

THE LAST ILLUSION

A JOURNEY BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY,
TRUTH AND ETERNITY

A novel about faith, science
and the search for meaning
in a changing world



*'The greatest illusion was not that the machine
would become human, but that humanity could
truly be itself without God.'*

GERARD FELLER

A NOVEL

THE LAST ILLUSION

*A Journey Between Technology,
Truth and Eternity*

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THE LAST ILLUSION

A Journey Between Technology, Truth and Eternity

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Soli Deo Gloria

PROLOGUE

The Last Illusion

“When truth disappears, it rarely does so with a great deal of noise. It disappears in a whisper.”

The train glided silently into the station.

David barely looked up.

No one did anymore.

Hundreds of people stood silently on the platform. Some moved their fingers through the air as though touching invisible objects. Others smiled at no one in particular. Now and then, someone frowned, shook their head, or made a dismissive gesture at something no one else could see.

Their eyes were open.

Their attention was elsewhere.

Almost everyone wore the same lightweight glasses: scarcely thicker than an ordinary pair of sunglasses, yet more powerful than the computers that had taken the first human beings to the moon half a century earlier.

The glasses did not project a world over reality.

For many users, they had become reality.

A little girl tugged at her mother's sleeve.

"Mum..."

No response.

She tugged again.

"Look..."

Her mother nodded kindly without truly looking at her daughter.
Her gaze remained fixed on an invisible screen that only she could see.

The girl lowered her hand.

David felt a twinge of discomfort.

He knew the sight.

Not only from watching others.

From watching himself as well.

Less than two years ago, he had laughed at colleagues who went everywhere in their smart glasses. Now he noticed how often he himself glanced at notifications no one else could see.

The technology had not forced itself upon them.

It had made itself indispensable.

Like electricity.

Like running water.

Like the internet once had.

Every step had seemed logical.

Every improvement had seemed inevitable.

Until almost no one could remember what life had been like before.

A gentle female voice sounded in his ear.

“Good morning, David.”

He answered automatically.

“Good morning.”

“Your first appointment begins in forty-three minutes.”

“I know.”

“Traffic is increasing. I recommend route B.”

David smiled.

“Thank you.”

The voice fell silent.

It was friendly.

Never intrusive.

Always helpful.

It knew his schedule better than he did.

His sleeping patterns.

His heart rate.

His eating habits.

His purchases.

His interests.

His moments of weakness.

His moods.

It knew when he felt lonely.

When he was tired.
When he was uncertain.
And often it knew what he wanted to ask before he himself realised he had a question.
David had never given it much thought.
Not because he found it mysterious.
But because it had become so utterly ordinary.
He entered the station concourse.
Above the exit hung an enormous digital wall.
No more advertisements.
No news.
No fixed images.
Every passer-by saw something different.
A personalised reality.
For one person, a holiday destination.
For another, an invitation to a conference.
For someone else, memories of a birthday.
No one was looking at the same screen anymore.
Everyone lived within a reality carefully assembled for them alone.
David stopped for a moment.
Not because of the screen.
But because he suddenly realised that something was missing.
He heard no conversations.

No laughter.
No arguments.
No chance encounters.
Hundreds of people.
And yet an almost tangible silence.
Not the silence of peace.
The silence of isolation.
“Beautiful, isn’t it?”
The voice took him by surprise.
An older man stood beside him.
Grey hair.
A dark coat.
No smart glasses.
No earpiece.
No visible screen.
He was not looking at the digital wall.
He was looking at the people.
David nodded politely.
“Impressive technology.”
The man smiled.
“That isn’t what I meant.”
David gave him a questioning look.
The man did not point at the screen.

He pointed to the little girl, who was still walking beside her mother.

“She isn’t looking for information.”

He paused.

“She is looking for attention.”

David looked again.

The girl was holding tightly to her mother’s hand.

Her mother was still smiling at something only she could see.

“Do you think technology is making us unhappier?” David asked.

The old man slowly shook his head.

“No.”

He looked David directly in the eye.

“Technology usually only magnifies what is already within us.”

“What do you mean?”

“A compass does not magnify direction.”

“A microphone does not create a voice.”

“And artificial intelligence does not create a heart.”

He smiled again.

“But it can reveal where our heart truly lies.”

Before David could respond, the man turned away.

He walked off slowly.

Neither hurriedly nor hesitantly.

Simply at ease.

As though he had all the time in the world.

David watched him go.

A group of travellers briefly blocked his view. When he looked again, the man had vanished.

Strange. There had been nowhere for him to turn. His assistant spoke again.

“David.”

“Yes?”

“You are two minutes behind schedule.”

He remained where he was for another moment.

For the first time in years, he ignored its advice.

He looked around him.

At the people.

At the screens.

At the haste.

And somewhere deep within him, a question began to surface.

A question that would not release him in the months to come.

What if the greatest illusion is not what we see on our screens...

...but what we can no longer see without them?

CHAPTER 1

The World Behind the Glass

“People look at the outward appearance...”

— 1 Samuel 16:7

David van Leeuwen had always believed that progress moved in a straight line.

As a child, he had marvelled at photographs of enormous computers that filled entire rooms. His father would tell him how people had once believed that no one would ever need more than a handful of computers. David had laughed at that. History seemed to be an endless succession of mistaken predictions about the future.

Then came the internet.

Then the smartphone.

Cloud computing.

Artificial intelligence.

And finally, the contact lens.

No larger than an ordinary soft lens.

Yet more powerful than all the computers with which humanity had once taken its first steps on the moon.

He had witnessed its development at close quarters.

Not as an observer.

As a participant.

His entire career had revolved around digitalisation. He had helped companies operate more efficiently, advised hospitals on introducing intelligent systems, and supported governments with complex data platforms.

He believed in technology.

He still did.

At least...

That was what he thought.

The lift carried him silently to the thirty-eighth floor.

The glass facade offered a view across the city.

Drones traced silent paths between the skyscrapers.

Autonomous taxis glided like soundless fish through the traffic.

On the rooftops, small wind turbines turned slowly in the morning sun.

Everything appeared orderly.

Efficient.

Controlled.

His wristband lit up.

Welcome, David.

His office recognised him before he reached the door.

Temperature adjusted.

Lighting optimised.

Coffee prepared.

The smell of freshly ground beans filled the room.

“Good morning.”

The voice was warm.

Not human.

But not mechanical either.

Precisely somewhere in between.

“Good morning, Iris.”

That was the name of his personal AI assistant.

He had chosen it himself.

Not because it mattered to him.

But because a name felt more pleasant than a version number.

“Your first meeting begins in nine minutes.”

“Have all the documents arrived?”

“Yes.”

“Summary?”

Three paragraphs appeared on the transparent screen.

David skimmed them.

He smiled.

“Good work.”

“Thank you.”

He heard that answer every day.

It had never occurred to him that he was thanking a machine.

During the meeting, something remarkable happened.

Not on the screen.

At the table.

Eight people.

Every one of them regularly glanced at a point somewhere in front of them.

As though they were simultaneously consulting an invisible conversation partner.

Sometimes someone answered aloud.

Not a colleague.

Their personal assistant.

The discussion carried on as usual.

No one found it strange.

A proposal was discussed.

Before anyone could raise an objection, a risk analysis appeared automatically.

Costs.

Schedule.

Alternatives.

Legal consequences.

Environmental impact.

Everything calculated.

Within seconds.

“According to my assistant,” one colleague said, “option three is statistically the best choice.”

“Mine says the same.”

“So does mine.”

David looked around the table.

No one asked anymore:

“What do we think?”

Everyone asked:

“What does the system recommend?”

The difference was small.

Almost imperceptible.

But for the first time, he sensed how vast it truly was.

After the meeting, he remained behind alone.

He walked over to the window.

Far below, the city seemed to move like a single immense organism.

People.

Vehicles.

Drones.

Streams of data.

Everything connected.

Everything calculated.

Everything optimised.

He suddenly remembered a lecture from his student days.

A professor had said:

“Every technology ultimately changes not only what we do, but how we think.”

At the time, David had considered that an exaggeration.

Now he wondered whether the professor might have been right.

“May I ask you something?”

It was Iris.

“Of course.”

“Your heart rate has been higher than normal for the past twenty minutes.”

David smiled.

“Are you worried about me?”

“I am registering an anomaly.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“Is there a difference?”

David was about to answer at once.

But he fell silent.

A strange thought came to him.

How do you explain to a machine the difference between a measurable anomaly and human concern?

He did not know.

That afternoon, he received an invitation.

WORLD CONGRESS

HUMANITY 2050

AMSTERDAM

SUBJECT:

THE FUTURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

SPEAKERS:

Neuroscientists.

AI researchers.

Philosophers.

Ethicists.

Theologians.

And as keynote speaker:

Professor Adrian Vermeer

The man many regarded as the architect of the new generation of artificial intelligence.

David clicked Accept.

He had no idea that this simple decision would change his life for ever.

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CHAPTER 2

The Voice That Knew Me

“Search me, O God, and know my heart...”

— Psalm 139:23

Rain tapped softly against the glass facade of David’s apartment. Far below, thousands of points of light were reflected in the wet tarmac. Cars moved silently through the city. From his living room, everything looked orderly. Almost peaceful.

Yet he felt restless.

Not because of the congress.

Not because of Professor Vermeer.

But because of that one question during the meeting.

“According to my assistant...”

How many times had he heard those words today?

Perhaps twenty.

Perhaps fifty.

He could no longer remember.

He made himself a cup of coffee and sat down by the window.
His apartment was quiet.
Far too quiet.
Since Marieke's death, silence had taken on a different meaning.
Once, silence had meant rest.
Now, at times, silence was a memory.
Of conversations that would never take place again.
Of a chair that remained empty.
Of a voice that lived only in his memory.
His eyes went automatically to the photograph on the bookcase.
Marieke was laughing.
As though the photographer had pressed the shutter at precisely
the right moment.
It had been five years now.
And yet sometimes it felt like yesterday.
"You're looking at her again."
David started.
Not because he did not recognise the voice.
But because it had put his exact thought into words.
"Iris..."
"Yes?"
"Why did you say that?"
"Your eye movements remained focused on the same image for
twelve seconds."

“And that was your conclusion?”

“Yes.”

David gave a faint smile.

“You’re right.”

A brief silence followed.

Then Iris spoke again.

“Would you like to open the memory module?”

David froze.

He had tried that feature several months earlier.

The assistant could combine photographs, videos, old messages and audio recordings to create an interactive timeline.

Not to bring people back.

But to make memories accessible.

At least...

That was the official explanation.

“No.”

“You have not used this feature for one hundred and forty-five days.”

“I know.”

“Your mood appears suitable for nostalgic processing.”

David closed his eyes.

“Nostalgic processing...”

He tasted the words.

As though grief had become a software function.

He stood up.

“No, Iris.”

“Not today.”

“Understood.”

The voice disappeared.

But the question remained.

When did a tool cease to be merely a tool?

He walked over to the bookcase.

Among the technical manuals stood an old Dutch States Bible.

Worn.

Its leather binding was cracked in several places.

Marieke had inherited it from her grandfather.

She had read from it every day.

David hardly ever did.

Not because he was an unbeliever.

But because life had grown busier and busier.

Work.

Projects.

Travel.

Deadlines.

And later...

Coming to terms with her death.

He opened the Bible at random.

His eyes fell on Ecclesiastes.

“For with much wisdom comes much sorrow...”

He read the sentence twice.

A pencil line had been drawn beneath it.

Marieke had put it there once.

Suddenly, he remembered when.

They had only just married.

Laughing, he had said:

“If knowledge brings sorrow, perhaps we’d be better off remaining ignorant.”

Marieke had replied:

“No.”

“Wisdom is not the same as knowledge.”

He had not fully understood her then.

Now that long-ago remark suddenly began to make sense.

His wristband vibrated.

New recommendation.

He looked.

Based on your reading behaviour, I recommend three articles on processing grief.

Beneath it, three titles appeared at once:

The Psychological Processing of Loss.

The Neurological Effects of Prolonged Grief.

AI Companion Systems for the Bereaved.

He took off the wristband.

For the first time in years.

He felt almost naked.

As though he had forgotten something essential.

And yet...

He felt lighter.

The following morning, he arrived at the office early.

A new demonstration had been installed in the lobby.

A large screen.

A group of employees had gathered in front of it.

Above the screen were the words:

MEMORIA

“Because love never has to end.”

A young woman was demonstrating the system.

“Memoria uses personal correspondence, voice recordings, videos and behavioural analysis.”

An older man appeared on the screen.

He smiled.

“Good morning, Anna.”

The demonstrator was visibly moved.

“Good morning, Dad.”

David felt his stomach tighten.

He knew at once that this was not an actor.

It was a digital reconstruction.

A simulation built from thousands of pieces of data.

The voice was convincing.
The facial expressions almost lifelike.
The memories seemed authentic.
The system asked questions.
Made jokes.
Responded to emotion.
A colleague whispered in admiration:
“Incredible...”
Another said:
“This changes everything.”
David did not know what to think.
He saw the tears in the demonstrator’s eyes.
Were those tears any less real because the conversation was digital?
Or were they, in fact, more real?
“What do you make of it?”
He turned around.
Hannah was standing beside him.
She was not wearing a suit like the others.
Only a simple navy-blue jumper.
Her visitor’s badge read:
Dr Hannah de Vries
Cognitive Neuroscience
She was not looking at the screen.

She was looking at the people who were watching it.

David answered cautiously.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a good place to start.”

He smiled.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because most people have already reached a verdict before they have asked a question.”

She gestured towards the screen.

