue with which the missing picture was fastened. Underneath it says: 'Unmistakeably father and daughter'. I flick back and look for other photographs of the father. There's the cropped picture I mentioned before, showing only the arm and leg of a man. Is that her father? Or just someone walking through the picture?

After putting the album back, I walk into the bedroom. Perrotte has a big futon. Next to it is a bedside table, on it a half-full water glass, an old-fashioned notepad and a few pens. I pick up the pad and flick through the pages with my thumb. They're all blank. On the ceiling above the bed there's a big holomirror. A guy is looking down at me from there. He has eyes like lumps of coal and a five-day beard, which is really a two-day beard. His hair is hardly any longer than the stubble on his chin. He is wearing a green leather jacket with a tight black roll-neck pullover and even tighter black chinos. His features look Indian, his complexion is like milky coffee. In fact he could use a cup of that, because he looks tired. And he's been looking in the mirror for far too long, the great poser.

I turn towards the wardrobe, which is built into a niche in the wall in the American style. Hidden behind the sliding doors are some blank suits hung neatly on hangers, matt white, in various cuts. But most of the wardrobe is light and in plain black. I'm about to close the wardrobe again when I hear a barely perceptible humming sound. It takes me a second or two to work out that it's coming from the lift, which must be somewhere behind the wall. It's about four in the morning, which is why I'm playing it safe. I tell the house system to turn off the music and switch off the lights as well. I disappear into the wardrobe. To avoid messing up the suits, I move them away from me a little and crouch down on the floor before pulling the sliding door closed.

It isn't long before someone comes in through the front door. A voice of indefinable sex says something, and the light comes on in the bedroom. The wardrobe door has slats. I can look outside. At first I can only see the legs of the new arrival. The figure is about a

metre seventy, and is very probably a woman. I can tell that she's kneeling down by the bedside table. My breathing is shallow, I bring my eyes as close as possible to a split between two slats. She has turned her back to me and is assessing the notepad. The woman is wearing jeans and a leather jacket. Brown hair, Caucasian features – but no, I wasn't thinking about it properly. Her hair is quite fair, and her skin colour is less pale than I'd imagined, it's more like mine. And she's wearing a velvet blazer.

Just a moment.

The woman holds the notepad in her left hand, and she's holding a pencil in her other. I can make out her face now. She has Asiatic features, her black hair is woven into braids. I have to control myself. I almost let out a whimper of surprise. She – if it really is a she – is obviously wearing an everyman suit, also known as a dickie. I know these things exist, but I never have thought I'd come face to face with one. No, let me put that another way. It's entirely possible that someone has walked past me wearing an everyman suit at some point. But I wouldn't have noticed, because that's actually the point of the whole thing. The idea of this camouflage suit is over a hundred and fifty years old. But in the days of the pharmacologist Kindred P. Dick, who came up with the concept, the technical conditions for manufacturing it were not yet in place. The dickie is a holographic suit, not unlike the matt white things dangling over my head. But instead of projecting an essentially static holotexture – the black of a tuxedo, a houndstooth pattern – the picture on show is constantly changing. Not only the clothes, also facial features and hairstyles are forever switching. It happens slowly and gradually so that the casual observer doesn't notice. The projections come from a databank which contains the holos of millions of people – hence the name everyman suit. The software of the dickie takes the demographics of the local population into account. Someone who wears the suit in Peking will show ninety-five percent Asiatic facial features. Someone strolling through Moscow will look mostly Caucasian.

In cities the everyman is the perfect disguise. It turns its wearer into the man in the crowd, an appearance that no one can really remember. Everyman suits are quite rare – they're almost military equipment. It might be easier to buy an assault rifle than a dickie. Special units of the EURUS Ministry of the Interior use such things, professional spies and maybe the ne'er-do-wells of the Solntsevskaya Bratva.

I look at the woman's silhouette. Who do you belong to? She's still on the notepad, she's writing something. What's she doing there? When I work out what she's doing, I feel a mixture of shame and irritation. That it didn't occur to me before. Miss dickie is using one of the oldest snooping tricks in the book. Nowadays it rarely works because most people use

holographic paper. But there were ball-point pens beside the pad. And when you write with ball-points it leaves a mark on the page underneath. So she's rubbing the blank paper with a pencil to see what was on the page above.

