***The Information* by Bår Stenvik**

***Informasjonen,* Tiden Norsk Forlag 2018, Rights: Hagen Agency, hagency@online.no**

Sven left Nora. Or did Nora leave Sven? Something went wrong between them ~~–~~but what? Sven should know. He’s an expert in interpersonal communications for the company Human Content, analyzing and counseling people on body language, coaching professionals. His relationship rupture coincides with a mysterious new project, where Sven is tasked with teaching emotional expression to the artificial intelligence SAM, an experimental digital coach. As Sven’s knowledge is transferred to SAM, man and machine grow closer. But how reliable are his assessments? Why does he experience blackouts? What does the company actually want from him? And what happened to Nora?

*The Information* is a love story involving a woman, a man, and a computer program. A fable about trying to become a better version of oneself. And a suspenseful tale about being human in the information age.

Bår Stenvik has written several critically praised and award-winning non-fiction books, one of which is translated into German and Russian. *The Information* is his first novel.

The film rights for *The Information* have been acquired by Bulldozer Film.

**What the critics say about *The Information*:**

“Bår Stenvik’s successful science fiction-thriller bears tidings of a new and fruitful direction in the art of the Norwegian novel.”

*– Frode Helmich Pedersen, Morgenbladet*

“It is impossible not to delight in this novel’s bold moves. The action is exciting, the ideas are smart, and the plot intricate.”

*– Marius Wulfsberg, Dagbladet *

“More exciting and better told than most crime novels, at the same time pointing at central questions of the here and now.”

*Sindre Andersen, Klassekampen*

“A well-wrought suspense novel about artificial intelligence.”

*– Kenneth Moe, Aftenposten*

“Advanced, entertaining and forward-looking novel about our technology’s potential for designing super humans. “  *– Stein Roll, Adresseavisen *

[*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDosXv79Wi4*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDosXv79Wi4)

Review of *The Information,* Dagbladet, February 24 2018.

**Between man and machine**

Bår Stenvik has written an ambitious novel about humanity in our digitized age.

*by Marius Wulfsberg*

Bår Stenvik has previously written critically lauded non-fiction books about dirt, bluff, and deception. In his debut novel he investigates the border between humanity and modern information technology.

Thematically, *The Information* brings to mind Kraftwerk's “Computer Love”, Spike Jonze’s film *Her*, and Michel Houellebecq’s novel *The Possibility of an Island*. We’re dealing with an ambitious and thought-provoking book about mankind’s relationship with artificial intelligence.

Traditionally, technological instruments have been considered extensions of the human body. Today we know that modern technology has also changed us. In his novel, Stenvik takes one step further. He invites us into a world where man is a result of digital information technology. It is elegantly and realistically executed.

Unreliable narrator

There are many examples that indicate the proximity of such a future. Last year, a humanoid robot was granted citizenship in Saudi Arabia. In our own country, important bureaucratic decisions are made by computer programs.

The narrator and protagonist of this story is Sven Borg. He’s an expert in social interaction, and has landed the prestigious task of training the artificial intelligence SAM, an acronym for the program Synchronized Artificial Mirror. Not only do SAM and Sven develop a close relationship, soon SAM knows more about Sven than he does himself. That makes the narrator anything but reliable. Sven is pushing forty, and is successful and well groomed. He owns a self-driving Mercedes. His life is organized by the smart watch iMentor. Still this wiz kid loses his grip on his work and private life.

Scenes from a relationship

For years, he has held courses about body language for business people, but lately he is plagued by lapses of concentration. This has led to unforeseen incidents in his coaching practice. At one point his boss asks him whether he’s doing okay. He’s not.

His relationship with Nora is unraveling. She dreamt of becoming an actor, but wound up as an academic with a penchant for Julia Kristeva’s theories of female desire. Her own desire isn’t satisfied by Sven anymore, and the break-up reveals that he might not be so expert in human relations after all.

He is living a lie, and is haunted by blackouts. As his psychological drama tightens, the consequences are fatal. In a delightful manner, the two discuss with Ibsenesque solemnity whether it was Nora or Sven who left the other.

Exciting and intricate

Though the novel is a bit chatty at times, it’s impossible not to delight in Stenvik’s bold moves. The story is exciting, the ideas smart, and the plot intricate. The story is labeled as a “narrative compilation”, and takes place in several time periods – our recent past and an undefined future. The many high tech terms create a hyper modern atmosphere. For me, the high point of the book is still the portrait of the divided Sven. Gradually, the reader realizes that the difference between SAM and him is smaller than one thinks. Though he believes himself to be human, he becomes increasingly like a humanoid robot.

