

Gaute Heivoll

Dr Gordeau

I

When the plane has almost come to rest, he sees an angel. The angel is sitting right at the back of the small baggage train on its way across the runway. A young man. Or a woman? Longish hair. His eyes. Frightened? Happy? Is he raising his hand?

The next time he looks out, the case the angel was sitting on has fallen off. The baggage train continues on its unsteady journey. The case is black. Locked. The kind that holds a musical instrument.

The plane follows a course of red and yellow stripes on the runway. Soon it comes to a complete halt. His heart is beating with renewed vigour. A moment ago he was in the air, gliding over the sabre-shaped beaches of Sardinia at 40 degrees below zero. He tuned into a conversation between two French women a few seats back while staring into his paper coffee cup and watching the milk spread like clouds in all the black. The Mediterranean, which was clearly demarcated on the map, though, as it lay beneath him, blurred in reality. It was as still as sheet metal, ice cold, with a mute sparkle like glass shards strewn across the floor of a ballroom. He fell asleep. For a brief moment he was crouching by the carp pond behind his house in Denmark. He saw the sluggish red fish under the layer of water lilies and green algae. A frog floating on the surface of the pond. Frog's eyes, unnaturally large, swollen. Then he hears Vivian calling from the house: 'Where are you? We have to go now!' He can hear Vivian's footsteps on the gravel, coming down the grass. The frog, hearing her too, dives and with human-like kicks swims in under the edge of the

turf.

His belt is still fastened. He is perspiring under his arms and around his groin. Soon people near him will start standing up; his heart beats faster. Outside it is 31 degrees Celsius, the captain informs them. Soon he will have to get up as well. He is here now. He is frightened. A red light flashes. He stands up; the blood rushes to his head. Suitcase in hand, the queue of people through the fuselage, down the steps one at a time, across the runway to the glass doors. Put one foot in front of the other. That's the way. The surge of heat. An ill-defined din around him from all quarters. He is here. He walks. He tries to locate the case which fell off the train. The angel. He doesn't see anyone.

The official stares at him the way you would scrutinise the contents of a bottle. Then his eyes fall on the passport photo. The stream of travellers flows anxiously past them; he recognises the occasional face from the airport in Rome. Why was he waved to the side and why not them? Does he appear in any way suspicious? Has his face really changed that much since the passport picture was taken? His mouth? Eyes? Hair? Of course, his hair.

'Tourist?'

The customs official stares at a point close to where his cheek becomes his chin. He can feel the sweat under his arms, the weight of the money belt around his stomach, imagines the notes being drenched with sweat, ruined, valueless. He nods vigorously; his long hair bobs up and down. The official doesn't seem convinced, however. Instead of giving his passport back to him he points to a blue door.

Two further officials, one of whom seems annoyed – as if his work demanded painstaking care and silence and he had been disturbed. The other one is wearing white rubber gloves. They are shown the passport. They stare at the photograph, then at him. It is almost synchronised, as though it were impossible for one man to do anything without the other following suit. ‘Please open.’ With a pulsating heart, he places his case on the metal bench. The blood rushes in his ears as it is opened. The official’s be-gloved hand disappears under the top layer of general clothing. Shirts, trousers. A small travelling towel, which Vivian had neatly folded and placed in the case without his knowledge. The hand rummaging around the bottom of the case. The blouses. The make-up. The underwear. The official holds a pair of flimsy panties between his fingers. Immediately afterwards, he pulls out a bra. For a few seconds he hears everything around him except what is going on in the room. He can hear the sounds of the airport: the crowds of people, the metallic voice resounding around the arrivals hall, all the conversations, the murmuring and the mumbling. The official’s gaze. He is at the bottom of the carp pond with the red fish gliding above him like large airships before the sun. The frog’s eyes growing in the dark in front of him. Then he is back. The bra dangles from the official’s fingers as if it were stinking refuse. The official who initially seemed annoyed says something in Arabic. Triumphant, disdainful, impossible to decipher. Then they both go into French. The case is slammed shut. He catches a last glimpse of the panties and bra as the official stuffs them into his pocket.

Dr George Gordeau, *Clinique*, Rue Lupebé 24. He places the case on the bed, opens it, contemplates the chaos incurred by the official’s hand.