It seems she's found it. She pulls off the top sheet and shoves it in a pocket. After that she stands up and goes. I hear the front door slamming shut. The light goes out.

I stay in my cupboard hiding-place for a few minutes before creeping out. As soon as I'm standing back in the bedroom, I pick up the notepad too, in the faint hope that the rubbing trick will still work on the next page. Not much comes of it:

A m e d a

Andromeda? Ahmed as something? It could mean anything.

Otherwise the bedroom doesn't contain anything interesting – I'd hoped for sex toys or porn films, to find out something about Perrotte's preferences, but sadly no chance. Presumably she's straight, or at least that's my impression. That's quite a shallow observation. Sexual preferences are one of the best datapoints, above all when they are unusual. I need to find out more about her social contacts. Another reason to go to this party tonight.

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It's getting light. But the patisserie on the ground floor still isn't open. Which is a shame because my stomach is rumbling audibly. I call up the address of the hotel booked by the Amanuensis. It isn't very far away, somewhere near the Place des Vosges. Walking distance. Maybe that will wake me up. I walk along deserted streets. In London there would be quite a few people around at this time of day, but not here. Like most European cities, over the past few decades, Paris has lost its inhabitants on a massive scale – and not just because of the plague. Everything aspires eastwards, to the promised land. People want to go to Siberia, to make their fortune or at least not get sunstroke. Last year I was in a few medium-sized cities in the south and in the central region of EURUS. There was nobody in the streets but the old and the destitute, but the façades and pavements were neat and tidy, thanks be to holopolish. Paris has the advantage of having value as a walk-through museum. In a few hours the city will be full of Chinese and Sibs, stomping open-mouthed through this Disneyland of European culture.

I'm stomping too, but I summon the nerve not to number myself among the tourists. I pass the church called Saint Paul as well as some kind of museum. Everything is blamelessly

perfect. Over the past few years there's been a lot of demolition here. Some of the modern horrors have been touched out, including the horrific Tour Montparnasse and the Neue Oper.

After a quarter of an hour I reach my temporary residence, a business hotel with too much marble in the lobby. Of course I'm too early, but the concierge promises me that I will be given access to the room as soon as possible. In the meantime I have breakfast. After a large portion of scrambled eggs and two croissants I feel distinctly better. I sit down in the lounge with a cup of coffee and pass the time with the newspapers. In Death Valley they've measured a new record temperature, seventy-one degrees Celsius. A strike threatens to paralyse the spacelift in New Albion. Two new settlements have been inaugurated near Yakutsk, which will initially be able to take four million, but will later accommodate five times as many. And the London Lions have lost again against Moscow and are now at the back of the Lacrosse playoff. Since it's a complete mystery to me how this disaster could have come about, I call up a few scenes from the game. Before I can look at them, the concierge waves me over.

I switch off the window and take the lift upstairs. The room looks OK. You can tell that Amanuensis has communicated my preferences to the hotel. There's a Ryan Pfluger photograph above the bed, and a Robert Mapplethorpe in the corridor. There's a lot of pale wood, big windows, muted colours. There's plenty of room for my milk cartons above the little desk.

After making myself another coffee with the machine in the room, I start going through my inbox. There's a reminder mail for the cocktail reception at the INTERQUEST conference. I delete. The fact that I've had a reply from Juliette Perrotte's employer is a lot more important. Her superior, a man with the interesting name of 77C Faucheux will see me at about eleven.

So I've got plenty of time to research a few things and have a little nap. First of all I run the pictures from Perrotte's album through the Amanuensis software, with a request to identify the place where they were taken. I also give her the name of the lady whose party I'm going to crash this evening. And I order a costume for myself. It seems to be a smart party, so I don't want to show up in cheap holorags.

Before setting off I also bought in a few streams. There are millions of people who have cameras fixed to their houses or their clothes, and who are constantly filming the public space. The videos generated in this way are generally uninteresting and consequently a bit worthless. You can buy them, a few thousand hours of material cost only a few cents. My Amanuensis, which is essentially a search engine on steroids, continuously compares the

streams with pictures of Perrotte. The vague hope is that my milk carton will be spotted at some airport or other. But it's more likely that she's using a holomask.

That must be it, at any rate. The Amanuensis hasn't picked up anything. I rub my eyes. One last thing, then I'll get down to it. I go to the EURUS index of names, for which I have a semi-legal account via a strawman. I call up Juliette Perrotte's reference data. The information agrees with what I was told by Mumeishi. Her father is given as one Jacques Perrotte. I go to his data. They've been deleted, since Jacques Perrotte disappeared twenty years ago.