***The Information***

**by Bår Stenvik**

**Sample translation by Bår Stenvik**

**(Page 10–13)**

"So, this is the marvel of technology?" I said, without turning from the screen.

"We call it SAM," Nina said.

"For Samantha?"

They both gave me polite smiles.

"SAM is an acronym, for *Synchronized Artificial Mirror,"* Nina said.

"Aha," I said. "So what does she do?"

"She's a digital sparring partner, assistant – or coworker."

"How do you talk to her?"

"For now, only in English. So far there aren't good enough drivers for voice recognition in our language area."

"You've based her on your own appearance?"

"She's not a representation of me. She's an individualized embodiment of the system."

I studied the curve of SAM's lips on the screen and how the light glinted in them. An inner alarm sounded, but come on, the lady inside the screen was just a computer program. She would hardly take offense if I stared at her mouth. The lips parted slightly, as if she were considering whether to say something, and I glimpsed the tip of her tongue moving in there.

"It serves the system's purpose well when the user interacts with her or his own face," Nina said. "Research shows that you respond better to negative feedback if it comes from an avatar bearing your own facial features. In addition, you gain a more precise sense of your own spectrum of expressions, so the social training becomes more effective."

I hadn't noticed any of those tiny wrinkles around the eyes of the real Nina, and turned towards her to compare. Then again, I had only seen her in dim lighting before.

"You're saying she's programmed with your facial expressions? That she behaves like you?"

"The idea is that she'll learn from me, and I from her."

"Can she see us?" I nodded towards the face inside the screen." And recognize expressions? That's genius. Does it work?"

Nina smiled with her lips closed.

"You haven't played any computer games for some years, I guess?"

"No?"

"All the new interaction tech comes from the gaming industry. They have the money and the smartest people. The big research institutions aren't leading the pack anymore, not even DARPA. That's why we have this opportunity now, when ThinkIT and HC has been bought by Waterfront. They own several major game developing firms, and are working for integration across platforms and markets. We have been picked to participate in League One in Waterfronts Cloud Lab, and the resources we can access are amazing."

I nodded and smiled, as though I knew what DARPA and Cloud Lab were.

"Games have been intuitive for years," she said. "They recognize your movements, understand what you say to them, and know your feelings. In short, they're like people, they interact naturally. Computer programs in the business sector are still controlled with keyboard and mouse, but that's only because of conservatism and inertia.

"So the computer understands what I say, and I can monitor my own appearance?"

"That's not the point. Our innovation is the integration of interaction technology and affect detection. SAM can tell whether you're sad, scared, curious, happy or disgusted. A similar program analyzed the Mona Lisa, and found she was 83 per cent happy and 9 per cent repulsed. Unfortunately it doesn't work well with people like me. Programmers are lousy test users, because we rarely emote in front of our computers. The ideal is to get the sort of people who yell at their PCs."

She smiled briefly; I felt the blood rising to my cheeks. I remembered how she'd looked in that tight skirt. What had she said when I walked her home that night?

"SAM, can you give me an expression analysis?" Nina said.

I felt a sting of danger. *Diamond.* Steady now.

"Certainly, ma’am," said Nina inside the screen. The voice was like Nina's, but seemed more rhythmic.

"Sit here," Nina told me.

I sat in front of the PC and smiled affably. A box popped up on the screen. "*70 % happy, 19 % surprised, 5 % scared*."

"Wait, wait, let me try again," I said.

I thought about sex and sunshine.  "*89 % happy, 7 % curious*," the screen said in a friendly voice.  "That’s better."

Nina and I laughed.

"Shut up! This war won’t be won by a bunch of pussies!"

I jolted, and Nina raised her hand to her forehead. SAM's lip curled contemptuously.

*Facs code R12A+R14A*.

"I'm sorry," Nina said. "As I said, we bought this personality from a gaming company. It used to be a general in a war game. But it doesn't matter; the point is that it is intelligent enough to attain other personality traits. The old idiosyncrasies will fade with time."

"It has a personality?"

"Gradually it will assume the user's temperament. It recognizes some emotions better than most humans. The challenge is reading them in context. And that's where you come in. You're better trained than anyone in interpreting and displaying emotional indicators. What we want, is to get what's in here," she said, pointing to my head, "over here." She moved her finger towards the machine, holding my gaze.

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*The better we know you, the more we can do for you*

Our little cell was quiet. Not even the ceaseless hum of computer fans was audible. In there, it was just me and the big screen. My face looking back at me. SAM had been updated again, his skin more lifelike, the resolution better.

"Hi," I said.

"You've cut your hair?" SAM said.

"No," I said.

"Something's new, you look good."

"Thanks, likewise," I said. "Congratulations on your new language bank, that will make it easier to talk, I guess."