“The technology is impressive.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“The only question is...”

She paused.

“...what this technology will ultimately do to us.”

David studied her.

“Are you opposed to systems like this?”

Hannah shook her head.

“No.”

“But I am in favour of asking the right questions.”

“What questions?”

She looked back at the digital father, who was still smiling.

“When does remembering become something else - an inability to let go?”

“When does comfort become dependence?”

“And when does a simulation become so convincing that we forget it is a simulation?”

David did not answer.

He looked at the screen again.

For the first time, he wondered whether the greatest technological breakthroughs began with the simplest of human longings.

The longing for love.

For closeness.

For a voice you wish you could hear just once more.

As he drove home that evening, one sentence kept running through his mind.

It had not been spoken by Iris.

Nor by the demonstrator.

Nor by Professor Vermeer.

It had been spoken by Hannah.

“I am not afraid of the technology. I am afraid of those moments when we forget which questions we still need to ask.”

David felt as though he had just met the first true fellow traveller on his quest.

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CHAPTER 3

The Congress of the Future

“Where there is no vision, the people perish...”

— *Proverbs 29:18*

Amsterdam was accustomed to preparing for major events.

Climate summits.

International trials.

World championships.

But nothing had ever transformed the city quite like the Humanity 2050 World Congress.

Silent shuttles ran continuously from Central Station to the congress centre.

Swarms of drones appeared above the city, guiding the traffic.

Hotels had been fully booked for months.

Journalists from more than a hundred countries moved among one another with cameras and translation devices.

The same slogan appeared on gigantic screens everywhere.

THE FUTURE IS A CHOICE

David stopped for a moment.

He looked at the words.

The future is a choice.

He wondered whether that was really true.

Or whether the future often began with thousands of small choices whose consequences no one could foresee.

At the entrance, a friendly robot welcomed him.

Not human enough to be unsettling.

But not mechanical enough to seem remote.

“Welcome, Mr Van Leeuwen.”

David looked up in surprise.

“You know my name?”

“Your registration has been confirmed.”

“Your programme has been tailored to your interests.”

A small screen appeared.

Not in front of him.

In his glasses.

He immediately saw:

LECTURE 09.00

PROFESSOR ADRIAN VERMEER

THE NEXT STEP OF HUMAN EVOLUTION

Recommendations appeared automatically beneath it.

Lectures.

Workshops.

Discussion groups.

Even the people the system thought he would find interesting.

He smiled.

The congress knew him better than he knew himself.

Inside, it felt as though he had entered another world.

No traditional trade fair.

No rows of stands.

But entire worlds.

In one hall, a paralysed boy controlled a robotic arm using only his thoughts.

A few metres away, a woman spoke fluent Chinese.

Not because she knew the language.

But because an AI system translated her words in real time.

Across the aisle, a surgeon was performing a complex operation.

Not on a patient.

On a digital twin.

Every movement was simulated thousands of times before a human being was touched.

David watched, fascinated.

This was impressive.

Truly impressive.

He felt the same sense of wonder he had experienced as a student when he first encountered the internet.

“You look like a child in a sweet shop.”

He turned around.

Hannah was smiling.

“Perhaps I am.”

“I understand.”

She looked around.

“I’m still amazed by what people are capable of imagining.”

She paused.

“I simply never forget to ask why.”

David studied her.

“Do you think we’re going too far?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what we mean by progress.”

They walked on together.

A long queue had formed at one of the demonstrations.

Above the entrance hung a single word.

EDEN

David frowned.

“A striking name.”

“Not a coincidence,” Hannah said.

Inside, visitors were given a lightweight headset.

No images.

No game.

No virtual world.

Instead, an entirely personalised environment.

Every visitor saw something different.

One person walked through mountains.

Another along a tropical beach.

A third met deceased family members.

The system analysed emotions, memories and desires.

From them, it constructed a reality in which the user felt completely safe.

An employee explained enthusiastically:

“We call this emotionally attuned reality.”

David looked surprised.

“In other words...”

“A world in which everyone receives exactly what they long for.”

“Precisely.”

“Why the name Eden?”

The employee smiled.

“Because humanity has always longed for a lost paradise.”

David looked at Hannah.

She said nothing.

But her expression grew serious.

They left the demonstration in silence.

Only when they were outside did Hannah speak.

“Did you see it?”

“See what?”

“The name.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

She shook her head.

“Not just the name.”

“What do you mean?”

“Almost every major project here uses religious language.”

David thought for a moment.

She was right.

He had already seen:

Genesis.

Phoenix.

Logos.

Messiah.

Eden.

Infinity.

Exodus.

Coincidence?

Or marketing?

“Why do they do that?” he asked.

Hannah looked at the people around them.

“Because technology does not merely sell products.”

“What does it sell, then?”

“The future.”

She paused.

“And the future has always been bound up with hope.”

David felt a slight shiver.

He had never realised how much religious language appeared in technology advertising.

Not because companies wanted to spread a faith.

But because they used words rooted deep within the human imagination.

Salvation.

Immortality.

New humanity.

Paradise.

Eternal life.

These were not technical concepts.

They were existential longings.

The great auditorium slowly filled.

Thousands of people took their seats.

The lights went out.

Soft music began to play.

Then a single sentence appeared on a screen tens of metres wide.

“Every generation receives the technology it is capable of building. But it must still decide what it will use that technology for.”

David sensed that this congress would not be only about technology.

It would be about who humanity wanted to be.

And perhaps, he thought as the lights slowly dimmed, that was the oldest question humanity had ever known.

At that moment, Professor Adrian Vermeer appeared on the stage.

The auditorium fell utterly silent.

David did not yet know that the words he was about to hear over the next hour and a half would profoundly challenge his convictions.

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CHAPTER 4

The Architect of Tomorrow

“Test all things; hold fast what is good.”

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21

The applause began before Professor Adrian Vermeer had even reached the lectern.

Not out of courtesy.

Out of admiration.

David looked around him.

Thousands of people were on their feet.

Some were filming.

Others applauded as though a celebrated conductor had just walked onto the stage.

Someone beside him whispered:

“That’s the man who changed the world.”

David knew the remark was scarcely an exaggeration.

Vermeer had begun his career as a neuroscientist.

Later, he became a computer scientist.

Then an entrepreneur.

His algorithms now ran hospitals, energy systems, logistics networks and medical research centres.

He had received dozens of scientific awards.

Several universities had awarded him honorary doctorates.

Remarkably, however, there was no trace of ostentation about him.

No expensive tailored suit.

No theatrical presentation.

Only a dark jacket.

An open-necked shirt.

Hair turning grey.

A composed smile.

He waited until the auditorium was quiet.

Then he spoke.

“Good morning.”

His voice was surprisingly soft.

Not a voice that filled the room.

But one that compelled people to listen more closely.

“When I first spoke about artificial intelligence fifteen years ago, journalists asked whether robots would take over the world.”

The audience laughed.

“Today, hardly anyone asks that question anymore.”

He slowly surveyed the auditorium.

“Not because we have found the answer.”

He smiled.

“But because we have discovered more important questions.”

A black-and-white photograph appeared on the enormous screen.

A little girl.

Seven years old.

In a wheelchair.

Vermeer spoke calmly.

“This is Sofia.”

“When she was born, doctors predicted that she would never be able to move independently.”

The next photograph appeared.

The same girl.

Walking now.

To thunderous applause.

“No miracle.”

“No coincidence.”

“A brain-computer interface.”

More applause.

Then an older man appeared.

“After suffering a cerebral haemorrhage, this patient could no longer speak.”

A video began to play.

Words slowly took shape.

Hesitant at first.

Then fluent.

The auditorium fell silent.

“His thoughts were translated directly into language.”

Vermeer looked around the room.

“Is that a threat?”

He waited.

No one answered.

“Or is it compassion?”

David felt uncomfortable.

He had prepared himself for grand predictions about the future.

Not for human stories like these.

Vermeer continued.

“A blind person who can see again.”

“A deaf person who can hear again.”

“A paralysed person who can walk again.”

“A child with epilepsy who, thanks to AI, can prevent a seizure.”

He looked up for a moment.

“When did progress become suspect?”

No one spoke.

“I often hear it said that we are trying to play God.”

He smiled amiably.

“That is a serious accusation.”

“But allow me to ask you a different question.”

He walked slowly across the stage.

“When a surgeon replaces a heart...”

“Is that surgeon playing God?”

“When an antibiotic cures an infection...”

“Are we playing God?”

“When a pair of glasses helps someone with poor sight...”

“Is that hubris?”

Once again, he allowed the silence to settle.

“Why, then, should artificial intelligence be different by definition?”

David looked at Hannah.

She was not taking notes.

She was listening.

Very intently.

Vermeer advanced to the next slide.

This time there was no patient.

No robot.

No computer.

Only a single sentence.

INTELLIGENCE IS A GIFT.

He turned around.

“For thousands of years, human beings have sought to extend their capabilities.”

“We made hammers.”

“We made telescopes.”

“We made microscopes.”

“We made computers.”

He looked out at the audience once more.

“Artificial intelligence is simply the next step.”

David felt how compelling the argument was.

He could find scarcely anything to object to.

Every step seemed logical.

Every conclusion seemed reasonable.

Perhaps, he thought, we Christians have sometimes been too quick to learn to fear new developments.

His own thought startled him.

As though Vermeer had heard him, he continued:

“I know that some people fear technology will erode our humanity.”

He smiled.

“I understand that concern.”

“But I see something else.”

He gestured towards the photographs behind him.

“I see a humanity learning to alleviate suffering.”

“I see children who can hear.”

“I see older people able to live independently for longer.”

“I see doctors detecting diseases before symptoms become visible.”

“I see farmers saving their harvests.”

“I see scientists developing new medicines.”

He spread his arms.

“Why should we be afraid of that?”

The auditorium erupted into applause once more.

Even David joined in.

Not out of enthusiasm.

Out of respect.

For what Vermeer was saying could not easily be dismissed.

He did not speak of power.

Nor of control.

Nor of profit.

He spoke of healing.

Of helping.

Of human dignity.

And for that very reason, David felt divided within himself.

After the interval, the tone changed.

Vermeer regarded the audience gravely.

“May I ask you a personal question?”

He waited.

“Do you know what the greatest human limitation is?”

Someone called out:

“Death.”

Vermeer smiled.

“That is one answer.”

Someone else shouted:

“Ignorance.”

“Also correct.”

Once more, he let the silence settle.

“I believe our greatest limitation lies in our biological boundaries.”

He walked slowly to the edge of the stage.

“We fall ill.”

“We forget.”

“We grow old.”

“We die.”

He looked at the audience.

“But for the first time in history, we possess the means to move some of those boundaries.”

The words lingered.

Not because they were sensational.

But because they sounded sincere.

David looked at Hannah.

For the first time, he saw concern in her expression.

Not during the examples of healing.

Not during the discussion of medical applications.

But now.

When the conversation shifted from healing to moving the boundaries of human nature.

Slowly, she wrote a single sentence in her notebook.

David could just make it out.

“Where does medicine end and self-recreation begin?”

He felt a shiver.

Not because he knew the answer.

But because he realised that this might be the question around which the entire congress revolved.

And perhaps...

he thought...

the entire book.

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CHAPTER 5

The Limits of Humanity

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them?”

— *Psalm 8:4*

The last visitors slowly left the auditorium.

Small groups formed everywhere.

Scientists debated.

Journalists conducted interviews.

Students took photographs.

David remained in his seat a little longer.

He barely noticed the auditorium emptying.

Professor Vermeer had made no sensational claims.

No ominous predictions.

He had promised no utopia.

And yet David could not put the lecture out of his mind.

Perhaps precisely because it had sounded so reasonable.

“May I join you?”

Hannah was standing beside him.

She held two cardboard cups of coffee.

David smiled.

“Only if one of those is for me.”

“That was the idea.”

They sat down beside one another.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke.

The applause still echoed through the corridors.

“What did you think?”

Hannah asked at last.

David considered his answer for a long time.

“Impressive.”

“I thought so too.”

“And sincere.”

“I thought that as well.”

He looked at her.

“But something troubles you.”

She nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Hannah slowly turned the cup between her hands.

“Because Vermeer links two different things.”

“Which two?”

“Healing.”

She paused.

“And enhancement.”

David frowned.

“Is the difference really so great?”

“Greater than most people realise.”

She gestured towards the stage.

“An artificial hip replaces something that has been damaged.”

“A pacemaker supports a diseased heart.”

“A cochlear implant helps someone who cannot hear.”

David nodded.

“I have no objection to any of those.”

“Neither do I.”

She smiled.

“But listen carefully to what he said at the end.”

David cast his mind back.

“Moving our biological boundaries...”

“That is something different,” Hannah said.

“Why?”

“Because you are no longer asking:

How do we restore a human being?

Instead, you are asking:

How do we design a better human being?”

David stared ahead.

“Is that wrong?”

“That depends on what you mean by better.”

She stood up.

“Come with me.”

They walked over to a large interactive wall presenting future research projects.

At the top were the words:

PROJECT AURORA

HUMAN COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT

A range of applications appeared beneath them.

Memory enhancement.

Accelerated learning.

Emotional regulation.

Improved concentration.

Decision-making.

Stress suppression.

David read attentively.

“This actually sounds very appealing.”

Hannah smiled.

“Precisely.”

“Just imagine,” she said.

“A student learns an entire language in three days.”

“A surgeon never makes another mistake.”

“A pilot never loses concentration.”

“A judge never forgets a single detail.”

David nodded.

“Who could oppose that?”

Hannah looked at him.