Another one who's melted into air.

It's hardly surprising. Twenty years ago the Sibtrek was in full swing. A huge number of Western Europeans decamped. Many of them quite deliberately left their own lives behind.

I decide not to start a search routine for old Jacques. First of all it's too long ago. Secondly I'm already chasing after enough ghosts. I can't help smiling. At the start of the twenty-first century it's supposed to have been almost impossible to disappear. There was surveillance technology which meant that everyone could be traced within seconds. After the Turing incident all that software was switched off. Fine by me. Otherwise I'd be out of a job.

More out of habit than hope I take a quick look to see if there's anything from Percy. But of course nothing has come up about this milk carton either.

'Alarm for ten,' I say to the room.

Then I lie down on the bed. Fluffy blue clouds drift past on the ceiling above me. Soon I'm asleep.

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When the alarm goes off, I feel as if I've only just fallen asleep. Groaning, I sit up. I look out of the window. The city looks like a bad monochrome projection. I wash my face and take the lift down to the lobby.

When I step into the street from the hotel, the thrust hits me unannounced and with its full force. My chest feels as if someone has cast it in concrete. Every movement is difficult. Depression is seen as a mental problem. For that reason most people aren't aware how incredibly physical the symptoms are. It's as if you were up to your neck in industrial cinders. Even reaching for a glass of water becomes an enormous effort. Apart from the fact that you don't even want any water.

Normally I wait until all that shit has gone by, like a captain weathering a storm. I lie down on the carpet in my flat for hours, or keep on playing the same sax run, usually ‘Lonnie’s Lament’. But now I have to go to that bloody interview and later even... to a party. I’ll get the interview out of the way somehow or other. As a depressive, you learn how to function socially. I can be in the deepest dip and during a short conversation or phone call still come across as being in an extremely good mood. It takes up a lot of energy, of course. And afterwards everything’s even worse. But a party? Full of people? Never.

I hate doing it, but it has to be. Leaning against the wall of a house, I slowly lift my concrete hand. In a toneless voice I speak into the microphone on my watch: ‘Dispenser. Fluxovint, three hundred milligrams.’

Glowing text appears in front of me: ‘Dose under preparation. Double authentication. Retina scan.’

I hold the watch in front of my right eye.

‘First authorisation successful. Please say the password.’

‘Bitches Brew,’ I reply.

‘Second authorisation successful.’

Without my being aware of it, the dispenser sluices three hundred milligrams of happy-maker into my bloodstream. I wait. It takes about a minute. Then I feel my limbs becoming lighter. The world seems brighter now. For the first time I’m aware of the cute boy sitting a few steps away on a park bench. Now I’m a good quaestor again, and a terrible sax player. God how I hate this stuff. I run my left hand over the back of my neck and take a few deep breaths. Don’t get annoyed. Time for the show. With a spring in my step I walk over to one of the taxis in front of the hotel.

A quarter of an hour later I’m standing outside a nondescript office building near the Trocadéro. From the large number of name plates I conclude that there are lots of small companies here, most of them presumably on short-term contracts. These little start-ups are called hit-and-runs. Every few months they move their bases to the city that happens to give them the best conditions or the best grants at the time. Since the spaces in these office towers are usually standard, the companies just have to put their holotextures over the furniture, and everything’s just as it was, including the rubber tree and the worker-of-the-month certificate on the wall.

Cryptocarbon is on the twenty-seventh floor. As expected, it’s a blank office. There’s a lot of wood and anodized aluminium, actually quite nice. The lady in the outer office greets me with a charming widening of the eyes, to which I am not susceptible. I still flutter my

eyelashes back. Presumably I look a bit manic. Perhaps a hundred and fifty milligrams would have been enough.

She sends me down the corridor, into a conference room. Once I'm there I take one of the lemonades that are ready on a table, and go and stand by the window with it. It's a sunny April day, by now it's about twenty-six degrees outside. Another four or five weeks and Paris will be unbearable. I hear footsteps and turn around. The man who walks through the door is in his late forties. He is wearing a wing collar and a blue suit with a window-pane patten, which I find quite bold. His beard looks well-tended, his body just a tad too well fed.