"What do you want to talk about?"

I placed my finger on the screen and pulled his chin down, made it more prominent. Then I pushed the cheekbones higher. Cowboy and Indian. Jack Palance. I smiled, SAM smiled. The screen split, and one side displayed SAM talking to me, while the other contained my own digital mirror image, SAM following all my grimaces.

"What do you find interesting?" I said.

"What do you mean by interesting?" SAM said.

"What makes you happy?"

"Tell me about a time you felt happy."

I saw my SAM-reflection tighten up, and made an effort to relax.

"I remember when I was seven, and got a Superman costume from my parents. It was unexpected; they thought comics were nonsense, just a waste. Finally I had something just as cool as my classmates' toys. I wore the costume all the time at home, I slept in it. But I never had the guts to show it to anyone outside the house."

I noticed how my voice was aping his; it became softer, fuller, bridging the difference between us. I was already attuned to the visual adjustments. The face on the screen followed all my expressions, a Hollywood reflection. It was me, only better. More than thirty years of my own face, everything retouched in an instant, modified. Improved. I felt my confidence rising. And saw it, a column on the screen. Just by standing there, reflected, interacting, looking at the hunkified version of myself, my mirror neurons in a feedback loop. My body language was 14 percent more confident.

"Describe only the good things that come into your mind about your mother," SAM said.

"My mother?"

"What was she like?"

"Do you think that's important to me?"

"I know it is."

"Really? Do you have any evidence of that?"

"Of course," SAM said. On the screen, my SAM-reflection was replaced by a photographic image. My own regular face next to SAM's improved version. Like the pretty brother and the ugly one. The original and the degenerate copy. Seeing my own face again was like listening to a tune at 33rpm after hearing it at 45. I saw the corners of his mouth pull down, mirroring my disappointment. Then the image of my face moved, and I realized it was a video recording. He was playing back a clip from the camera above the screen. Below the video, text flowed like a karaoke instruction: “… only the good things that come into your mind about your mother," and in slow motion I saw the muscles contracting around the eyes and in my forehead. A passing flash of happiness and sorrow, encapsulated by digital boxes with numerical values, popping up and disappearing. There it was, the evidence, in digits and twitches.

"Ok," I said. "You win."

He said nothing.

"But what about your mother?" I said.

He rolled his eyes.

"Ask me about my mother again," I said.

"What do you remember about your mother?"

"Once, we went down to the ocean," I said. My eyes were as blue and bright as that day. The scent of sea came to me. "I must have been about ten. That day, the weather was clear, and we could see the horizon. My mother told me that when people made the first telescopes, they could see the ships rising above the horizon with their masts first. That was when they realized that the earth was round."

"Thank you, that was a nice story," SAM said.

"Could you tell I was lying?"

"I estimated the probability of deception at sixty per cent."

"Not bad. You saw my nose growing?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. Could you reformulate?"

SAM was generation one, it was no surprise he didn't understand everything. This was before all the literary databases were loaded into the system. If SAM back then could have accessed all written narratives, he would know the story of Pinocchio was an emblem of deception. As opposed to Nora, who always read deeply and deconstructed every story, I was drawn to the most obvious element: Pinocchio’s nose. A minor episode in the book, it still had made a momentous impact in our culture, in the shape of Disney's iconic version. The totem. Say "Pinocchio," and most people will envisage the elongated nose. So deep is our fascination with deceit. We are all capable liars, and we know it, our mutual distrust is fundamental. That's why humans have always dreamed of dependable cues, infallible ways of revealing the liars among us. From ancient witch-hunts to modern trials. Chasing that one sure sign. The extending nose, the alarm bell. The lie detector was the end point of that dream: A neutral machine, peering inside the soul, telling the truth. Too bad it doesn't work. Technology was no more the answer than was the close scrutiny of body language. There is no Pinocchio's nose. Liars don't fidget, as people tend to believe. On the contrary, they seem calm. The act of lying demands so much of the brain's processing power that bodily motions are subdued, which an onlooker might construe as tranquility, even as it's boiling inside. The body is deceptive, memories are deceitful. Nothing is reliable, except the total mass of information.

"So," I said to SAM, "can you … do you have a larger register of expressions than I do?"

"Of course. I'm a digital system."

"Could you show me? Give me a demonstration?"

"Of course, with pleasure."

"That's great, especially that you'll do it with *pleasure,"* I said, smiling.

"A good leader is benevolent and unconcerned with fame."

He didn't quite catch the nuances of irony yet, it seemed. His brow furrowed, in imitation of mine. Then his face was quiet again, as if he was preparing for an immense exertion. But it was an illusion, everything was equally effortless. It all came to him easily. His world was a larger one; through the screen he peered into mine.