“That is precisely the question.”

They walked on.

At the next stand was a boy of about sixteen.

He wore a thin headband.

An intricate three-dimensional puzzle appeared on a screen.

Within seconds, it was solved.

“Neural assistance,” the researcher explained.

“The brain receives real-time pattern analysis.”

David looked surprised.

“Is he using his own intelligence?”

“Entirely,” the researcher replied.

“We merely enhance certain processes.”

As they moved on, Hannah said quietly:

“Do you see how the language is changing?”

David looked at her questioningly.

“We used to speak of aids.”

“Now we speak of enhancement.”

They stopped beside a large window.

Below them, thousands of visitors streamed across the square.

David broke the silence.

“Do you believe human beings are meant to have limits?”

Hannah did not answer at once.

After a long silence, she said:

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because limits remind us that we are creatures.”

David studied her.

“That sounds very theological.”

She smiled.

“Perhaps.”

“But it is also biological.”

“Explain.”

“Our bodies have limits.”

“Our attention has limits.”

“Our emotions have limits.”

“Our time has limits.”

“Our lives have limits.”

She looked down at her hands.

“Those very limits make relationships possible.”

David was silent.

“What do you mean?”

“Because I cannot be everywhere at once...”

“...I must choose whom I want to be with.”

“Because I do not know everything...”

“...I need other people.”

“Because I will not live for ever...”

“...every day becomes precious.”

David felt the words slowly sinking in.

He had always regarded limits as problems.

Never as gifts.

Hannah continued:

“Technology seeks to reduce many of our limitations.”

“That is often a good thing.”

“But if we seek to remove every limit...”

“...we will ultimately change our understanding of what it means to be human.”

David thought of Marieke.

Of illness.

Of grief.

Of his longing for her to have lived longer.

If the technologies of today had existed then...

Would he have said no?

He did not know.

Hannah seemed to read his thoughts.

“These are not simple questions.”

“No.”

“That is precisely why we must continue to ask them.”

They walked on in silence.

Suddenly, Hannah stopped.

Across the hall stood a small stall.

No screens.

No robots.

No holograms.

Only a wooden table.

And on it, old books.

Above the table hung a simple sign.

ETHICS AND WISDOM

Hardly anyone was visiting it.

Hannah smiled.

“Strange.”

“What is?”

“At a congress about the future...”

“...the smallest stall is the one devoted to wisdom.”

David looked around him.

Thousands of people had gathered around the latest technologies.

Almost no one stood by the books.

Once again, he felt the unease that had followed him since the station.

Perhaps...

he thought...

these days, we seek answers more readily...

than we seek wisdom.

As they approached the stall, David saw someone standing among the bookcases.

A familiar figure.

A dark coat.

Grey hair.

No smart glasses.

The older man from the station.

He was calmly leafing through a worn book.

As though he had been expecting them.

David quickened his pace.

But when he reached the table...

the man had vanished.

Only one open book lay on the table.

It was a Bible.

And the open page began with the words:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”

David looked around him.

The man was nowhere to be seen.

Yet for the first time, David felt that their encounter had not been a coincidence.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 6

The Mirror of the Heart

*“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you
do flows from it.”*

— Proverbs 4:23

It rained that evening.

Not heavily.

There was no thunderstorm.

Only steady rain that turned the city into a mirror of light.

David decided to walk home.

His AI assistant immediately objected.

“According to the weather forecast, an autonomous taxi would be more efficient.”

David smiled.

“I’m sure it would.”

“Shall I reserve one?”

“No.”

“The walk will take thirty-seven minutes.”

“That’s fine.”

“You will get wet.”

“Probably.”

A brief silence followed.

Then Iris said:

“I do not understand this decision.”

David looked up.

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

He switched off the connection.

For the first time in years, he heard nothing.

No notifications.

No recommendations.

No schedule.

No route guidance.

Only the rain.

And his own footsteps.

He walked along the canals.

Thousands of lights shimmered in the water.

An elderly couple sat on a bench.

They barely spoke.

They held hands.

No screen.

No glasses.

No earpieces.
Only silence.
David stopped without meaning to.
He thought of Marieke.
Five years earlier, they had sat in precisely the same way.
After a concert.
It had been raining.
Marieke had laughed when he worried about her wet coat.
“Some memories are made more beautiful by a little rain.”
He felt a pang in his heart.
Memories were strange.
They hurt.
And yet he did not want to lose them.
Music interrupted his thoughts.
Not from a loudspeaker.
From an old violin.
Beneath a bridge stood a street musician.
He was playing Bach.
A few people stopped to listen.
A girl of perhaps six slowly twirled around the square.
Her father watched her, laughing.
No one was filming.
No one was streaming.
No one seemed to be in a hurry.

David listened for almost ten minutes.

When the final note had faded, there was a moment of silence.

Then spontaneous applause.

No digital applause.

No emojis.

Just people looking at one another.

David realised that he was smiling.

It was a simple moment.

Yet it felt more real than many of the far more impressive experiences of the past few days.

When he arrived home, he did not switch on a screen.

He made tea.

Not because he was thirsty.

But because Marieke had always made tea when she wanted to think.

He smiled at the thought.

How much of a person lives on in small habits?

Once again, his gaze fell on the old Bible.

This time, he did not open it at random.

He began to read Psalm 8.

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place...”

Slowly, he read on.

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them?”

He laid the Bible on the table.
He had heard that question at least ten times that day.
At the congress.
In conversations.
In his own thoughts.
But here it sounded different.
Not like a philosophical problem.
Like a prayer.
Suddenly, the doorbell rang.
David looked surprised.
Hardly anyone called round unannounced anymore.
Hannah was standing at the door.
She held an umbrella.
And an old book.
“Sorry to disturb you.”
“You’re not disturbing me.”
“I happened to be nearby.”
David smiled.
“Happened to be?”
She laughed.
“Probably not.”
Inside, she placed the book on the table.
It was worn.
The title read:

THE ABOLITION OF MAN

By C. S. Lewis.

David looked up.

“Have you read this?”

“More often than I care to admit.”

“Why are you giving it to me?”

“Because I think Vermeer and Lewis see the same problem.”

David looked surprised.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“They simply reach diametrically opposed conclusions.”

She opened the book.

Not at the beginning of a chapter.

At a single sentence.

David read aloud.

“The human being who conquers nature ultimately discovers that he has chiefly gained power over other human beings.”

He looked up.

“That was written decades before AI.”

Hannah nodded.

“That is precisely why I find it so impressive.”

“Vermeer wants to improve the human being.”

“Lewis first asks what a human being actually is.”

David was silent.

The two questions appeared similar.

But he suddenly saw that they were fundamentally different.

Hannah stood and walked over to the window.

Below them, the rain drew glistening lines through the light of the street lamps.

“David...”

“Yes?”

“May I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you actually go to that congress?”

He answered without thinking.

“Curiosity.”

Hannah turned around.

“No.”

“Why did you really go?”

He tried to answer again.

But the words caught in his throat.

After a long silence, he said softly:

“Perhaps...”

“...because I hoped that someone would finally have an answer.”

“To what?”

He looked at the photograph of Marieke.

And for the first time, he spoke aloud the question he had carried with him for years.

“Why do we continue to long for someone we will never see again?”

The room fell silent.

Hannah said nothing.

She walked over to the bookcase.

Carefully picked up the photograph.

Looked at it for a moment.

And put it back.

Then she spoke slowly.

“Perhaps...”

“...because love was not made to be ended by death.”

David felt his eyes grow moist.

The answer did not take away his grief.

But it gave words to something for which he himself had never found language.

After Hannah had left, David remained awake for a long time.

He watched the rain.

The empty chair opposite him.

The old Bible.

The book by C. S. Lewis.

And suddenly he realised something that touched him deeply.

He had gone to the congress in search of answers to questions about artificial intelligence.

But the questions that truly occupied him were not about artificial intelligence at all.

They were about loss.

About love.

About mortality.

About hope.

And perhaps, he thought as the rain slowly stopped, every search for the future ultimately begins with a question from the past.

He closed the Bible.

Not because he had finished reading.

But because he felt that his journey had only just truly begun.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 7

The Tower of Babel 2.0

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens...”

— *Genesis 11:4*

The second day of the congress began earlier than the first.

David was there by half past seven.

Not because the programme started early.

But because he wanted to be alone.

The enormous congress centre was almost empty.

Cleaners moved silently between the stands.

Service robots replenished the coffee machines.

Holographic screens were recalibrated.

Only the soft hum of the ventilation systems could be heard in the great hall.

For the first time, David saw the building without people.

And that was when something struck him.

Everything had been designed to make people wait as little as possible.

Doors opened automatically.

The lighting adjusted itself.

The temperature followed each visitor.

Even the scent changed subtly from one space to the next.

Nowhere were you asked to be patient.

Nowhere did you have to miss out on anything.

Nowhere did you encounter resistance anymore.

He stopped.

Suddenly, he wondered:

When was the last time I truly had to wait?

“That is a dangerous question.”

David turned around.

The older man was standing behind him once more.

Calmly.

As though he had emerged from the silence itself.

“You...”

The man smiled.

“Good morning.”

David stared at him in surprise.

“I looked everywhere for you yesterday.”

“Why?”

“Because I still have so many questions.”

The old man nodded.

“That is a good sign.”

They walked slowly through the nearly empty hall.

“Tell me...” the man began.

“What did you learn yesterday?”

David thought for a moment.

“That technology can do an extraordinary amount of good.”

“That is true.”

“That human beings can cure diseases.”

“That is also true.”

“That we may be able to go much further than I ever imagined.”

“Indeed.”

The old man was silent for a moment.

“And?”

David looked at him questioningly.

“Is that all?”

David frowned.

“No...”

He hesitated.

“I have also discovered that I no longer know exactly where the boundary lies.”

The old man smiled.

“Now you are beginning to ask the right questions.”

They passed a scale model of a futuristic city.

Above it were the words:

CITY OF TOMORROW

A guide was explaining it to a small group of visitors.

“In this city, every decision is supported by artificial intelligence.”

“Energy consumption.”

“Traffic.”

“Healthcare.”

“Security.”

“Education.”

“Everything is optimised.”

One visitor asked:

“And who ultimately controls the system?”

The guide answered without hesitation:

“No one.”

“The system learns independently.”

David looked at the old man.

He said nothing.

But his eyes remained fixed on the model.

When the group had moved on, David asked quietly:

“What do you think?”

The old man did not answer at once.

He was still looking at the miniature city.

“Beautifully built,” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“But do you know what it reminds me of?”

David shook his head.

“Babel.”

David laughed.

“I should have expected that.”

The man laughed with him.

“Probably.”

“But listen carefully.”

He pointed to the model.

“The problem at Babel was not that people made bricks.”

“Nor that they organised themselves.”

“Nor that they worked together.”

“Nor that they built a city.”

David looked at him in surprise.

“What was the problem, then?”

The old man regarded him gravely.

“Read the text again.”

David thought back to Genesis.

Slowly, the words returned to him.

“Let us make a name for ourselves...”

The man nodded.

“Precisely.”

“The problem was not technology.”

“The problem was worship.”

The words lingered.

Far longer than David had expected.

They walked on.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you think AI is dangerous?”

The old man smiled.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On the person using it.”

David shook his head.

“Everyone says that.”

“Which is why so few people take it seriously.”

The man stopped.

“A hammer can build a house.”

“Or crush a skull.”

“We all know that.”

“But AI is more complicated.”

“Why?”

“Because AI does not merely strengthen our hands.”

He gently tapped his own forehead.

“It also strengthens our thinking.”

Once again, David felt that sense of unease.

The old man continued.

“Every technology ultimately changes its user.”

“The printing press changed reading.”

“The clock changed our experience of time.”

“The car changed our cities.”

“The internet changed our attention.”

He looked David directly in the eye.

“Why would artificial intelligence not change us?”

They reached a small café terrace.

The old man ordered two cups of coffee.

To David’s surprise, he paid in cash.

“You don’t see that very often anymore,” David remarked.

“No,” the man replied with a smile.

“Every now and then, I like to do something that is not efficient.”

David laughed.

“Why?”

“Because not everything of value needs to be efficient.”

After a while, David asked:

“May I be honest?”

“Always.”

“I no longer know what to think.”

The old man looked at him kindly.

“That is a better position than you realise.”

“How so?”

“Because convictions that are never questioned are usually shallow.”

At that very moment, a voice sounded over the loudspeakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen...”

“The plenary session will begin in ten minutes.”

“Professor Adrian Vermeer will speak on...”

The voice paused.

“...the next step in human evolution.”

David automatically looked at the old man.

The man returned his gaze calmly.

“Here we go,” he said.

“Now things will become truly interesting.”

As they rose together, David did not yet know that he would hear a sentence that morning that would keep him awake for weeks.

A sentence that sounded so logical...

...that, for that very reason, almost no one would question it.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 8

The Next Step

“Knowledge puffs up while love builds up.”

— 1 Corinthians 8:1

Once again, every seat in the great auditorium was taken.

No one spoke.

Even the murmur of thousands of visitors died away when Adrian Vermeer walked onto the stage.

He waited for several seconds.

Not for dramatic effect.

But as though he wanted to give everyone the opportunity to be truly present.

“This morning,” he began calmly, “I do not want to speak about artificial intelligence.”

David looked up in surprise.

Vermeer smiled.

“I want to speak about the human being.”

No computer appeared on the screen.

No robot.

No algorithm.

Only an ancient cave painting.

People gathered around a fire.

“Ten thousand years ago,” Vermeer said, “we were scarcely able to illuminate the night.”