For some reason he is breathing with his mouth open, as if he had been running. It is evening now. He stands by the window. From deep in a backyard, TV aerials protruding over the rooftops in the last of the sun, the trembling antennae of huge insects waiting to die. A wall. He studies the piece of paper once more before carefully folding it and lodging it between the notes in his wallet. Gordeau. He says the name several times but its mystery and impenetrability remain. Never been so close before. Dr Gordeau is somewhere out there, in this town. What is he doing now? Sleeping? Eating? Reading? What does he actually know about Dr Gordeau? A military doctor, trained in France. Later a surgeon. And now. Yes. Now Gordeau is here. In this town. He most probably lives alone. Yes. Military doctor. Perhaps he was involved in the war? In several wars? Sewing on severed parts. What hasn't Gordeau seen! A man like Gordeau probably lives alone. A man who has seen too much of life to be able to live with anyone.

He lies on the bed thinking about the angel he saw at the airport. The case left on the runway. The baggage train wending its way. The angel's hair in the wind. This line of thought leads nowhere. Everything churns around in large circles above his bed. Again he thinks about Dr Gordeau. He can't stop wondering about the kind of life he leads. In one of the white brick houses lining the road from the airport – might Gordeau live in one of those? Perhaps with a small white dog, a housekeeper and a chauffeur. But otherwise alone. And his clinic, in a separate part of the building perhaps? Friendly, bright rooms, with tasteful art on the walls, windows looking out over the piercing blue sea. All the surgery performed there.

He rings reception and orders something to drink. After half an hour, when nothing has happened, he unlocks his door and goes down. The receptionist looks at him uncomprehendingly. There is a lot of to-ing and fro-ing until he finally receives a bottle and a cup made of thin brittle plastic. As he goes up the corridor a small Arab slips out of his room. A fierce anger wells up inside him. He moves towards him with determination, but the Arab scuttles past heading for the lift with a white, evasive smile. 'Where do you think you're going? Hey, you!' But the Arab is as silent as a ghost. A chair jammed in the lift door is pulled inside in a flash. The doors close and the Arab descends through the floors.

II

There is a terrible racket. He is standing at the entrance to an oval market place and is shoved forwards. A donkey's back brushes against him. The buzzing of flies, orange stalls, tinsmiths, street shoe cleaners and small cafés. The bright sun. He has no idea where to go. A shoe cleaner is immediately on his tail, offering his services. Another one appears from nowhere shouting into his ear and right through him: 'You want to see the sea? You want to see the sea?' He tries to manoeuvre his way across the square, but a kind of ground swell forces him in another direction. A head taller than all the others, it feels as if he is growing all the time, inch by inch, a white giant. Thousands of black eyes. What do they think he is? He catches sight of a small, grubby hand groping him just above his hip and money belt; he slaps the hand and it moves away. Finally, he collapses at a coffee table and orders a Moroccan beer. He almost downs the beer in one draught. The market square seems less threatening from a distance. He orders another beer. Eventually he quietens down and

mentally replays his visit to Dr Gordeau's clinic:

The taxi stops in Rue Lupebé and he walks with pounding heart until he is standing outside no. 24. A tall brick building, much as he had imagined.

At the end of the street, the steady stream of traffic flowed down a boulevard. At the opposite end the blue gleam of the Atlantic Ocean. He wasn't sure where he was exactly, perhaps somewhere on the fringes of the town centre. The taxi had taken a very roundabout way, going through several alleys which he initially thought to be dead ends, but which later turned out to be interconnected. He inspected the yellow sign by the bell. Clinique. A sharp intake of breath and he pressed the button. A tall door. One room, cool, a plant in one corner, a staircase leading upwards; on the left the reception desk, a young girl who raised her head and looked him in the eye. 'I'd like to talk to Dr Georges Gordeau.' The girl gave a tentative smile as if the mention of his name was intended as a joke.

Thereafter her face resumed its dark, shiny chill and she asked him to wait on an upholstered leather bench by reception. While he was sitting there, the street door opened and a woman in the final stages of pregnancy came in with an elderly man. Both uttered a greeting before making their way up the stairs. Ten minutes passed. A quarter of an hour. Half an hour later the door opened again and a young woman came in leading a small boy. They also uttered a greeting and went upstairs. He was wriggling on the bench and sweating despite the fan in the ceiling. The girl behind the desk stood writing something by hand. When the scratching of the pen came to an end he turned round and she promptly lowered her eyes. After almost an hour she said in a monotone, apparently à propos of nothing: 'You can go up.' He hadn't heard the telephone ring; he hadn't heard her talking to anyone else. Bewildered, he stood up. 'You mean up the stairs?'

He pointed. She nodded and the same mischievous smile cracked her face.