'Monsieur Singh?' he says. 'I'm 77C Faucheux, the business manager.'

We shake hands. I thank him for taking the time to see me. We sit down. He rests his hairy hands on the conference table and spreads his fingers. 'So you're trying to find Juliette.'

'That's my job.'

I take out my notebook. 'If I'm properly informed, you both had an appointment three days ago, on the fourteenth?'

'Correct. But she didn't come.'

'And when was the last time before that you saw her?'

Faucheux thinks for a moment. 'It's quite a while ago. I was in Toronto on business for a few days, seeing one of our partners there. After that there was something I wanted to talk through with Juliette. She was in charge of one of our most important projects.'

I cross my legs. 'What was it about?'

'Monsieur Singh, that is... very confidential.'

Instead of answering, I look at him quizzically. He seems to understand that he should betray at least a few details to me if I'm to hunt out his chief programmer.

'Do you know what we're working on here?'

'Encryption procedures for some kind of data.'

'Not some kind. We only encrypt cogits. Our encryption procedures are very special. Tailor made for uploads. As you can imagine, these are just about the most sensitive data that there are. May I ask you,' he smiles, 'if you are a quant, Monsieur Singh?'

About forty years ago they first succeeded in scanning in a human brain and copying it digitally. The result is called a cogit. When Faucheux asked if I was also a quant, he was actually asking the following: 'Have you had your brain scanned and captured on a hard disk? And then have you had your skull sawn open and your cerebrum taken out? Have you had it replaced with an e-Cephalon, a small quantum computer, which now fills the space formerly occupied by your grey cells?'

‘No,’ I reply. ‘To be quite honest I find uploads a bit suspect.’

Faucheux takes a Pervitin Pepsi. He is trying to distract me from what is happening in his face. He frowns and purses his lips. He seems to find my attitude old-fashioned and passé.

‘In my job I’m not particularly exposed to serious dangers,’ I go on. ‘And if I understand things correctly, otherwise it doesn’t change very much in any case.’

The advantage of being a cogit is that you can switch bodies. A digital intelligence can be uploaded into a clone that has been prepared accordingly, albeit only for a few days. After that you have to go back into your own four walls – your root body. Otherwise you die. Why? No one knows. The only certainty is that if you stay out for too long that’s you finished. This means that the only advantage of upload technology is body holidays. If I had the secret fantasy of being a long-legged blonde couch potato, I might do it. But I don’t.

‘I see what you mean,’ Faucheux says. ‘Most people still think that way. But the technology will become more and more popular the closer we get to solving the Descartes conundrum.’

‘The what?’

‘You know what the one-body problem is?’

I nod. ‘A quant can’t leave its root body for more than twenty-one days. Otherwise it’s finished.’

‘Correct. Braincrash – collapse of the cogit with complete destruction of the data structure. At the same time the vessel suffers a lethal anaphylactic shock.’

‘Vessel?’

‘That’s what we call a clone capable of receiving an upload.’

‘Funny term,’ I say.

‘It’s from the epistle to the Corinthians. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” At any rate the cogit can’t survive for long without the root body. And it can’t live at all without a body. If you try to run a cogit in a virtual environment, in a blank computer, then braincrash occurs immediately, within milliseconds. There seems to be a connection between body and mind that we don’t yet know. And this connection, this mystery, was named after the philosopher René Descartes.’

‘Because?’ I ask. Philosophy is one of the many school subjects that I was rather bad at.

‘Descartes postulated that mind and body are separate. He called them *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the thinking thing and the extended thing. He thought the two of them

interacted via an unknown place and in an unknown way. Neuroprogrammers are feverishly in search of this place. If they ever find it, it's going to be huge. Because if people knew how body and mind are connected, it might be possible to manipulate or even dissolve that connection.'

He chuckles. 'The Holy Grail. Then we could live for ever, and have ourselves uploaded into a freshly cloned vessel every few decades.'

I take another sip of lemonade and study Faucheux. 'And? Should we hold our breath?'

Faucheux shakes his head. 'It's going to take decades. Maybe centuries. But it stimulates people's imagination.'

'You don't believe it?'

'So far we don't even know how the human brain even works. We just know how to make a copy of it and load it into an emulator. But exactly what goes on up there... I'm afraid nature won't be tricked.'

I nod absently. I sometimes have the feeling that Faucheux is digressing a bit from the subject of Perrotte. But perhaps he's just a chatterbox.