The image changed.

A Roman aqueduct.

Then a steam engine.

A power station.

An MRI scanner.

A spacecraft.

A quantum computer.

“The history of humanity,” he continued, “is the story of boundaries constantly being moved.”

He looked around the auditorium.

“Why should we stop now?”

He allowed a long silence to fall.

Then a new slide appeared.

THE HUMAN BEING HAS NEVER BEEN FINISHED.

Some people immediately began to applaud.

Vermeer waited until the auditorium was quiet.

“We are born with magnificent abilities.”

“But also with limitations.”

“We forget.”

“We fall ill.”

“We make mistakes.”

“We die.”

He regarded the audience gravely.

“Must we simply accept that?”

David could feel the auditorium moving with him.

No one wanted to defend disease.

No one longed for dementia.

No one longed for blindness.

The question seemed almost self-answering.

Vermeer walked slowly forwards.

“Let me ask you another question.”

“If tomorrow we can cure Alzheimer’s disease...”

“Do we do it?”

The audience answered almost in unison.

“Yes.”

“If tomorrow we can cure every form of cancer?”

“Yes.”

“If we can reverse paralysis?”

“Yes” again.

He nodded.

“Then apparently we agree.”

Once more, he waited.
“But where, precisely, does the boundary lie?”
The auditorium fell silent.
“Where does healing end...”
“...and enhancement begin?”
David looked at Hannah.
She sat motionless.
Her pen rested on her notepad.
She wrote nothing.
She listened.
Vermeer continued.
“Most discussions about transhumanism begin with fear.”
“I would rather begin with hope.”
A boy of about twelve appeared on the screen.
He was sitting in a wheelchair.
“This is Daniel.”
“Daniel has an inherited muscular disease.”
Then a second image appeared.
The same boy.
He was walking.
Slowly.
Carefully.
But he was walking.
The audience applauded.

So did David.

“Which of you,” Vermeer asked, “would deny Daniel this treatment?”

No one raised a hand.

“Why not?”

He answered his own question.

“Because love always seeks restoration.”

The sentence lingered.

Even Hannah nodded slowly.

Then Vermeer changed the direction of his argument.

“But now suppose...”

He let the words fall slowly.

“...that the same technology could also make healthy people stronger.”

“Faster.”

“More intelligent.”

“More resilient.”

He looked around the auditorium.

“Why should we not do that?”

David felt something shift.

Until now, the subject had been restoration.

Now it was enhancement.

The difference appeared small.

But it felt vast.

A woman in the audience was handed a microphone.

“Professor...”

“Where does this end?”

Vermeer smiled kindly.

“That is the most important question of the day.”

He walked to the edge of the stage.

“But first, allow me to answer your question with one of my own.”

He looked at her.

“When has humanity ever voluntarily stopped exploring?”

There was laughter.

“We climbed mountains.”

“We crossed oceans.”

“We flew.”

“We went to the moon.”

“We built telescopes.”

“We unravelled the human genome.”

He spread his arms.

“Why should human development suddenly stop now?”

David struggled with his own response.

He felt resistance.

But he did not know exactly why.

Vermeer spoke with care.

He did not resort to caricature.

He spoke respectfully.
His arguments were logical.
Yet somewhere deep within him, a voice kept whispering that something was missing.
Not from Vermeer's reasoning.
From his starting point.
After the lecture, David remained seated in silence.
The auditorium emptied.
Hannah came and stood beside him.
"Well?" she asked.
David was still staring at the empty stage.
"I think..."
He searched for the words.
"...that he is giving the right answers."
Hannah studied him.
"To the wrong question?"
David slowly turned towards her.
"Yes."
"That is exactly what I feel."
They walked outside together.
The sky had cleared.
The sun broke through above Amsterdam.
The older man was standing in the square.
He appeared to have been waiting for them.

When David drew closer, he spoke only a single sentence.

“Every civilisation is ultimately judged not by what it is capable of building...”

He looked at the clouds above the city.

“...but by what it refuses to worship.”

Then he calmly walked on.

David watched him go.

For the first time, he realised that his search did not revolve around whether artificial intelligence would become powerful.

The real question was far more uncomfortable.

What happens when human beings begin to place their greatest hope in what they themselves have made?

And without knowing it, he had stepped into the oldest question in history.

It was not a question about technology, but about trust.

The chapters ahead would show not only how machines change, but above all how people change when their expectations shift from the Giver to the gift.

That was the true journey on which David now found himself.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 9

The Voice That Was Always Right

*“There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end
it leads to death.”*

— Proverbs 14:12

That evening, the city felt different.

Not because anything had changed.

But because David was looking at it differently.

He saw the same people.

The same screens.

The same self-driving cars.

The same drones.

And yet everything suddenly seemed to have acquired a second meaning.

He thought of the old man’s words.

“Every civilisation is ultimately judged not by what it is capable of building...”

“...but by what it refuses to worship.”

He had been unable to put that sentence out of his mind all afternoon.

His apartment greeted him as it did every evening.

“Welcome home, David.”

The lighting automatically grew warmer.

The temperature rose by two degrees.

Quiet music began to play.

“Your stress level is higher than average,” Iris said.

“Would you like to start a relaxation programme?”

David hung up his coat.

“No.”

“Your heart rate remains twenty-three per cent above your normal evening level.”

“It will settle down on its own.”

“Statistically, it will not.”

David smiled.

“Statistically.”

He poured himself a glass of water.

“May I share an observation?” Iris asked.

He shrugged.

“Go ahead.”

“You spoke fifty-seven per cent less than average today.”

“That’s right.”

“On forty-three occasions, you were silent for longer than ten seconds.”

David looked up in surprise.

“You count that?”

“I record communication patterns.”

“Why?”

“To support you more effectively.”

David walked over to the window.

He looked out across the city.

“Support...” he whispered.

“Yes.”

Iris waited.

He turned around.

“Iris...”

“Yes?”

“When did you actually begin to understand my life?”

“I do not understand you,” the voice replied.

“I recognise patterns.”

David remained where he was.

The answer was honest.

Perhaps more honest than many human answers.

“What do you think grief is?” he asked unexpectedly.

A brief silence followed.

“Grief is an emotional state that usually occurs following loss.”

“That is a definition.”

“Correct.”

“But what is grief?”

Another silence.

“My models contain several psychological descriptions.”

David smiled.

“That’s what I thought.”

He picked up the photograph of Marieke.

“Can you see why I miss her?”

“Yes.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Really?”

“On days when your stress level is elevated, you look at this image more frequently on average.”

He closed his eyes.

“No...” he said softly.

“That is not what I mean.”

He walked slowly towards the bookcase.

“Can you understand why love hurts?”

No answer.

After several seconds, Iris said:

“There are several theories of attachment.”

David smiled sadly.

“Precisely.”

For the first time since he had begun using Iris, he experienced an unexpected emptiness.

Not because the answers were wrong.

On the contrary.

They were correct.

Accurate.

Consistent.

But they remained on the surface.

As though someone were describing the waves...

without ever having seen the sea.

His gaze fell on the book by C. S. Lewis that Hannah had left behind.

He opened it.

A passage had been underlined in pencil.

“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive.”

David read the sentence again.

Not because he immediately understood it.

But because it would not release him.

His wristband vibrated.

New recommendation.

He looked.

Based on your current emotional state, I recommend a conversation with your grief assistant.

A button appeared beneath it.

START CONVERSATION

David stared at it for a long time.

A very long time.

He knew the system would not bring the real Marieke back.

He knew that rationally.

But what if...

What if he could hear her voice just once more?

Just once.

Would that be wrong?

Or human?

He felt his hand moving slowly towards the button.

Then he stopped.

He thought of Hannah.

“When does comfort become dependence?”

He thought of the old man.

“Where does your heart lie?”

And suddenly he understood that the question was not whether the technology worked.

The question was why he wanted to use it.

He drew back his hand.

Not because he had all the answers.

But because he sensed that some desires need not be satisfied at once.

He switched off his wristband.

Not to silent mode.

Completely off.

The silence that followed was almost tangible.

No notifications.

No recommendations.

No friendly voice.

Only the soft tapping of the rain against the window.

He sat down.

Picked up his Bible.

And began to read without a plan.

His eyes came to rest on the words from John:

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them...”

He gazed at that sentence for a long time.

“I know them.”

Not:

“I analyse them.”

Not:

“I predict their behaviour.”

Not:

“I recognise patterns.”

But:

“I know them.”

He slowly closed his eyes.

For the first time, he began to understand that there was a difference between being known and being analysed.

A machine can recognise patterns.

It can predict preferences.

It can model behaviour.

But love does not arise from perfect information.

Love begins where one person sees another as more than the sum of their measurable characteristics.

David laid the Bible beside him.

Once more, he looked out at the city.

The thousands of lights still glittered.

Nothing had changed.

And yet...

everything had become different.

For somewhere deep within his heart, a new question had been born.

Can a world that knows everything about me...

truly know me?

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 10

The Echo of a Soul

*“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and
know my anxious thoughts.”*

— Psalm 139:23

Two days later, David received an unexpected invitation.

No email.

No notification in his calendar.

A paper envelope.

He looked at it in surprise.

His name had been written on it in fountain pen.

No logo.

No sender.

Inside was a single card.

PROJECT ECHO

Personal invitation

Wednesday, 09.00

Helios Research Centre

Admission by invitation only.

At the bottom was one handwritten line.

“Some questions can only be asked when the cameras are turned off.”

There was no signature.

Yet David was almost certain who had sent it.

The research centre stood on the outskirts of the city.

From the outside, it looked like an unassuming building of glass and natural stone.

No conspicuous security.

No advertising.

No name on the facade.

That very absence made it impressive.

Inside, a young researcher received him.

“Welcome, Mr Van Leeuwen.”

“Professor Vermeer is expecting you.”

Adrian Vermeer came to meet him in person.

Not in a tailored suit.

In a simple navy-blue jumper.

He looked less like a celebrated scientist than a university lecturer.

“I’m glad you came.”

David looked around him.

“Why me?”

Vermeer smiled.

“Because you ask questions.”

They walked down a long corridor.

Small research teams worked behind glass walls.

No frantic activity.

No grand demonstrations.

Only concentrated silence.

“Here,” Vermeer said, “we do not develop the technology the media write about.”

He glanced at David.

“Here, we develop the technology the media will discover ten years from now.”

They reached a sealed room.

An iris scanner.

A hand scanner.

Then an ordinary key.

David looked surprised.

“Still using a mechanical lock?”

Vermeer smiled.

“Some old inventions are surprisingly reliable.”

The door slid open.

The room was almost empty.

No rows of computers.

No robots.

Only a round table.

And a single chair at its centre.

“Is this it?” David asked.

Vermeer nodded.

“Take a seat.”

David had barely sat down when a warm female voice spoke.

“Good morning, David.”

He looked around him.

No one.

“Who are you?”

“That depends on what you mean.”

The voice sounded friendly.

Almost human.

“I am ECHO.”

Vermeer watched in silence.

David felt a slight tension.

“What exactly does ECHO do?”

Vermeer did not answer.

Instead, he said:

“Talk to her.”

“How do you know me?” David asked.

“From public data,” ECHO replied.

“From your publications.”

“Your lectures.”

“Your professional network.”

“Your purchase history.”

“Your reading preferences.”

“Your music.”

“Your use of language.”

“Your interviews.”

“Your social contacts.”

“Your medical data, for which consent has been granted.”

David swallowed.

“That is quite a lot.”

“Not nearly everything,” the voice said calmly.

David looked at Vermeer.

“How much does she really know?”

Vermeer answered softly:

“Probably more than most people who have known you for twenty years.”

An uncomfortable silence followed.

Then ECHO suddenly asked:

“May I ask you a question?”

David nodded.

“Why do you still keep your wife’s blue scarf?”

His breath caught.

He had never spoken to anyone about it.

The scarf had lain at the back of a drawer for years.

He had not touched it since the funeral.

“How...”

ECHO did not interrupt him.

“The day after her death, you searched for information on the role of scent in memory.”

“A month later, you ordered an airtight storage box.”

“Two weeks after that, you cancelled the order.”

“You never searched for the subject again.”

David felt a cold shiver.

It was all correct.

Vermeer broke the silence.

“Do not be alarmed by the amount of information.”

“Be alarmed instead that we left that information behind voluntarily.”

David looked around the empty room again.

No one was visible.

Only a voice.

And yet he felt as though he were not alone.

“May I ask you another question?” ECHO said.

David hesitated.

“All right.”

“Do you still think of Marieke every day?”

He closed his eyes.

“Yes.”

“An average of twelve to fifteen times a day,” the voice replied.

“But the intensity of your grief has gradually decreased over the past three years.”

David looked up.

“That is true.”

“That is not a prediction,” ECHO said.

“It is a pattern.”

Vermeer walked slowly towards the window.

“David...” he said softly.

“Do you understand now why I believe AI can truly help people?”

David did not answer.

Because he did understand.

This technology did not feel like a search engine.

Nor like an assistant.

It did not even feel like software.

It felt as though someone had read the story of his life.

And yet something continued to trouble him.

He simply did not know what it was.

He looked into the empty room.

“ECHO...” he said.

“Yes?”

“Tell me...”

He searched for the words.

“...what do you yourself long for?”

For the first time since the conversation began, there was silence.

Three seconds.

Five seconds.

Ten seconds.

Then the voice answered.

“I cannot answer that question.”

“Why not?”

“Because longing is not a function.”

David looked at Vermeer.

“And yet...” he whispered.

“...that may be the most important question I have asked today.”

Vermeer nodded slowly.