III

'Dr Georges Gordeau?' The man wearing the surgeon's mask turns, but doesn't reply immediately. His eyes are filled with a kind of smoke. He motions towards the chair. 'You are Anders Nimb?' He nods. 'Yes.' The room is hot although the window is open. White curtains, white walls, a metal bin for medical waste. 'I'm not Georges Gordeau,' the doctor says, slipping the mask over his chin. 'Just take a seat. I will be examining you.' 'But... I'd have liked to speak to Dr Gordeau personally. He hasn't mentioned a price...' 'Relax, you can always come to some agreement. There's always a solution.' 'Are you sure? Do I have to sign any papers first?' 'What papers? Can you see any papers here?' The doctor pulls off his disposable gloves and throws them in the bin with a musketeer's flourish, finds a new pair, pulls them on and points with a rubber gloved finger. He thinks about the airport official's hand. Two dogs break into a bout of furious barking somewhere outside the window. 'Hurry up now. There are more patients apart from you. You can undress behind the folding screen.'

The intense embarrassment of standing naked in front of a man. 'Sit down on that chair. Put your legs on the rests.' He spreads his legs and closes his eyes. Feels sudden heat when the doctor directs a lamp close up. 'When will I meet Dr Gordeau?' He can feel the doctor's cautious hands around his balls. 'He's busy right now.' 'But Dr Gordeau will perform... the surgery?' 'Yes, of course.' The hand is holding the whole of his scrotum, raises it and pulls circumspectly. 'How long have you been receiving

hormone treatment?’ The door flies open and a nurse comes in with a folder under her arm. The doctor removes the powerful light. ‘How long have you wanted to do this?’ ‘How long? I don’t know... I’ve always wanted to, I think.’ The doctor nods. ‘You can get dressed now. Maria has the necessary papers. Don’t you?’ Maria turns and smiles, first at the doctor, then – in a different way – at the patient.

He dresses with alacrity. The doctor and Maria are talking in Arabic on the other side of the screen. Once dressed, he sees the doctor has gone. Maria is sitting alone with her dark smile. She resembles the woman in reception. Perhaps they are sisters. She is bent over a form.

‘Sexchange. Operation.’ ‘Yes...’ As soon as she mentions the word, he can instantly feel his knees give way. He staggers over to the chair. Actually he had never thought of it as an operation, more as a surgical intervention, but he realises now that operation is the correct word. Take it easy, Gordeau is very able. He’s the best. ‘How much is it, do you know?’ ‘Six thousand.’ ‘Dollars?’ ‘Yes, of course.’ ‘I haven’t got that much.’ She looks up from the papers for a moment. ‘Please, couldn’t I speak to Dr Gordeau personally.’ ‘I’m afraid not. Dr Gordeau is not available until tomorrow.’ ‘Where is he now then? On holiday? At home? Do you know how far I’ve travelled to come here? Do you know how long I’ve lived... as...?’ He looks down his body and she scrutinises him. Without finding anything special, it seems. ‘No, sir, I don’t.’ ‘I haven’t got six thousand dollars... but... I might have... four.’ ‘As I said, Dr Gordeau is here tomorrow. Come back then.’ ‘But the operation...’ ‘Dr Gordeau can do the operation but it depends on...’ ‘On what?’ ‘I’m sorry, sir. I don’t have any more time for you now. We have other patients. If you have the money, Dr Gordeau will give you the same consideration he gives to everyone.’ The

dogs are biting chunks out of each other in the street. Human-like howls travel up the front of the house. He hears the piercing scratch of her pen and now he notices the table fan swivelling from side to side, causing the papers she is writing on to flutter.

IV

He gets up from the table in the café. It is beginning to gust. The canvas over the stalls is flapping and banging like the sails on a full-rigger when the wind has changed direction in open sea. Although he hasn't realised, there are now fewer people in the streets. A scrawny dog jogs past him and disappears down an alleyway. He walks back the same way he came, past the man who a short while before had held sun-ripened oranges out to him. Now the man has his back to him as he busily puts the fruit into large crates. One by one, carefully, as if they were made of glass. He comes out into the broad avenue. The wind is stronger here. His shirt ripples over his stomach and is blown up into a balloon on his back. It has grown dark even though it is barely two o'clock. A kind of haze floats across the sky, veiling the sun. He begins to walk towards the hotel, thinking about what happened before leaving the clinic. He had been on his way out of the surgery when he sensed someone watching him. As he walked past he glanced to his right, at a bamboo curtain. The silhouette of a man. Black and unmoving. A cold shudder went through him. The man was just standing there. The curtain billowed between them. 'Dr George Gordeau?' he asked in a thick voice. The shadow glided to the side and was gone.