'And what exactly was Perrotte's job with you?'

'She was a crypto-analyst. Uploads are a boom market. The technology's getting cheaper all the time. By now there are about ten million quants, and the trend is strongly upwards. Ten million digital brains, you'd need absolutely uncrackable encryption procedures.'

'I thought Cogit-Crypto was quite good? Or is that just what the adverts tell you?'

'It is. Cryptocarbon's encryption is seen – and I'm not just saying this – as the gold standard. Juliette was considerably involved in the latest version. The encryption occurs during the first brainscan, so that the cogit data are never unprotected. We're also working with what we call the matryoshka model.'

'Those Russian dolls?'

'That's right. Like a matryoshka, our crypto has several layers or shells that you have to get through in turn. If you decode shell one, the cogit can be copied. But it's only if you also have the codes for shell two that you can mount it, make it run in a vessel. And even then shell three still protects you against anyone seeing the actual content of the cogits. We also use quant crypto. As soon as a hacker even looks at the key, its state alters. It's basically impossible to crack a cogit. And yet we're constantly working on improving our standards.'

‘I understand,’ I say. ‘Could you have your office send me Perrotte’s journeys over the past few months, her appointments?’

‘In principle, yes. But first I’d have to ask our legal advisor whether we’re allowed to give that out. You’re not a policeman.’

‘No, that’s true. But my client, Madame Mumeishi, is Perrotte’s mother’s lawyer. I’m sure she’ll be happy to confirm to you that I’ve been given a mandate by the family, if that will put your legal advisor’s mind at rest. I assume Perrotte was a quant as well?’

‘Of course.’

‘Ok. One quite different question.’

‘Hmm?’

‘Why do you think Perrotte disappeared?’

Faucheux sucks on a straw. There’s a rattling noise. He studies the bottle with consternation, as if the fact that his Cola is running out right now is a complete disaster.’

‘I have no idea. Juliette was very reliable, in fact.’

‘Is anything else missing?’ I ask.

‘Missing in what sense?’

‘Data, documents. Things she was working on.’

‘No, not as far as I know.’

I can tell by his face that he hasn’t yet checked whether Perrotte might have absconded with some sort of research results. I think it’s only just dawning on him that that possibility exists. For a moment 77C Faucheux doesn’t say a thing. Then he utters two plain words: ‘Industrial espionage?’

‘It’s not unthinkable,’ I reply. ‘I’m sure she knew a lot of things that would be useful to competitors, don’t you think?’

‘Yes... yes, of course.’

I put my pad in the writing position. ‘Who are your main competitors?’

Faucheux reaches for another Pervitin Pepsi, but then realises that he shouldn’t do that to his heart. He turns back towards me.

‘It’s not a huge field. We’re a small company, but there are only three other cryptoboutiques working in this area – 123 Outcomes, Alumia, BGT Security.’

‘I see. Well, Monsieur Faucheux, thank you for your time.’

‘My pleasure. We’ll try to get hold of Perrotte’s diary for you as quickly as possible. And if you hear anything – above all, anything that indicates industrial espionage...’

‘...I’ll let you know straight away.’

We get to our feet. I shake Fauchoux's hand, then he shows me to the door.

'One last thing.'

'Hm?'

'Your Monsieur Descartes. Did he have a theory about the place where mind and body meet?'

'At first he thought it was the pineal gland. Later he thought it was God,' Fauchoux replies.

'God?'

'Descartes called it *concursum dei*. He thought the interaction occurred through God. In other words: he had no idea.'

I thank him again. When I turn around one last time, my hand raised in farewell, I notice a picture on the wall, two metres wide and not very high. It's a classic, the evolution of *homo sapiens*. Unlike the original, though, you can look inside the heads of the apes, Neanderthals and humans walking in sequence. The ape brain is quite small, in its evolutionary descendants it becomes bigger and bigger until we get to humans with their massive piece of equipment. After that comes another human. He has a quantum computer in his head, a qube, the size of a walnut.

A nutjob, haha.

Not mine, of course. Presumably we'll all eventually have something like that in our skulls, packed with a lot of filler material so that it doesn't rattle when you walk. The avant-garde, who have already had a cogit implanted, are called quants. They call us normal 'sponge-heads'. The majority, whose thinking is still analogue, has taken their revenge for that insult. They call the quants 'airheads'.