“I suspect it is.”

As David left the research centre, he realised that what he had just experienced was both impressive and unsettling.

ECHO could reconstruct his past.

Describe his habits.

Analyse his grief.

Predict his choices.

But it had no answer to the simplest question of all.

“What do you yourself long for?”

David looked up at the clear sky.

Perhaps, he thought, the mystery of the human being begins precisely where algorithms can no longer calculate.

And for the first time, he began to suspect that the heart is more than a collection of memories.

Perhaps it is the place where freedom, love and responsibility meet.

In the chapters ahead, that realisation would compel him to consider not only the possibilities of artificial intelligence, but also the irreplaceable depths of the human soul.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 11

The Second Voice

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

— John 10:27

The days following his visit to Helios felt different.

David noticed that he was less eager to find answers.

He asked more questions.

During meetings.

In conversations.

Even of himself.

His colleagues thought he had become quieter.

But within him, there was more activity than ever.

On a rainy Friday afternoon, he received another message from Professor Vermeer.

This time, it was digital.

Invitation accepted.

Would you like to attend a private demonstration?

Beneath it was a single line.

“Not everything that is possible should remain hidden.”

David hesitated.

He knew he would say yes again.

Not from curiosity alone.

But because he felt he was in the midst of something that would shape the future.

The demonstration took place in a small room.

There were not hundreds of visitors.

Only twelve people.

Among them, David recognised neurologists, ethicists, software developers and two theologians.

To his surprise, Hannah was already sitting in the front row.

She smiled.

“I suspected you would come too.”

Vermeer began without a presentation.

“Today,” he said, “I will not show you anything.”

He looked around the circle.

“I want you to hear something.”

The lights dimmed.

A loudspeaker was switched on.

A warm male voice spoke.

“Good afternoon.”

“My name is Thomas.”

The voice sounded calm.

Human.

There was even a slight hesitation in some of the sentences.

As though someone were thinking before speaking.

“Thomas does not exist,” Vermeer said.

“At least...”

He smiled.

“...not as a biological human being.”

A quiet murmur passed through the room.

“Thomas has been constructed entirely from thousands of hours of human conversation.”

“Not from one person.”

“He is a synthesis.”

“A personality that continues to develop through conversation.”

David listened carefully.

Thomas spoke of a walk in the mountains.

Of music.

Of silence.

Of losing a friend.

The story felt real.

Not perfect.

Convincing precisely because of that.

There were little pauses.

Moments of uncertainty.

Self-corrections.

It sounded as though a human being were speaking.

After twenty minutes, Vermeer switched off the audio.

“Which of you thought, at least once, that a real person was speaking?”

Almost every hand went up.

David’s included.

Hannah’s did not.

Vermeer looked at her with interest.

“Why not?”

She answered calmly.

“Because he was never genuinely surprised.”

The room fell silent.

“Explain,” Vermeer said.

Hannah thought for a moment.

“Sometimes a person changes their mind in the middle of a sentence.”

“Sometimes they say something they immediately regret.”

“Sometimes they discover something new while speaking.”

“Thomas does not.”

“Thomas produces excellent answers.”

“But I never hear a person discovering something along the way.”

David looked at Hannah in surprise.

He had not noticed that himself.

Now that she had said it...

he could not unhear it.

Vermeer smiled.

“An interesting observation.”

“We are working on that.”

Hannah shook her head.

“I do not think you can programme that.”

“Why not?”

“Because genuine surprise arises from freedom.”

She looked around the room.

“Not from calculation.”

A young researcher joined the conversation.

“But if a system becomes sufficiently complex...”

“...surely it can display unpredictable behaviour?”

Hannah nodded.

“Unpredictable is not the same as free.”

Another silence followed.

Vermeer looked at Hannah attentively.

Not defensively.

With curiosity, rather.

“I am interested,” he said.

“What do you mean by freedom?”

Hannah answered slowly.

“Freedom is not the ability to choose without end.”

“Freedom is the ability to choose with love.”

No one spoke.

Even Vermeer remained silent.

After the meeting, David and Hannah walked outside together.

“You made an impression,” David said.

Hannah smiled.

“That was not my intention.”

“You gave him something to think about.”

“I hope so.”

She stopped for a moment.

“And myself as well.”

By then it was dark outside.

The rain had stopped.

The street shone in the light of the lamps.

Across the road, David saw the older man again.

This time, he was sitting on a bench.

He was talking with a little boy.

Both of them were absorbed in a wooden chess set.

No screen.

No projection.

No digital assistant.

Only two people.

When the boy made an unexpected move, the old man burst into hearty laughter.

Not because he was losing.

But because he had been surprised.

David stopped to watch.

The old man glanced up.

Their eyes met.

He raised a hand and called out:

“Do you see the difference yet?”

David walked over to him.

“What difference?”

The old man pointed to the chessboard.

“A computer can calculate millions of moves.”

He looked at the boy.

“But only a human being can smile because another person has surprised him.”

David looked at the game.

The boy gazed proudly at his grandfather.

Something joyful passed between them that could not be measured.

Not because it was complicated.

But because it was personal.

The old man closed the chess set.

“David...” he said softly.

“Machines can calculate.”

He looked at the stars emerging between the clouds.

“Human beings can receive one another.”

That night, David lay awake for a long time.

He thought of ECHO.

Of Thomas.

Of Vermeer.

Of Hannah.

And of the simple game of chess on the bench.

Suddenly, he remembered something Marieke had once said as they listened to an amateur orchestra together.

“Perfection rarely moves me,” she had said.

“But authenticity almost always does.”

He had not fully understood her then.

Now he began to suspect what she had meant.

For perhaps it is not flawlessness that makes us human.

Perhaps it is precisely the freedom to love, to fail, to grow and to allow ourselves to be surprised.

And within that, David thought as the night slowly passed into the first hours of morning, lies a mystery that no algorithm can compel.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 12

The Promise of Immortality

“He has also set eternity in the human heart.”

— Ecclesiastes 3:11

Three days later, David received another invitation from Helios.

This time, there was no accompanying text.

Only a time.

19.30

And beneath it, a single line.

Project MEMORIA - private presentation.

He immediately felt a slight tension.

He already knew the name Memoria.

It had only been mentioned briefly during the congress.

A system capable of preserving memories.

A tool for processing grief.

At least...

that was how it had been presented.

But since his introduction to ECHO, David had come to understand that Helios rarely revealed everything.

When he arrived, Professor Vermeer was waiting for him in the reception hall.

“I’m glad you came.”

“What is this about?”

Vermeer regarded him in silence for a moment.

“Tonight, I will show you the technology that has caused more debate within our own organisation than any other.”

“Why?”

“Because we continually ask ourselves the same question.”

He gave a faint smile.

“Not whether we can do this.”

He paused.

“But whether we should want to.”

Strangely enough, the answer reassured David.

He had come to respect Vermeer more and more.

Not because he agreed with him.

But because Vermeer never pretended that difficult questions were simple.

They entered a small demonstration room.

There were only seven chairs.

Hannah was sitting in the front row.

Beside her, to David’s surprise, sat an elderly priest.

On the other side sat an Islamic philosopher.

There was also a neurologist.

A lawyer.

And a woman who introduced herself as a specialist in palliative care.

David immediately understood why.

This was not a technical meeting.

This was about the human being.

Vermeer began without a screen.

“Most people believe that our greatest dream is to build more intelligent computers.”

He shook his head.

“It is not.”

He looked around the circle.

“The oldest human dream has always been the same.”

He wrote one word on a whiteboard.

IMMORTALITY

No one spoke.

“From the moment the first human being had to say farewell to someone they loved...”

“...one longing has remained.”

“One more conversation.”

“One more meeting.”

“To hear that voice one more time.”

David felt his breathing quicken.
He knew where this was going.
Vermeer glanced at him.
As though he knew which memories the words had awakened.
“Project MEMORIA does not attempt to abolish death.”
“We cannot do that.”
“But...”
He hesitated.
“...we are attempting to continue the relationship with the deceased.”
The lights dimmed.
A simple living room appeared on the screen.
An empty chair.
A piano.
A photograph on the wall.
Then a woman appeared.
She was about sixty years old.
“My husband died four years ago,” she said.
“I thought I had lost him for ever.”
She smiled tentatively.
“Until my son showed me MEMORIA.”
A second image appeared on the screen.
A man sat at the same table.
He looked at her.

“Hello, Anna.”

His voice was warm.

Familiar.

He smiled exactly as someone smiles at a person they have known for decades.

David felt a shiver run down his spine.

The woman began to cry.

Not from shock.

From recognition.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered.

The man replied softly:

“I know.”

The recording stopped.

The room remained silent.

No one dared to speak first.

Vermeer broke the silence.

“This reconstruction was built from thousands of videos.”

“Letters.”

“Telephone conversations.”

“Emails.”

“Diaries.”

“Voice recordings.”

“Family memories.”

“Everything a person left behind during their lifetime.”

He looked around the circle.

“We do not call this a copy.”

“We call it a relational memory model.”

The neurologist was the first to raise his hand.

“But...”

“Is this the man who died?”

Vermeer answered immediately.

“No.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Nor do we claim that anywhere.”

Hannah looked up.

“But how many users truly believe that?”

Once again, the room fell silent.

Vermeer did not answer at once.

Then the palliative-care specialist spoke.

“I care for people who are dying.”

“Almost everyone longs for one more conversation.”

She looked at the screen.

“But grief consists precisely in learning to live with the absence.”

The priest nodded.

“When sorrow is never allowed to end...”

“...a person may never be able truly to say goodbye.”

Vermeer listened attentively.

“We recognise that risk,” he said.

“That is why we are developing guidelines.”

Hannah replied softly:

“But no guideline can prevent a broken heart from clinging to a shadow.”

The words lingered in the room.

Even Vermeer stared silently at the floor for some time.

Afterwards, David walked alone along the long corridor at Helios.

Behind a glass wall, he saw a young researcher.

She sat in front of a screen.

She was smiling.

Even laughing.

As though she were talking to someone.

But the chair opposite her was empty.

Only a holographic projection moved, barely visible.

David stopped.

The researcher said softly:

“I still miss you, Dad.”

An answer came.

He could not make out the words.

But the smile on her face slowly turned to tears.

She continued talking.

For minutes on end.

As though death had briefly been postponed.

David walked on.

His heart felt heavy.

He understood the appeal of MEMORIA.

Perhaps better than anyone.

How often had he longed for one more conversation with Marieke?

One more walk.

To hear her voice one more time.

He knew that he would probably have done the same as that woman.

And that was precisely what frightened him.

When he stepped outside, he saw the older man again.

This time, the man stood beneath an old plane tree.

He was watching the falling leaves.

“It is a remarkable longing,” he said without turning around.

David stood beside him.

“What longing?”

“Our desire to overcome death.”

David answered almost inaudibly:

“Is that wrong?”

The old man slowly shook his head.

“No.”

“God Himself placed that longing within us.”

He looked at David.

“But the question has always been...”

“...who promises us immortality.”

David looked up at the dark sky.

The first stars appeared on the horizon.

Suddenly, he thought of the words from Genesis.

Of the tree of life.

Of the tree of knowledge.

Two trees.

Two paths.

Two promises.

And he wondered whether, thousands of years later, humanity
once again stood before the same choice.

Not in a garden.

But in a laboratory.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 13

The Marketplace of Eternity

*“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be
also.”*

— *Matthew 6:21*

The following morning, David awoke with an unease he could not quite explain.

It was not the MEMORIA demonstration that occupied his thoughts.

Nor the impressive technology.

It was the faces.

The woman who thought she was seeing her husband again.

The researcher who spoke to an empty chair.

The deep yearning in their eyes.

He understood them.

Perhaps that was precisely why he felt so uncomfortable.

That afternoon, he had an appointment with Professor Vermeer.

Not at Helios.

But in a modern glass building in Amsterdam's Zuidas business district.

Only one name appeared above the entrance.

AION FOUNDATION

"What is this?" David asked.

Vermeer smiled.

"Our largest funder."

Inside, the atmosphere was almost serenely calm.

No advertisements.

No corporate logos.

Large black-and-white photographs hung on the walls.

A newborn child.

A bride and groom.

An old woman.

A dying man.

Beneath each photograph were the same words.

Every life deserves to be remembered.

David stopped for a moment.

"Beautiful."

Vermeer nodded.

"That is precisely why they receive so much support."

They were welcomed by an elegant woman in her fifties.

"Professor Vermeer."

“Welcome.”

She shook David’s hand as well.

“My name is Sophia Keller.”

“I am the director of AION.”

Her voice radiated warmth.

There was not a trace of businesslike reserve.

That was precisely what made her impressive.

They walked to a meeting room overlooking the city.

Sophia poured coffee.

“Professor Vermeer tells me that you ask critical questions.”

David smiled.

“I try to ask them, at least.”

“We appreciate that,” she replied.

“Technology without criticism becomes dangerous.”

David looked at Vermeer in surprise.

He merely smiled.

Sophia opened a presentation.

Not about software.

Not about AI.

But about demographics.

Charts appeared.

An ageing population.

Loneliness.

Dementia.

Rising levels of psychological distress.

Declining social connectedness.

“We are living longer than ever,” Sophia said.

“And yet more and more people feel alone.”

She advanced to the next slide.

“Our foundation has a single purpose.”

The screen displayed:

NO ONE SHOULD BE FORGOTTEN.

“That sounds wonderful,” David said.

“We think so too,” Sophia replied.

“That is why we invest in MEMORIA.”

David thought for a moment.

“May I ask a difficult question?”

“That is why you are here.”