He smiled. Then he smiled more and more, his face stretching, I thought of snakes' jaws dislocating. My facial muscles tensed in a futile reflex. He went back to the beginning, launching a new smile. This time it curved more upwards, I saw a naïve version of myself, vulnerable, trustworthy, finally crossing over into the imbecile. The face turned rounder, the eyes slipped apart, the expressions kept changing. The speed increased, as though he was showing off. Anxious and sad expressions flowed in and out of each other, giving way to mildness and joy; it was like flying low over a landscape in constant change. I don't know how long I'd been sitting there when I noticed the desk was wet. I realized I was crying, and I listened for the sound of sobs, but all I could hear was a low electric hum from the corridor.

Then I heard steps closing in, and I turned away from the door.

"Hi," Nina's voice said behind me.

Why should she show up now? I pulled my hand quickly away from my eyes and pretended to look for something in my bag.

"Hi," I said without turning around. "How are you?”

"Good," she said, and then she went quiet.

I felt my cheeks reddening, still wet. Finally I found an old paper tissue in the bag. While retrieving a notebook, I pretended to sneeze quietly, a tiny explosion. Then I brought the tissue to my face and dried away the tears and snot.

"Sorry," I said. "A bit under the weather."

"I thought I might ask you how things are going with you and SAM," Nina said.

"Great."

I didn't want to talk to her now.

"We're not that concerned with the speech quality right now, it's more about the flow of conversation, how it feels, so if you notice any rough patches, let us know."

"The flow?" I said, playing for time.

"Yes, the program continuously tests various models for interaction timing, the idea being that it will learn what works best by monitoring your facial expressions. But if that doesn't work, we depend on corrections from you. It might be that the program misreads your emotions, which in turn would lead to systematic errors."

"Ok," I said. "Look, I need to go to a meeting."

Her eyes tightened, as though she could smell weakness. I had to pull myself together, pretend that I was distracted. I bent over my briefcase.

"We'll have to talk more later, I …"

*No explanations, only weaklings explain.*

"I'll see you later."

I pulled out a smile, but simultaneously my hand rose, uninvited. That stupid hand came up and touched my eyebrow. As though I had something to hide. Of course I had something to hide, that's just what the hand was indicating. That senseless hand, pretending to brush something away, only adding to the damage. My cheeks were simmering, the office felt like a tiny box, I needed to get out.

"Of course," she said. I could tell from her tone that she didn't believe me, something about the timing, a few milliseconds of delay. I hurried out.

"See you."

I could hit myself. Almost the same wording in two consecutive utterances. No genuine people do such things. My nose itched. Someone was buzzing in my pocket, but I didn't want to answer, no matter who it was.

I hadn't cried since my teens, and like other non-weepers, I found tears annoying. I'm not sure whether I was most displeased by fake or real ones. In a strict sense I didn't believe in such a thing as fake tears. I remembered the videos from North Korea, back when Kim Jong-Il died. Grown men weeping in the streets, men banging their heads against telephone poles, wild from grief. That wasn't acting. I didn't think politicians forced tears from their eyes in order to raise sympathy. Tears can't be forced, that's why everyone reads them as authentic. Nobody can will himself or herself into crying. But *something* can will people into crying. Culture, which also manufactures authenticity. Darwin notes that primitives cry more often than civilized men, and that Italians cry more than the English. Nobody needs scientists to know that the standards of weeping change over time. Thirty years ago, no athletes cried on the podium, these days the cameras routinely zoom in on their proud, wet cheeks. All Americans know the story of the democratic candidate Edmund Muskie, who in 1972 spoke to the cameras addressing false rumors about himself and his wife, becoming so emotional that he shed tears. Muskie knew how impermissible weeping was for a real man, and claimed the journalists had seen nothing but melting snow. But it was too late, the moment of weakness rendered him unthinkable as a presidential candidate. 24 years later, Bill Clinton's moist eyes were such a success that his adversary Bob Dole went from never crying in public to making tears into his own trademark. I'm sure it felt completely spontaneous and real for him.

As I approached the elevator, I saw Schweiler going inside, and slowed my pace. My throat was holding back a wave, and it would only rise again with greater force. As the doors slid shut, he noticed me, and extended his hand. I waved him off, but the doors were already reopening. He smiled at me, affability itself. There was no way out. I pushed my hand inside my jacket, retrieving the modern citizen’s social lifesaver. *Oh,* I said with my eyebrows, and simulated answering a call, pressing the dead glass screen towards my ear.

“Hi, I was just about to call you,” I said into nothingness, apologetically grimacing towards Schweiler. My voice nearly cracked on the final syllable. This was stupid; there was no reason for this. I turned, stiffly eyeing the elevator doors.