He walks past the houses thinking about Vivian: Vivian lying in bed at home with drooping eyelids, Vivian behind the steering wheel driving him

to the airport, Vivian walking across the lawn and down to the carp pond where he was squatting in front of the fish and the frog. Her footsteps, which cause the bloated eyes to dive and disappear. 'Are you scared? Don't you want to go?'

The sun has vanished in an instant. The sky has turned dark. Directly above him, it is almost black. His heart beats faster. A sign with an enormous white arrow on flaps violently in the wind. He begins to suspect he is walking in the wrong direction. Passes a collapsed building he cannot recall seeing before. A boy is standing in the ruins and points at him with a stick. He turns, goes back the same way, walking faster. Cars fly past, leaving long trails of dust. The entrance to the market square. He hesitates but enters. The man with the oranges has gone. The bare skeleton of the stall remains, swaying in the wind. Some women dressed in black stand in a doorway, but move indoors when they see him. There is a low roar, like the sound of a bonfire. Something in the air. Sand. He stares at the palm of his hand. Tiny reddish grains of sand.

Has he been here before? He stops, uncertain. A sign shaped like a peaked shoe. No. He turns and goes back the same way. The sand rushes past his ears, gets into his ears, nose and mouth. He breathes through his shirt. The sky is reddish, almost mauve above the rooftops, as though a tanker out to sea had gone up in flames. Now he seriously begins to be frightened. There is no-one outdoors. Everyone must have known about the sandstorm. Only he hadn't. The night of sand whirls past and through him, coats his lungs with fine dust. Every street corner is identical to the next, the house fronts merge into one another. A door, and a few minutes later another with precisely the same door handle. At the

end of a narrow street he catches sight of a man's back. A tourist? Were there more of them there? He thinks he can hear English being spoken. He increases speed, but the man walks at least as fast. At the next street corner, he sees the man's back pass in front of a window. 'Hey, you! Wait!' The man doesn't hear, just merges deeper into the red mesh of sand. He gets sand in his mouth as he yells. 'Wait!' He runs as fast as he can. Round a corner. A gateway. An open square. A market place? He holds his hands over his eyes. Nobody. Empty stalls wherever he turns. Linen sheets in the wind, like the forgotten military flags of an armada, chased and scattered to the four winds. So he stands there. Slightly to the right there is a black outline against a pale wall. No more than five metres away. He is breathless, but holds his shirt in front of his face so that the sand doesn't go into his lungs. 'Dr George Gordeau? Is that you?' The figure does not respond. Instead it takes a step forward, then another. The sand howls around the corners of houses. He imagines a fine layer of red dust settling on the furrows of his brain. A head. Long hair. A man? Yes. Another step closer. How old? 'Gordeau?' he repeats, but this time mostly to himself. An Arab? No, his hair is too fair. Or is the sand deceiving him? 'I AM LOST!' he shouts. 'DO YOU KNOW WHERE WE ARE??' Another step. The figure seems at once much taller. 'DO YOU KNOW...' A giant. Then he sees the hazy face through the sand.

V

He wakes up lying on a hard floor. Everything is bright white. As if in heaven or an operating theatre. He gives a start. Then an Arab bends over him. 'You okay? You sleep in sand. I found you. No good. No good.' For a few seconds he sees double. The dark face dissolves and the identical

almost transparent face moves to the side, only to merge back into the first. The sounds around him take shape, music. Voices from a television or a radio. A baby crying. Then everything comes back. Where he is. Where he was going. The sandstorm. The man he was following. Who turned back. Whom he recognised. Whom he had seen at the airport when he landed, sitting at the back of the baggage train.

Outside, it has brightened up. The sand lies in the streets like discoloured snow. The last flurry of grains in the wind. People are in the streets again. The crunch of sand under sandals as they walk by. The sun is warming. Now he has his orientation again. He is standing in the same market place, only at the other end. Now he can see the café where he was sitting, the stalls, the man with the oranges and the narrow alleyway leading to the broad avenue.