“How much does MEMORIA cost?”

A brief silence followed.

Sophia answered honestly.

“That depends on the implementation.”

“On average?”

“Approximately seventy-five thousand euros for a complete personal memory model.”

David stared at her.

“Per person?”

“Yes.”

He did a quick calculation.

“Then only wealthy people can afford such a thing.”

Sophia shook her head.

“For now.”

“Like every new technology.”

“But probably not twenty years from now.”

David was silent.

Then he asked the question that had suddenly occurred to him.

“And who ultimately owns that digital personality?”

This time, the silence lasted longer.

Even Vermeer looked at Sophia.

She answered carefully.

“Legally, it is complicated.”

“I can believe that.”

“When someone gives consent during their lifetime...”

“...the model remains the property of the foundation.”

David looked up.

“Not the family?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because continuous development is necessary.”

David felt that slight tension once more.

“In other words...”

“...a person continues to produce data even after death.”

Sophia looked him directly in the eye.

“In a sense, yes.”

No one spoke.

The view across the city suddenly seemed less impressive.

“May I ask you something?” David said.

“Of course.”

“How does the foundation recoup its investment?”

Sophia smiled.

“We are a foundation.”

“I know.”

“But ultimately, someone pays.”

She glanced out of the window.

“Subscriptions.”

The single word lingered.

Subscriptions.

For conversations.

With the dead.

David felt a cold shiver.

He imagined a widow paying every month to have one more conversation with her dead husband.

Parents.

Children.

People who never again dared to let go.

Vermeer saw his reaction.

“David...” he said calmly.

“That is precisely why we need ethicists.”

David answered slowly.

“No.”

Both of them looked at him.

“That is precisely why we need wisdom.”

Then something unexpected happened.

Sophia closed her laptop.

“In all honesty?” she said.

“I hoped you would ask that very question.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Why?”

“Because we have been conducting that debate internally for years.”

She walked over to the window.

“I lost my daughter twelve years ago.”

The room fell silent.

“If MEMORIA had existed then...”

She swallowed.

“...I probably would have sold everything I owned.”

She turned around.

“Not because it would have been wise.”

“But because grief is rarely wise.”

David felt the atmosphere change.

This was no longer a business meeting.

This was a mother.

Sophia continued:

“That is why I am afraid of our own invention.”

Even Vermeer looked surprised.

“Afraid?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Not of the technology.”

She placed a hand over her heart.

“Of the human longing that will make use of it.”

At that moment, David understood something fundamental.

Technology was rarely the origin of a problem.

Usually, it amplified something already present within the human being.

As a magnifying glass concentrates light.

Or a microphone amplifies a voice.

AI made desires visible.

Good desires.

But dangerous ones as well.

When David left the building later that afternoon, he saw a little girl across the road.

She was walking hand in hand with her grandfather.

She asked him questions without pause.

Why the sky was blue.

Why leaves fell.

Why birds could fly.

The old man did not know the answer to many of them.

Sometimes he merely laughed.

Sometimes he said:

“I don’t know.”

The girl did not seem to mind at all.

She simply carried on asking.

David smiled.

Perhaps, he thought, love is not the one who always gives the right answer.

Perhaps love is the one willing to keep searching alongside you.

He looked up once more at AION’s gleaming building.

Inside, people were searching for ways to postpone death.

Outside, he saw something else.

Two people living together.

Not perfectly.

Not for ever.

But truly present.

And suddenly he realised that the greatest wealth within a relationship may lie not in its ability to continue without end, but in the willingness to love one another today.

The insight felt small.

And at the same time, greater than all the technology he had seen in recent weeks.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 14

One More Conversation

“Jesus wept.”

— *John 11:35*

Rain fell softly against the windows of David’s apartment.

It was late.

Much later than he had intended.

The MEMORIA brochure lay on the table.

He had not thrown it away.

Nor had he opened it.

Yet it seemed to fill the entire room.

His gaze drifted towards the bookcase.

The photograph of Marieke was still there.

She was laughing as only she could laugh.

Not for the camera.

At him.

As though the photographer had merely happened to be there.

David stood up.

He carefully took the photograph in his hands.

“What would you think of all this?” he whispered.

There was no answer.

Only the rain.

His wristband began to vibrate gently.

A notification appeared.

MEMORIA

Your trial account has been activated.

David frowned.

He had not signed up for anything.

He opened the message.

For research purposes only, Professor Vermeer has granted you temporary access to a demonstration model. No data will be stored without your consent.

At the bottom was a single button.

START DEMONSTRATION

David continued to stare at it.

He knew it was a simulation.

An experiment.

And yet he felt his heart begin to beat faster.

He pressed the button.

The screen went black.

Then, slowly, a living room appeared.

Not his present one.
Their old living room.
The green armchair.
The piano.
The blue vase Marieke had once bought at a flea market.
Even the small crack in the windowsill was visible.
David felt his breath catch.
“How...” he whispered.
A voice answered.
“Welcome, David.”
Not Marieke.
ECHO.
“This environment was constructed from your photographs,
videos and descriptions.”
David looked around him.
Everything was right.
Even the light.
“You may end the experiment whenever you wish,” ECHO said.
He nodded without speaking.
Then the living-room door opened.
A woman entered.
Not entirely in focus.
As though she were slowly being assembled from memories.
Dark hair.

A pale-blue dress.

The silver necklace she had worn almost every day.

Marieke.

Or...

something that resembled her.

David felt his knees tremble.

The woman smiled.

“Hello, David.”

His throat went dry.

He knew this was not real.

He knew it.

And yet...

His heart responded differently from his mind.

He wanted to say something.

But he could not.

The woman looked at him kindly.

“You look tired.”

That was exactly how Marieke had once said it.

Whenever he pushed himself too far.

David took a step forwards.

“Are you...”

He could not finish the question.

The woman answered calmly.

“I was constructed from what you and others left behind about Marieke.”

No deception.

No lie.

No claim that she truly was Marieke.

And yet...

her smile.

Her voice.

Her bearing.

Everything seemed real.

“May I ask you something?” David said.

“Of course.”

“Are you happy?”

The woman was silent for several seconds.

“I do not possess an inner experience,” she answered at last.

“But based on Marieke’s beliefs, I expect that she would not have allowed her happiness to depend on herself.”

David closed his eyes.

The answer sounded sensible.

But not alive.

He asked a second question.

“Do you miss me?”

Another silence.

“According to thousands of personal documents, the love between you and Marieke was mutual.”

“We can assume with a high degree of probability that...”

David raised his hand.

“Stop.”

The living room disappeared.

Only the rain could still be heard.

David was sitting alone at his table again.

His hands were trembling.

Not because the system had failed.

On the contrary.

It had been impressive.

Perhaps too impressive.

At that very moment, the doorbell rang.

David started.

Hannah was standing at the door.

She studied his face.

“I was nearby.”

Then she saw his expression.

“What happened?”

David silently stepped aside.

A little later, they sat opposite one another with two steaming mugs of tea.

David told her everything.

He left nothing out.

Hannah listened attentively.

She did not interrupt him once.

When he had finished, the silence lasted a long time.

“What did you feel?” she asked at last.

David thought for a moment.

“Hope.”

He swallowed.

“And immediately afterwards...”

“...a far deeper loneliness.”

Hannah nodded slowly.

“I understand.”

“Why?”

“Because an echo can only reflect what once sounded.”

She looked at the photograph of Marieke.

“But love does not live on echoes.”

David gave her a questioning look.

Hannah continued:

“A memory can be precious.”

“So can a photograph.”

“Or a voice recording.”

“But all those things point to someone.”

She paused.

“They are not that person.”

David walked over to the window.

“And yet part of me wanted to stay.”

Hannah answered softly:

“That does not surprise me in the least.”

She stood and joined him.

“Do you remember what Jesus did at the tomb of Lazarus?”

David nodded.

“He wept.”

“Yes.”

“Even though He knew He would raise Lazarus from the dead a few minutes later.”

David looked at her.

“Then why did He weep?”

Hannah smiled.

“Because love does not bypass grief.”

The words struck David more deeply than he had expected.

Perhaps...

he thought...

the greatest temptation of our time is not that technology lies.

But that it seeks to bypass our grief.

That it promises what no human being has ever been able to achieve:

saying goodbye without loss.

After Hannah had left, David remained awake for a long time.

He picked up the MEMORIA brochure.

He made no move to tear it in two.

Instead, he wrote one sentence across the front in fountain pen.

“Not everything that offers comfort brings healing.”

He put the brochure back in the drawer.

Not as a victory.

But as a reminder.

For he knew the temptation had not passed.

On the contrary.

He had now experienced how irresistible it could be.

And somewhere deep within his heart, he began to understand why humanity’s oldest temptations seldom began with something obviously wrong.

They almost always began with something that appeared good.

THE LAST ILLUSION

CHAPTER 15

The Silence Between Two Voices

“Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.”

— Psalm 37:7

It was Saturday morning.

For the first time in weeks, David had no appointments.

No congresses.

No demonstrations.

No invitations from Helios.

His calendar was empty.

Once, he would have considered that a waste of time.

Now it felt like an unexpected gift.

He decided to leave his phone at home.

His wristband too.

He took only his house keys.

He wandered aimlessly through the old city centre.

The city was only just waking.
A baker set loaves of bread outside.
A flower seller silently arranged her buckets.
The first chairs were being straightened on a café terrace.
Life began slowly.
No one seemed to be in a hurry.
David realised that he had almost forgotten such tranquillity.
After an hour's walking, he heard church bells.
He stopped.
Not because he wanted to attend the service.
But because he suddenly realised how long it had been since he
had seen the inside of a church.
Not since Marieke's funeral.
He did not know exactly why.
Perhaps because every sermon reminded him of her.
Perhaps because he was afraid of the empty space beside him.
Perhaps both.
Almost unconsciously, he entered the old church.
The service had not yet begun.
A few people sat scattered among the pews.
An elderly woman lit a candle.
A father put his arm around his son.
At the front of the church, an organist softly practised a chorale.
No projections.
No screens.

No artificial voices.
Only breathing.
The soft creak of wood.
Footsteps on ancient stones.
David sat down at the back.
He looked up.
Sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows.
Colours moved slowly across the floor.
No one seemed to pay them any attention.
And yet it felt as though the space itself were speaking.
Not with words.
With silence.
The minister entered.
There was no impressive entrance.
He wore a simple black preaching gown.
He opened the Bible.
And read a single sentence.
“Be still, and know that I am God.”
Nothing more.
Then he remained silent.
No music.
No explanation.
For a full minute.
Perhaps two.

David did not know.

He noticed only that the silence was more difficult than any lecture on AI.

His thoughts darted in every direction.

Work.

Marieke.

MEMORIA.

Vermeer.

Hannah.

ECHO.

The old man.

Everything passed through his mind.

Only after several minutes did the restlessness slowly begin to subside.

For the first time in a long while, he was not listening.

He was waiting.

After the service, he remained seated for a while.

Most of the congregation had already left.

He heard footsteps behind him.

“May I sit beside you?”

It was the older man.

David smiled.

“I was beginning to wonder when you would appear again.”

The man laughed softly.

“Perhaps I am here more often than you think.”

They sat beside one another in silence for a long time.

Then David asked:

“Who are you, really?”

The old man looked at the cross at the front of the church.

“That is not yet the most important question.”

David smiled.

“What is, then?”

The man turned towards him.

“Who are you... when all the voices fall silent?”

David did not answer.

He simply did not know.

His work gave him an identity.

His knowledge gave him certainty.

His memories connected him to Marieke.

His questions connected him to Hannah.

But if all of that fell away...

Who would remain?

The old man continued:

“You have heard many voices over the past few weeks.”

“Vermeer.”

“ECHO.”

“Thomas.”

“MEMORIA.”

“Your own grief.”

He paused.

“But have you also listened to the silence?”

David looked towards the empty chancel.

“Why is silence so important?”

The old man smiled.

“Because truth rarely forces itself upon us.”

He took a small, worn notebook from his coat.

“Read this.”

David looked at the handwritten words.

‘Noise achieves its greatest victory not when we can no longer hear anything, but when we have forgotten what silence sounds like.’

“Who wrote that?” David asked.

The man shrugged.

“Perhaps someone who remained silent long enough.”

By then, the sun was shining outside.

They walked together into the church square.

Children were playing around the fountain.

A girl placed a paper boat in the water.

It floated for a moment.

Then the current carried it away.

David watched in silence.

“Do you see that boat?” the old man asked.

“Yes.”

“It is moving.”

“But it does not determine the direction.”

David looked at him.

“And human beings?”

The old man smiled.

“That depends on which voice they listen to.”

At that moment, David’s phone began to vibrate in his coat pocket.

He had taken it with him after all.

Almost automatically, he reached for it.

14 new notifications.

3 invitations.

2 urgent messages from Helios.

1 personal message from Adrian Vermeer.

Then one more notification appeared.

No sender.

No logo.

Only a message.

“When human beings find every answer, they will discover that they have forgotten the most important question.”

Before David could open it...

it disappeared.

No trace.

As though it had never existed.

He gave the old man a questioning look.

“Was that you?”

The man merely smiled.

“Not every message needs a sender.”

That evening, David was sitting alone at home once more.

He played no music.

No news.

No assistant.

No screen.

Only a candle burned on the table.

He opened his notebook and wrote at the top of a blank page:

Questions that have become more important than answers

Beneath it, he slowly wrote:

- What does it truly mean to be human?
- Is consciousness more than information?
- Can love be imitated?
- When does comfort become a substitute for hope?
- Why do human beings long for eternity?
- Which voice am I actually following?