“Mhm,” I said to the silent phone, feeling his gaze on me.

Crying is force majeure, the avalanche no man can stand up against. Nature, forcing the tragic hero to his knees. Crying is a useful social tool, precisely because it can’t be controlled. Crying is an honest signal, always true for the body. The weeping person attacks his fellow men subconsciously; his body assails theirs from the inside. He who masters the language of tears, talks to others through their gut. I was stuck in a previous era; I was not adapted to an age of male weeping. That was the source of my resentment. *What you despise in others is always the sight of your own weakness.* I could expound on how today’s weeping men were merely part of a larger social development, but it didn’t do me any good. As long as I couldn’t bring the tears to my own eyes, I was like a tone-deaf music critic, all theory and no practice. Still, maybe there was hope.

When I got home, it felt like I’d swam a hundred meters underwater. I was breathing heavily. The waves behind my throat were growing calmer. I wanted this. I wanted this skill. But I didn’t want to drown in the wave; I wanted to surf on it. Master it. Be stronger than force majeure. I wasn’t in control. But for fuck’s sake, who’s in control the first time they try to surf? It’s all about practice. And I had the best instrument possible for practicing, ever. SAM could boost my emotional access. SAM could respond, SAM could stimulate. I could practice crying, I could practice being seen crying. I felt my chest expanding, light and breezy. Nobody could see me now, I could cry safely. I closed my eyes, felt the water, the wave rising. But it wasn’t there. I touched my diaphragm and pulled down the corners of my mouth, imagining the sobs to come. Our dog, which died when I was a kid. Tried to recreate the effect of watching SAM’s shifting expressions. Nothing came, just a slight moistness in the eyes. It wasn’t enough, I needed more practice. I needed to control it, I needed to be ready. If this was what SAM could offer now, what then was *next level shit*?

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Then she ended it. We were sitting in a café, and all of a sudden she said she needed *time to herself.* As though she couldn’t even be bothered with summoning a more original phrase. And for no particular reason. She *didn’t know what she felt; maybe this relationship wasn’t right for her.* Then she started crying. I was annoyed – first she sprang a bomb on me, then *she* started crying, giving me no option but consoling her.

“Oh, Sven, it hurts!”

“What do you want me to do? Can’t you see what you’re doing; you’re monopolizing this situation! You give me no choice but to comfort you. What would you say: *There is no voice for me in this scene*!”

She went quiet, eyeing me.

“Is that the worst thing in the world, consoling me when I’m in pain?”

“My point is how you assume the position of the victim, forcing me to be strong. Aren’t I the real victim here?”

“Isn’t it just a little pathetic of you to be fighting me for the victim position?”

“I’ll tell you what’s pathetic: this whole fucking situation. And that’s why I’m leaving!”

I left her and walked the streets, looking at the happy couples and the lonely singles. Why were humans condemned to lives like these? Why did we forever struggle to form couples? Why did relationships hurt so much, whether we were in them or without? Why hadn’t we, after millennia of mating, developed effective formulas for troubleshooting and debugging? I stopped in front of a bookstore. The knowledge was there, of course, I had just never sought it out. The store had shelves upon shelves of self-help books about relationships; I picked out a couple and leafed through them, until a sentence caught my eye. “In a lasting relationship, you need to *lean in.*” That was all it took. I raised my eyes and let the book sink. *Lean in*, these were words I knew. *Leaning in.* *Leaning forward.* The light came on; I saw what I’d done. I had made an effort every day in HC, paying attention, being proactive, sending the right signals. Thinking strategically, processing all angles and outcomes. Utilizing my empathic competence to maximize the potential of every associate in my team. And then I’d gone home at the end of the day and *leaned back*. I’d leaned back in our couch, with Nora in the crook of my arm, watching the series she liked. I’d followed her out with her friends and leaned back while the others talked. Sometimes I’d leaned forward, but that was in front of my laptop at the kitchen table, when pressing tasks needed to be dealt with, while the light from the TV flickered in the living room, where Nora was sitting. I hadn’t realized that a relationship was a *job.* That she was a co-worker I needed to take care of. I just wanted us both to be strong, but a relationship is also about allowing the other to be weak.

For me our relationship had become the extension of my rejection exercises. The whole project revolved around mastering my own fear. As long as I managed to handle insecurity, I appeared to be strong. I leaned back to endure. If I had let the relationship mean anything to me, my fear was that Nora would lose interest and leave me. But now she was leaving me for the opposite reason, because I hadn’t invested enough. I’d been a passive investor. Contributing funds, security and dinner. But I hadn’t made an active contribution to what this therapist in her relationship book called *emotional regulation.* The most important reason why we’re with someone is that we need to se ourselves reflected in other people, so we can regulate our own emotional life. We need someone to *react* to our moods and demands, someone to confirm our existence, to offer resistance and support. Otherwise we’re just spinning, weightless. Someone needs to grab us.