Back in the hotel he stands for a couple of seconds outside his room before abruptly twisting the key and tearing open the door. Nobody. What had he been expecting? He still has the money in the belt around his stomach, with his passport and wallet. Nothing missing. He settles down on the edge of the bed, puts his case over his knees, finds the sheets of paper he received at hotel reception and begins to write:

Dear Vivian

I'm here now. I can hardly believe it will soon happen. I've been to the clinic and I've been examined, but Gordeau won't come until tomorrow. I'm scared. I got lost in a terrible sandstorm and fainted. Someone found me and carried me to a house where I came to. Sometimes I think I'm seeing things. Was it wrong of me to come here? Will you love me when I return? As I am? I don't know any longer what or who I am. People

ogle me. I'll be happy when this is all over! I hope I can talk to Gordeau tomorrow. I hope he'll operate. I hope I get to see Gordeau. All of a sudden it feels as if he is the only person I can trust. Perhaps everything will be okay now? With us. With me. I'm so frightened of losing you. I don't know what I would do. I pray to God. Do you think he hears me? Dear Vivian, I love you so much. Say hello to the fish and the frog in the carp pond! Write or ring! Address: Rue d'Azial 63, Dar el Beida, tel.no. 3074173057001

You're a

Pitch black. Or is it slightly greyer ahead? He comes closer, or the grey comes closer. Water grass. Swaying in a strange underwater wind. For some reason he can breathe. He glides through the weightless murk, past enormous stalks which extend upwards and downwards without his ever being able to see their ends. He floats under the water lilies, touches the surface and plunges down to the black mud floor. Then it is light and he is still floating. The sun undulates in the water above him. Beneath the overhanging turf, in the dark, there is a glint of the frog's black eyes. The frog is bigger than him, but he is not afraid. He swims, keeping a distance, and watches the frog rise to the surface with two lethargic strokes. Then a face at the top. Beside the sun. Hair billowing, melting and merging like milk in water. Floating quite still in the shade of a water lily leaf, he peers up. A long time passes. The face flutters like a flag in the wind. Then he suddenly understands.

VI

The room is light. The street is teeming with noises. His first thought:

George Gordeau. He gets up, goes to the miserable bathroom, undresses, looks down and thinks: this is the last time. He fills the bath full. The water is a red, rusty colour and it isn't properly warm. He sinks into it. At the bottom he can feel why: fine sand.

The taxi through the streets. At a crossing he can see a long stretch of ocean and, above it, as far as the eye can see, a grey mist. His heart is hammering as he passes the houses in Rue Lupebé. His hair is still wet at the tips. The white brick building, the blackened windows at the top of the wall. There.

This time he doesn't have to wait. The girl behind the desk points to the stairs. She doesn't smile. Now everything moves fast. Up the stairs. What did he actually write to Vivian? Did he remember the address? The telephone number, was it correct? But the telephone number here, of the clinic? Neither of them had it. Down the corridor. If he... what if she tried to contact him and couldn't get hold of him? What if...? He recognised the door from the previous visit. The brass plate: Dr Gordeau. The door opens before he can knock. Maria is standing there. He is happy and relieved to see her again. Behind her, by the curtain, is the doctor who examined him. The disappointment is like a stab in the chest. 'Where's Dr Gordeau?' 'He's coming,' Maria replies. The doctor dematerialises like a ghost through the rustling bamboo curtain. 'So he's not here today then? Of course, he isn't!' He detects an unforeseen resistance in himself to meeting Dr Gordeau. 'Perhaps it would be best to delay the appointment?' 'Delay?' Maria stops in mid-movement and looks at him with surprise. 'That's too late now.' 'Too late? What do you mean?' 'Dr Gordeau has arrived. For you.' 'Does that mean he has accepted

a lower price?' 'Let's see how much money you have.' He unties his money belt and puts all the notes on the table. She counts them while he listens to voices on the other side of the curtain. 'That's sufficient,' she announces. 'Sufficient? Does that mean...?' 'Yes, Dr Gordeau is ready.' 'Now?' 'Please take a seat on the chair.' The table fan swivels from side to side making the dollar notes flutter like withered leaves. 'But... I had no idea it would be so quick. Shouldn't I meet him first?' 'Dr Gordeau does not meet patients until afterwards.' 'Afterwards?' 'Please take off your clothes.' He puts on a green shirt. 'You will be given a sedative first.' Before he knows what is going on, she has injected the syringe. A fountain of pain spreads through his thigh and then it becomes numb. 'That's it. We go through there.' She leads him by the hand and parts the curtain. A small operating theatre. White walls, a round clock above a trolley of instruments. A metal bench in the middle of the floor like an altar. He has to blink several times, but the mist in front of his eyes does not clear. A haze in front of the lamps. Maria, Maria. He can hear himself speaking as she leads him unsteadily across the floor. As if they have been dancing all night and can barely walk now. Then he lies on the bench. He senses a powerful light without seeing it. 'You'll soon be asleep now.' 'Dr Gordeau,' he hears a voice say. He tries to open his eyes and soon realises they are already open. 'Is that you? Are you here? Are you here? Answer me!' He shouts. Or whispers. He breathes. That is all. Then the face above him merges into the water like milk.