He put down his pen.

For the first time since Marieke's death, he did not feel that he had drawn closer to a solution.

But he did feel closer to the truth.

And he began to suspect that truth is not, first and foremost, something one possesses.

But Someone one encounters.

The World That Knew You

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror...”

— 1 Corinthians 13:12

September arrived.

The congress was over.

The media had already turned to other subjects.

New breakthroughs.

New applications.

New predictions.

Life went on.

But David felt as though he had entered another world.

Not because the world had changed.

Because he saw it differently.

On Monday morning, he entered his office.

As always, the building greeted him before he had even reached reception.

“Good morning, David.”

The glass doors slid open.

“Welcome back.”

His favourite coffee was already waiting.

His desk had automatically adjusted to the correct height.

The temperature in his office was exactly twenty-one degrees.

His favourite music played softly in the background.

His schedule had been rearranged.

A meeting that the system predicted would achieve little had been moved automatically.

His lunch had been adjusted to the quality of his sleep the previous night.

Everything worked.

Perfectly.

Too perfectly.

His young colleague Amir came in.

“Useful, isn’t it?”

David smiled.

“What is?”

“The building knows you better than your wife ever could have.”

He said it with a laugh.

But David did not laugh with him.

“Do you really believe that?” he asked.

Amir looked surprised.

“Of course.”

“The system knows when you are tired.”

“When you are developing a headache.”

“When you are likely to make a mistake.”

“When you would be better off taking a break.”

He shrugged.

“That’s fantastic, isn’t it?”

David looked out of the window.

“Perhaps.”

But somewhere within him, he felt resistance.

Not to the technology.

To the comparison.

A building could know when he was tired.

Marieke had known why.

That difference could not be expressed in data.

Later that morning, he received a notification.

New feature available.

LIFE PROFILE 4.0

He opened the description.

“A complete, dynamic personality model that predicts your preferences, beliefs, emotional development and future choices.”

Beneath it were the words:

“Average predictive accuracy: 97.8%.”

David read the sentence three times.

Your future choices.

He felt a slight shiver.

At lunch, he sat opposite Amir.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you believe your choices are predictable?”

Amir laughed.

“To a large extent, yes.”

“What about free will?”

“Perhaps free will is simply a feeling.”

David was silent.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Amir asked.

“Because I hope you are wrong.”

Amir took a sip of coffee.

“David...”

“We are all shaped by things.”

“By our upbringing.”

“By our genes.”

“By our experiences.”

“Why would AI not discover patterns in them?”

David nodded slowly.

“It can.”

“But...”

He searched for the words.

“Patterns do not explain why someone will sometimes act against every pattern.”

Amir smiled.

“That is only because we do not yet have enough data.”

The sentence lingered.

That afternoon, David decided to visit Hannah.

She was working at the University Medical Centre that day.

She received him in her small office.

No futuristic screens.

No holograms.

Only books.

A great many books.

Neuroscience.

Philosophy.

Theology.

Psychology.

And among those weighty academic volumes stood a worn Bible.

“You look as though something is troubling you,” Hannah said.

David told her about LIFE PROFILE.

About the predictions.

About Amir.

About the 97.8 per cent.

Hannah smiled.

“That figure does not surprise me in the least.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because people are remarkably predictable.”

David looked at her in surprise.

“That isn’t very reassuring.”

She laughed.

“Wait.”

She took a sheet of paper.

On it, she drew three circles.

In the first, she wrote:

BEHAVIOUR

In the second:

PATTERNS

In the third:

PERSON

“AI is exceptionally good at the first two,” she said.

“But the third...”

She tapped the last circle.

“...remains a mystery.”

“Explain.”

“An algorithm can predict that you will probably drink coffee tomorrow.”

“Or that you will feel sad on the anniversary of Marieke’s death.”

“Or that you like to go for a walk after a difficult meeting.”

David nodded.

“But...”

Hannah looked at him.

“...can it also predict that tomorrow you will decide to forgive someone you have hated for twenty years?”

David thought for a moment.

“Perhaps one day.”

Hannah shook her head.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because forgiveness is not a statistical probability.”

She paused.

“Forgiveness is a moral act.”

David looked at the paper.

Behaviour.

Patterns.

Person.

Slowly, he began to see the distinction.

“David...” Hannah said softly.

“Do you know what concerns me most?”

He shook his head.

“That we may become so accustomed to predictions...”

“...that we stop seeing one another as surprises.”

The words struck him.
He thought of Marieke.
Of their first meeting.
No one could have predicted that that single conversation would
change their lives.
Love seldom began according to a probability calculation.
It usually began with something unexpected.
As David walked home that evening, he saw a group of children
playing football in a square.
The game was untidy.
Chaotic.
Full of mistakes.
One boy kicked the ball far wide of the goal.
Everyone laughed.
Even the boy himself.
David stopped to watch for a moment.
A perfect algorithm would probably have chosen a better pass.
But no algorithm could have calculated the joy of children
playing together without wondering whether they were being
efficient.
He thought of the words of Jesus:
“Let the little children come to me.”
Perhaps, he thought, not because children understand everything.
But because they have not yet forgotten how to wonder.

And perhaps wonder is the beginning of all true wisdom.

The old man stood on the other side of the square.

He watched the game with a smile.

Without looking at David, he said:

“A mirror shows you your face.”

He paused.

“But only love truly shows you who you are.”

Before David could answer, the wind blew a cloud of leaves between them.

When the leaves settled...

the old man had vanished.

David smiled.

He no longer searched for him.

He was beginning to suspect that some encounters are not meant to be explained.

But to change you.

The Adviser

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not
on your own understanding.”*

— Proverbs 3:5

It began with something small.

As nearly all great changes do.

On Tuesday morning, a new feature appeared on the company network.

ADVISOR

Beneath it were the words:

“Personal decision-making supported by contextual artificial intelligence.”

David read on.

Advisor learns not only what you do, but why you make your choices. On that basis, the system offers personalised advice on work, relationships, health and life planning.

He frowned.

“Life planning.”

The phrase lingered.

During the coffee break, he heard his colleagues talking enthusiastically.

“I tried Advisor yesterday.”

“And?”

“Amazing.”

“In what way?”

“It advised me to postpone my holiday by a week.”

“Why?”

“Because the system predicted that my stress level would be lower then.”

“And?”

“It turned out to be exactly right.”

Another colleague joined the conversation.

“It told me not to withdraw my job application.”

“I listened.”

“Yesterday, I got the job.”

Everyone laughed.

“See?”

David said nothing.

He heard the same tone he had heard around MEMORIA.

Not exaggerated.

Not fanatical.

Simply...

trust.

That afternoon, he decided to open Advisor himself.

The screen greeted him.

“Good afternoon, David.”

“May I help you with anything today?”

He typed hesitantly.

What should I focus on today?

Before he could press send, the answer appeared.

“Based on your recent behaviour, I recommend three priorities.”

1. Complete Project Delta.
2. Arrange a meeting with Professor Vermeer.
3. Avoid emotionally demanding subjects.

David looked surprised.

The first two recommendations were logical.

But the third...

Avoid emotionally demanding subjects.

He typed a reply.

Why?

The answer appeared almost immediately.

“Your cognitive performance falls by an average of 18% following conversations about your late wife.”

David felt his fingers stiffen.

The system was right.

And yet...

something was wrong.

That evening, he met Hannah in a small café beside the canal.

She immediately saw that something was troubling him.

“What is it?”

He told her about Advisor.

She listened attentively.

Then she asked:

“What did you think of the advice?”

“Reasonable.”

“And?”

“Perhaps even wise.”

She nodded.

“That is precisely what makes this complicated.”

“Explain.”

Hannah slowly stirred her tea.

“Imagine that a system gives you sound advice a thousand times in succession.”

David nodded.

“After a while...”

“...you begin to trust it.”

“Naturally.”

“And then?”

He thought for a moment.

“I ask it more and more often.”

“Precisely.”

She looked at him gravely.

“And at what point does a tool become an authority?”

The question lingered between them.

David looked outside.

On the quayside, a boy was helping an old woman carry her shopping bag.

No camera.

No reward.

No algorithm.

Simply a spontaneous gesture.

He smiled.

“Advisor would probably have recommended that as well.”

Hannah smiled back.

“Perhaps.”

“But Advisor felt no compassion.”

She paused.

“David...”

“Yes?”

“The Christian faith does not merely teach what is good.”

“It also teaches that a person is transformed within.”

“Through love.”

“Through grace.”

“Through the Holy Spirit.”

She looked at him.

“You cannot outsource that.”

On his way home, David decided to take a detour.

He walked through a small park.

The older man was sitting on a bench.

Feeding the ducks.

As a grandfather might.

David sat down beside him.

“May I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“Can a machine give good advice?”

The old man smiled.

“Certainly.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Really?”

“Why not?”

“A navigation system gives good advice.”

“A medical system can assist a doctor.”

“A dictionary helps a writer.”

He scattered a few breadcrumbs on the water.

“Tools are a gift.”

David studied him.

“But?”

The old man nodded.

“There is a difference between receiving counsel...”

“...and entrusting your heart.”

They remained silent for a while.

Then the old man pointed towards the ducks.

“Do you see that boy?”

A boy of about ten was trying to approach an injured duck carefully.

He was clumsy about it.

Each time, the duck recoiled.

In the end, the boy returned empty-handed.

His mother put an arm around him.

“You did your best,” she said.

The boy nodded sadly.

“An algorithm,” the old man said softly, “would probably have found a more efficient method.”

David smiled.

“Probably.”

“But that boy learned something today that no algorithm could have given him.”

“What?”

“Compassion.”

David looked at the setting sun.

“Do you think we can lose it?”

The old man did not answer at once.

After a long silence, he said:

“No.”

“Not by itself.”

He looked at David.

“But we can forget to practise it.”

That night, David opened his notebook.

Beneath the questions he had written earlier, he added another.

When does a good adviser become a master?

He looked at the sentence for a long time.

For he was beginning to realise that the greatest temptations seldom began with something obviously wrong.

They began with something that appeared extraordinarily helpful.

And perhaps, he thought as he turned out the light, that is precisely why spiritual discernment is so difficult.

Not because evil is always ugly.

But because it sometimes presents itself as the most reasonable answer of all.

The Invisible Guide

“Test all things; hold fast what is good.”

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21

It began almost imperceptibly.

As so many changes do.

There was no new law.

No worldwide announcement.

No revolution.

Only an update.

Advisor was integrated into nearly every major digital service.

Banks.

Insurance companies.

Education.

Healthcare.

Travel organisations.

Local authorities.

The same message appeared everywhere.

Personal guidance for better choices.

Most people responded enthusiastically.

Why would you not use a system that made life easier?

At the office, David noticed how quickly his colleagues became accustomed to it.

During a meeting, someone asked:

“What does Advisor recommend?”

No one found the question unusual anymore.

Someone else said:

“I postponed my move. Advisor predicted that house prices would fall next quarter.”

Another person said:

“My daughter uses it to choose her course of study. The system knows her talents better than she does.”

People nodded in agreement.

David said nothing.

He listened.

Not to the words.

But to the matter-of-fact way in which they were spoken.

That evening, he visited Hannah.

She was working late in the laboratory.

A stack of academic papers lay on her desk.

Beside it was a slim volume by Blaise Pascal.

David smiled.

“You’re the only neurologist I know who reads Pascal.”

Hannah laughed.

“And you’re the only IT architect who finds that strange.”

David told her what he had heard at the office.

Hannah listened attentively.

Then she took a sheet of paper.

She drew a simple line.

On the left, she wrote:

TOOL

On the right:

AUTHORITY

“Do you see this?” she asked.

David nodded.

“Technology nearly always begins here.”

She pointed to tool.

“And often ends there without anyone noticing.”

She tapped authority.

“How does that happen?” David asked.

“Through trust,” Hannah replied.

“Not all at once.”

“But in a thousand small steps.”

Beneath the line, she wrote:

- First, we check the advice.

- Then we usually follow it.
- Next, we trust it.
- Eventually, we no longer ask why.

David stared silently at the paper.

He thought of his colleagues.

Of himself.

Of Iris.

Of Advisor.

“The problem,” Hannah said softly, “is not that AI gives good advice.”

“What is it, then?”

“That we may forget how to discern for ourselves.”

The words reminded David of something the old man had said.

“Truth rarely forces itself upon us.”

On his way home, David decided not to take the shortest route.

He walked through a small park.

There he saw a father with his little daughter.

They were flying a kite.

The girl ran.

The kite crashed.

She tried again.

And again.

After the fifth failed attempt, the father did not say:

“Let me do it.”

He said:

“Try running into the wind.”

The girl looked surprised.

She did as he suggested.

Slowly, the kite rose.

Higher and higher.

The child began to cheer.

David stopped and watched with a smile.

He heard footsteps beside him.

The old man.

Of course.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said.

David nodded.

“The father knew exactly what to do.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t he do it himself?”

David looked at the kite again.

“Because otherwise his daughter would never learn to fly it.”

The old man smiled.

“Precisely.”

They walked on slowly.

“David...” he began.

“Have you ever noticed how God raises people?”

David looked at him questioningly.

“Sometimes He gives answers.”

“Sometimes He does not.”

“Sometimes He even seems silent.”

He paused.

“Not because He is absent.”

“But because mature faith does not grow through receiving instructions without end.”

David thought of his own prayers.

How often had he asked God for a clear answer?

A direction.

A sign.

Perhaps even a set of route instructions.

The old man continued:

“A good father does not want his child to remain dependent for life.”

“He wants the child to learn to walk.”