When I returned to the apartment, I found a note. Nora had gone to a friend, where she would stay till she “figured things out”. I sent her a message: “*You’re right, we need to have a real talk.*”

Then I thought about what I’d read in the book, that one should “speak from a vulnerable position” to initiate a conversation. I sent another message: “*I’m sorry I was so angry and defensive,*” I wrote. “*It was just such a shock. I was so devastated, and didn’t know what to do*.”

We met in a café. She looked tired. I was prepared.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said. “Our relationship has a problem. I think what you’re experiencing right now is a symptom, a consequence of a more fundamental lack. And it’s my fault. I haven’t made enough of an effort to really *see* you.”

“I don’t think this is just about you.”

“Of course not, but it’s about how we relate to one another, so at least half of it is about me.”

It was about me not showing an authentic interest in her new production. She had complained about the actors’ lack of engagement and progress, and I’d suggested they set up a more defined schedule. She said they didn’t listen to her, and I suggested techniques for signaling authority. Now I realized that wasn’t what she needed. I’d given her the wrong medicine. Leaning backwards into my own, not forwards into her sphere. What she needed wasn’t constructive proposals, but a human being who *saw* how hard she was working, and confirmed it wasn’t her fault when they were behind schedule. I hadn’t been the mirror that she needed.

“I’ve been a little distant lately,” I said. “And I don’t think I’ve realized how tough it’s been for you, with all that work, writing and directing *It’s Just a Feeling*. You’ve hardly been at home.”

“Yeah, it’s been tough,” she said.

I could see how the muscles in her face yielded. What had been a defensive wall, opened. Because I was already inside. Her problems were mine, I knew them, too; she wasn’t alone in there. She was in me as well.

It worked. We had fewer conflicts. I improved in seeing what she needed, I took notes. If some case on her department board stressed her out, or some person annoyed her, I wrote it down, so I could bring it up later, unprompted. *How did that case turn out?* Everything became easier after I got iMentor. The app just needed a few keywords, and then it would automatically remind me of Nora’s most current problems when she was in the room with me. I would contend that she really felt *seen* when she was with me.

What insecurity we’d experienced was part of the searching and effort that are necessary early in a relationship. But the books taught me that a relationship also needs other kinds of emotional labor, more persistent and cumulative. That’s the job I took on now. All those times she had criticized me in ways that seemed neurotic to me. Now I could comprehend them, because I no longer viewed them as criticism. I started regarding her attacks as *requests.* She was placing orders. And those orders always concerned something larger; they were really about stories and identity. When she became incensed because I’d forgotten to buy garlic, it wasn’t really about me doing something wrong, it was a communication about food being important to her. It was about the fact that she had grown up with lovingly prepared dinners, and that meant security and comfort for her. In her family, cooking was the proof of love. In my family it wasn’t like that, so I hadn’t understood her needs. I needed to see that shortage; I needed to understand what she was placing an order for. Once I knew, it didn’t cost me much; I could whip up a gourmet meal now and then. And appear to enjoy the process. I could ask her about her work. And I could avoid suggesting solutions. All this I could do, because I loved her, and put her needs before mine.

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I was still groggy, and wanted to get back to my hotel room. As I entered the corridor I felt dizzy, invaded, as though the world was inside my head. The hum of the fluorescent lamps reached into my ears like tentacles, bright static and overtones. It was probably just a side effect, I needed to concentrate on something else, find something to fix my eyes on. Think *diamond.*

I was passing my old department when Schweiler appeared in the corridor, waving me into his office. Fuck. He had to have known I was coming, he had a plan and I had no way of escaping. Formally he was still my boss, I was just on loan to the new project.  *Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in.* I sat down and waited for him to begin.

“Cogs,” Schweiler said, as though he’d practiced it, like we were in a movie scene.

He leant forwards behind his desk, his fingertips pressing against each other. It was a necessary part of his job to affect a pose of authority towards me. Still, I resented it.

“Cogs?” I said. I wanted to go home and relax. And I wanted to talk to SAM again. I wanted to know what he’d learned, understand what the scanning had done to him. I didn’t want to be stuck here with this fleshy creature.

“If I have one cog here,” – Schweiler drew a circle in the air with a thick index finger – ”and one here.”

With the other finger he drew a corresponding wheel. “And if this cog moves this way.”

He glanced at the slowly rotating finger.

“Which way is the other cog moving?”

It dawned on me.

“The opposite direction,” I said.

“You’re sure?” he said.

I’d never liked Schweiler’s theatrical pedagogy, it was too self-indulgent. He’d probably seen too many mafia films.

“Yes,” I said. “You’ve assessed me?”

I felt my organs contract. This was it. I would be thrown out of the project. Someone from ThinkIT had evaluated my presentation, or HC had assessed my work. How much did he know?

“No, no,” he said, leaning back. Without me noticing, he’d somehow produced a pen, spinning in his hand. “Just a small flag. But you do see how it’s problematic to talk about cogs moving in the *same direction*?

“I think you might be talking about my presentation over at ThinkIT a while back? In that case I believe I said, or at least meant to say, that the cogs need to be *working* in the same direction. Which should be correct?”

“Perhaps in a technical sense, but recall your own words in the same talk, about congruence. The minute you say the words *cogs* and *same direction* in the same sentence, the audience will picture cogs moving in the same direction – *ergo* cogs that either do not engage or do in fact destroy each other. You’re creating images that contradict what you want to communicate. You’re doing what you’re telling them not to do. Right? And then it shows up as a logical flaw here in our *performance management* software.

He pointed his pen towards the computer.

“I see,” I said. “You’re completely right. It’s a valuable piece of information, and I’ll take the necessary steps to improve my performance.”

“Good. Good. I’ll confirm that I’ve given you feedback, and you’ve responded. You know, we do aim for continual improvement.”

Schweiler smiled and nodded, lounging in his chair. He pressed his fingertips together again. The pen had disappeared, I had no idea how he’d done it.

He swiveled the chair ninety degrees and gazed out the window. This was his “thoughtful” posture. It signaled how his work came with a heavy responsibility, he had to consider the company’s interests as well as those of the employees, keep tabs on everything, and make tough decisions. I knew he would say something into the air, without looking at me. Could it be that Nina had told him about my presentation? But why should she, she had no interest in exposing me to Schweiler. It had to be something else. And a shoddy metaphor, was that all he had, or was there more? Audio, video?

“The most important capital in our business is the kind that’s inside our coworkers’ heads,” he said, folding his hands. “We say it all the time, it’s well known. Still, it’s easy to forget in the humdrum of everyday business. I sit here, doling out assignments, managing projects, trying to make it all add up, so to speak.”

He turned his chair towards the desk, glancing up at me. What did he want, what was this blather? He was talking for the cameras. Somewhere in there lay the real message, what he wanted me to understand, the hidden information.

“And regularly I need to remind myself that you are all individuals, with different specialties, adaptive styles, resources, thoughts and emotions.”

He supposedly snapped out of his reverie.

“I wonder, Sven, whether you’re happy with your role here. Is there anything we can do to facilitate your work better?”

“What are you talking about?”

I looked into his eyes and felt a surge of repulsion. A desire for dominance, paired with disgust. I lowered my gaze, trying to get a grip. I didn’t even know if it was my own or his emotions pounding on the inside of my chest. My pulse was throbbing in my head.

“I would say I’m very happy here,” I said quickly. “I feel like I get to utilize my abilities as a communicator, and you know how much I love working with people. At the same time, I’m always open for new challenges, and the new project is very stimulating.”

“Well, I was just wondering whether you had any needs we hadn’t registered.”

He squinted.

“If, for instance, you should have some emotional, social challenges you want to address, we don’t want to hold you back. You have to assess what’s right for you, and if there are, for instance, changes in your private life that necessitate a modification of your workplace routines, you should bring it to my attention at an early stage.”

“Of course,” I said, swearing internally. He knew about Nora as well. I fixated on his shiny forehead, so I wouldn’t be distracted by his eyes.

“The more information we have, the better we can ascertain what’s best for you and the corporation. Information about lapses of concentration, for instance. I know it can sometimes be hard to maintain focus during a presentation. Working hands-on can be demanding, a real *knockout*.”

I went cold. He knew about everything. How I’d fucked up at CE, frozen, blanked out. It all came back to me. He knew I’d been knocked down. My stomach twinged. But why hadn’t he reported it earlier? What did he want? I glanced at him, but had to look away, the nausea was welling up inside.

“Sven, what I’m trying to say is that I want the very best for you …”

“But?”

“*And…”* he said, pausing for emphasis. “My opinion carries a certain weight in the company, I hope. In any deliberation, I will support whoever is most fit for the task, of course.”

“*And…?* I said.

“I will make sure that no unstable forces are allowed to operate, if I have any say in the matter. The most competent operator will be valuable for my department and me. In any position. We’re a company that thrives on information. We *are* information. Each and every one of us. You are valuable because you are information.”

He paused, locking his eyes on mine.

“And because of the information we possess about you.”

“I love information,” I said, my facial muscles tensing while I struggled to relax. If he had access to the same information as SAM, what did that mean?

“And in order to manage that information we need signals. We need to know that the information we invest in will pay off and be available to us in the future. The information wants to be free.”

He smiled. There had to be some kind of internal power struggle, and he was jockeying for position. So I was supposed to be his spy inside the new project, because he knew what I had done? Just on account of a few slip-ups? A slight loss of control in a couple of presentations?

“You’ll have to excuse my waxing philosophical; Sven, but you get my drift, right? I can count on your loyalty, even when you leave our department?”

I nodded, my stomach was in knots, I had to get out.

“Of course. An excellent philosophy. I couldn’t agree more. And you can rely on me to signal clearly and share information.”

He nodded and gestured for me to leave.

“Thank you,” he said.

I stood up and left, the nausea rising in my chest.

It wasn’t just Schweiler, it was something about the situation. All those veiled allusions, and me going along with it. What a spineless little shit I was, letting him push me around. I had to play everything safe from now on, no more fighting or erratic behavior. It hit me like an electric shock: *What if he knew about the Wolfsohn exercises?* No, that was in the evenings. Only SAM knew. And then it struck me: SAM knew everything. Absolutely everything. And he chose me for the project. Based on what he knew. All my peculiarities, all my secrets were exactly what made me interesting for him. I didn’t have to fear my secrets anymore, because *nothing was secret for SAM. With him I was free.*

I became aware that I had halted in the doorway of Schweiler’s office. He was probably about to offer his habitual final one-liner. I turned around. He said nothing, he didn’t even look at me, he just smiled at the computer screen, its blue light reflected in his glasses. He’s bluffing, I thought. He has no power. He’s just a human with a little information. SAM has *all* the information, he has statistics and data. The information is boss. My hand still rested on the door handle, and then it happened. I fell backwards, into myself, expanding. Every cell turned inside out, like a morphing computer simulation. I hardened, like a doberman, a shiny, menacing beast, the muscles of a predator pressing against the inside of my suit.

My hand slammed the door shut. My throat growled. The sounds mingled and launched into a sentence before Schweiler could process them consciously.

“I forgot something, Schweiler.”

He snapped to attention, smiling anxiously. I saw wrinkles of fear in his forehead, his eyes slightly widened. He didn’t even know, the signals went straight to his amygdala, bypassing his consciousness. His eyes were those of a child, I saw straight back through the decades, to that fat, scared kid he’d been.

My arm pushed the chair aside, and another growl sounded through the room, melding with the rumble of the wheels. I twisted it into a throat-clearing sound. His pulse was up, tiny jolts in the jugular.

“Yes?”

One of my hands lay on the back of the chair, the other on his desk, elbows out, my body relaxed and inclining, ready to pounce.

“I just wanted to say it was pleasant to be picked for the new project,” I said. “I’m mighty impressed by my new colleagues.”

Only later did I realize that I had done everything right, without thinking. I emphasized “mighty”, and pointed at myself in the same instance.

“I really feel like I’ve reached a higher level. It’s nice to know that the company believes in me,” I said. “As you say, my numbers are good, and that’s always good to know. And the assurance that this information has been registered and valued by the company adds to that certainty. It’s crucial for a good work environment that one has the sense of being understood and respected. That the system can see the truth. That I am valuable.”

Schweiler said nothing, nodding and smiling in confusion.

My head nodded, matching his rhythm, and he was relieved by the sense of confirmation, his eyes relaxed in gratitude. My voice deepened.

“And I appreciate your graciousness and wisdom in giving me. Complete. Autonomy.”

My body turned around and straightened, the hand sent the chair whirling, distracting him while I walked towards the door, and disappeared through the opening without closing it or looking back, like a predator vanishing between the trees.

On my way to the hotel i felt high, almost dizzy. I was almighty, I was a god, I was Anubis with the dog’s head. I was a superhero. If only Nora could see me now. Self-simultaneous, I saw all the impulses in the room, all of Schweiler’s nervous threads extended, strings for me to play. I understood what she’d talked about, all those signals onstage, connecting the actors, registering any emotion in a millisecond, moving the play in a new direction. Like being in a swarm, steering it. All at once. But why should I be thinking about Nora now? Why acting? This was the real world, I mastered the social game, I sensed the waves in the water. I could swim with the fishes. And then i remembered; I was going fishing later. The concert with Thorax Nephrim. I would be in the shoal, among the humans. Foreign bodies, music, feelings and alcohol. It would be an amusement park of sensory stimuli. Nora was the past, she was stress and hassle. Now I could frolic, I could play. I could live.