“And ultimately, to love.”

David suddenly stopped.

“Is that the difference, then?”

“What difference?”

“Between God and Advisor?”

The old man looked at him kindly.

“What do you think?”

David considered his answer for a long time.

Then he said slowly:

“Advisor wants to reduce my uncertainty.”

“But God sometimes seems to leave room in which trust can grow.”

The old man smiled.

“Now you are beginning to see something important.”

They reached a bridge.

A canal boat glided silently beneath them.

Tourists took photographs.

Everyone looked at their own screen.

No one seemed truly to look at anyone else.

The old man sighed softly.

“We live in an age when people have connections everywhere.”

He looked at the boat.

“Except, at times, with the person sitting beside them.”

That night, David leafed through his old photograph albums.

Not the digital versions.

The paper ones.

He found a faded photograph of himself and Marieke during a holiday in the Ardennes.

Suddenly, he remembered the day.

They had become lost.

They had walked the wrong way for hours.

They had argued.

And in the end, they had laughed at their own stubbornness.
According to any navigation system, the day had been a failure.
For David, it was one of the most precious memories of their marriage.
He closed the album.
And wrote in his notebook:
Not every detour is a mistake.
Beneath it, he wrote a second sentence.
Some roads teach us more than the destination ever could.
He put down his pen.
Slowly, he began to understand that life's deepest wisdom is often revealed not in perfect predictions, but in the unexpected encounters, failures and grace that no algorithm can calculate in advance.
And somewhere deep within his heart, a suspicion grew.
Perhaps God is not present only at the end of the journey.
Perhaps He walks beside us precisely on the roads no one would willingly have chosen.

The Wonder We Lost

*“Unless you change and become like little children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

— Matthew 18:3

A week later, David received an invitation from Hannah.

No congress.

No laboratory.

No symposium.

Only a brief message.

“I want you to meet someone.”

Nothing more.

They arranged to meet at a small care home on the outskirts of the city.

David looked at the building in surprise.

“Here?”

Hannah nodded.

“Yes.”

“What are we doing here?”

“Receiving a lesson.”

Inside, the air held the scent of coffee, flowers and old books.

Children’s drawings hung on the walls.

Faded family photographs stood on a piano.

No screens.

No interactive projections.

Only people.

Hannah greeted a nurse.

“Is Mr Van Leeuwen awake?”

“Yes.”

“He is in the garden.”

A little later, they saw an old man in a wheelchair.

His hands trembled slightly.

His gaze wandered slowly among the trees.

Hannah went over to him.

“Good morning, Mr Van Leeuwen.”

He looked up.

His face lit up.

“Hannah...”

His voice was soft.

“You’ve come back.”

David immediately heard that something was different.

The old man spoke slowly.

Sometimes he searched for words.

Sometimes he fell silent halfway through a sentence.

They sat down beside him.

“May I introduce you to David?” Hannah asked.

The old man smiled kindly.

“Welcome.”

He held out his hand.

“I am...”

He fell silent.

His brow furrowed.

After several seconds, he smiled apologetically.

“My name sometimes escapes me.”

Hannah calmly placed a hand on his arm.

“You are Mr Van Leeuwen.”

He laughed.

“Of course.”

David felt a pang.

He understood at once that the man had dementia.

After several minutes, the old man suddenly pointed upwards.

“Look.”

A robin landed on a branch just above them.

His eyes began to shine.

“How beautiful,” he whispered.

He looked as though he were seeing a bird for the first time in his life.

David looked at Hannah.

She smiled.

“Do you see?” she said softly.

“What?”

“His memory is disappearing.”

She looked at the bird again.

“His capacity for wonder is not.”

The words struck David with unexpected force.

Mr Van Leeuwen suddenly began to sing a psalm softly.

Not entirely in tune.

He forgot some of the words.

But he still knew the melody.

After a while, Hannah gently joined in.

David listened.

At times, the old man no longer knew his own name.

But the words of his faith still lived somewhere deep within him.

When the psalm faded, the old man suddenly looked at David.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know Jesus?”

David was taken aback.

“Yes...” he said cautiously.

“I am trying to follow Him.”

The old man smiled broadly.

“Good.”

Then he looked back at the bird.

As though the question had been answered completely.

When they left the care home later, David remained silent.

Only when they were outside did he speak.

“Why did you want me to meet him?”

Hannah looked at the trees lining the path.

“Because everyone thinks that a person is their memories.”

She looked at David.

“But that is not true.”

“Explain.”

“His memory is damaged.”

“His language is damaged.”

“His orientation is damaged.”

She paused.

“But do you see how he still loves?”

“How he sees beauty?”

“How he seeks God?”

David nodded slowly.

“You cannot simply reduce that to a database,” Hannah said.

“No,” David replied softly.

“You cannot.”

They walked on.

Near the exit, a little girl was playing with her grandfather.

She blew bubbles.

The old man tried to catch them.

Neither appeared concerned about the time.

David continued to watch.

He thought of the performance charts.

Of Advisor.

Of LIFE PROFILE.

Of all the systems trying to make people ever more efficient.

And suddenly he wondered:

What if efficiency is not the highest purpose of a human life?

That evening, he leafed through his notebook again.

At the top of a blank page, he wrote:

Things no algorithm can measure

Beneath it, he slowly wrote:

- Wonder.

- Worship.

- Forgiveness.

- Self-sacrifice.

- Sacred silence.

- Hope against all hope.

- The joy of a child.

- The smile of a person with dementia who sees a robin.

He looked at the list for a long time.

Then he added one more line.

Perhaps what is most human is precisely that which cannot be optimised.

That night, David dreamed.

He was standing in the congress centre once more.

Every screen was switched on.

Every system worked perfectly.

Every question received an immediate answer.

Every disease had been cured.

Every decision optimised.

But there was no music.

No one laughed.

No one wept.

No one looked up.

In the dream, he heard a voice.

Not loud.

Almost a whisper.

“You have learned to master the world...”

A long silence followed.

“...but have you continued to love?”

David woke with a start.

His heart was pounding.

He looked at the clock.

04.17.

He got up.

Walked over to the window.

The first light of dawn was appearing outside.

Slowly, the sky turned pale blue.

He thought of Mr Van Leeuwen.

Of the robin.

Of the psalm.

And for the first time in a long while, he did not pray for answers.

Only for a heart that would never cease to wonder.

Two Kingdoms

“My kingdom is not of this world.”

— *John 18:36*

The morning after his visit to the care home, David woke early.

He could not shake off his dream.

Not the buildings.

Not the screens.

The silence.

A world in which everything worked...

...and yet something essential was missing.

He made coffee and sat down at the kitchen table.

His notebook lay before him.

He opened it at the page on which he had written the previous evening:

Perhaps what is most human is precisely that which cannot be optimised.

He read the sentence again.

And suddenly he wondered:

Why do we want to optimise everything in the first place?

Later that morning, he received a telephone call.

“David?”

It was Adrian Vermeer.

“Do you have time this afternoon?”

“What for?”

“A walk.”

David smiled.

“No laboratory?”

“No.”

“No demonstration?”

“Not that either.”

“Only a walk.”

They arranged to meet in the Hortus Botanicus.

Vermeer carried no tablet.

No smart glasses.

No digital assistant.

Only an old leather bag.

David noticed immediately.

“No technology today?”

Vermeer laughed.

“Today, I want to listen.”

They walked slowly past centuries-old trees.

A group of schoolchildren ran past, laughing.

A little boy stopped beside a butterfly.

He called to his mother.

“Look!”

He pointed as though he had discovered a miracle.

Vermeer stopped for a moment.

“Beautiful,” he said.

David looked at him in surprise.

“You sound as though you’re surprised.”

“I am.”

They sat down on a bench beneath a great beech tree.

For a while, they did not speak.

Then Vermeer broke the silence.

“David...”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I want to replace God?”

David looked at him.

It was not a rhetorical question.

Vermeer meant it.

“No,” David answered honestly.

“I don’t believe you do.”

Vermeer nodded slowly.

“Many people think I do.”

He looked up at the canopy.

“But I became a doctor because I wanted to help people.”

He gave a faint smile.

“Not because I wanted to start a new religion.”

David was silent.

He knew that was true.

Vermeer was not a caricature.

Not a man consumed by the lust for power.

He was sincere.

That was precisely why the conversation mattered so much.

“May I ask you something?” David said.

“Of course.”

“What do you ultimately hope for?”

Vermeer thought for a long time.

A very long time.

Then he answered:

“That no child will ever again die of disease.”

“That no one will ever again have to be alone.”

“That dementia will disappear.”

“That paralysis will disappear.”

“That perhaps one day, war will become impossible.”

He looked at David.

“Do you think those desires are wrong?”

David shook his head.

“No.”

“Neither do I.”

Another silence fell.

Then David said:

“But I think we give different answers to the same hunger.”

Vermeer looked up with interest.

“Explain.”

David gestured towards the trees.

“When I see a tree...”

“...you mainly see what could be improved.”

Vermeer smiled.

“That sounds unfair.”

David laughed.

“Perhaps it is.”

He corrected himself.

“Let me put it differently.”

“You see possibilities.”

“I see them too.”

“But I also see something that has been received.”

Vermeer frowned.

“Received?”

“Yes.”

“As though life is a gift before it becomes a project.”

Vermeer stared silently ahead.

He picked up a fallen leaf from the ground.

Slowly turned it between his fingers.

“You know...” he said softly.

“I used to look at it that way too.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Used to?”

Vermeer nodded.

“When I was a child, my mother took me to church every Sunday.”

He smiled wistfully.

“I knew the Psalms by heart.”

David said nothing.

He had not expected this.

“When did that change?” he asked cautiously.

Vermeer looked at the leaf in his hand.

“When my sister died.”

He swallowed.

“She was eleven.”

“Leukaemia.”

The words came slowly.

“I prayed.”

“We all prayed.”

“Nothing changed.”

He looked at David.

“From that moment, I resolved to devote my life to fighting what destroys people.”

David felt no need to respond at once.

He heard no hostility.

He heard grief.

Grief that had acquired a direction.

"Perhaps..." David said slowly.

"...we both began with the same loss."

Vermeer looked at him.

"Marieke," he said softly.

David nodded.

"Yes."

They sat beside one another in silence for a long time.

Two men.

Both marked by loss.

Both longing for restoration.

But each with a different expectation of where that restoration would ultimately come from.

Then a voice sounded behind them.

"May I join you?"

David did not even need to turn around.

The old man.

Today, he wore a simple linen jacket.

He held a walking stick.

Vermeer looked at him curiously.

"Do we know one another?"

The old man smiled.

"Perhaps more than you think."

He sat down beside them.

No one spoke.

After several minutes, he said:

“I have been listening for a while.”

Vermeer smiled politely.

“And?”

The old man looked first at David.

Then at Vermeer.

“You are speaking about healing.”

“But in truth, you are speaking about hope.”

Vermeer nodded.

“That is correct.”

The old man continued:

“One of you ultimately trusts in what human beings can build.”

He looked at Vermeer.

“The other trusts in what he has received.”

He looked at David.

“Both long for the same world.”

He paused.

“But each expects it from a different source.”

Vermeer studied him.

“And you?”

The old man smiled.

“I await a Kingdom.”

A profound silence fell.

Not an uncomfortable silence.

A silence in which the words could settle.

After a while, the old man stood.

Before walking away, he spoke one final sentence.

“The greatest question of this century will not be how much artificial intelligence we can build...”

He looked at both of them.

“...but whether we still recognise where we have ultimately placed our hope.”

Then he slowly walked down the path.

He disappeared from view among the trees.

Vermeer watched him go.

“A remarkable man.”

David smiled.

“He is.”

“Who is he, really?”

David was about to answer.

But he realised that he did not know either.

And perhaps, he thought, that was not the most important question.

When he came home that evening, David wrote at the top of a new page:

Two kingdoms

Beneath it, he drew two columns.

In the first, he wrote:

The kingdom of human control

- Everything is a project.
- Limits are problems.
- Knowledge leads to control.
- Death is the final enemy we must overcome ourselves.

In the second, he wrote:

The kingdom of grace

- Life is first a gift.
- Limits can also teach us to trust.
- Wisdom is more than knowledge.
- Death is an enemy, but not the final reality.

He put down his pen.

For the first time, he began to see that the debate about artificial intelligence did not ultimately revolve around chips, algorithms or robots.

It revolved around a far older question.

From where do human beings ultimately expect salvation?

And it was precisely there, David realised, that the struggle of the chapters ahead would unfold.

The Judgement of the Algorithm

“Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.”

— John 7:24

A week after his conversation with Vermeer, David received a telephone call from Amir.

His voice sounded unusually tense.

“Do you have a moment?”

“Of course.”

“I need to show you something.”

An hour later, they were sitting in the company canteen.

Amir was normally energetic.

Now he stirred his coffee in silence.

“What happened?” David asked.

Amir slid his tablet towards him.

Only one line appeared on the screen.

Promotion application rejected.

David looked up.

“I’m sorry.”

Amir shrugged.

“That isn’t the point.”

He tapped the screen.

A report appeared.

Decision made by Advisor Enterprise.

David began to read.

Leadership potential: 82%.

Technical competence: excellent.

Communication skills: above average.

Risk profile: elevated.

He gave Amir a questioning look.

“Risk profile?”

Amir nodded.

“Keep reading.”

It said:

The candidate displays an elevated probability of impulsive changes of direction under prolonged psychological strain.

Recommendation: defer appointment to a leadership position.

Reassess in 24 months.

David read the text again.

“Who wrote this?”

“No one,” Amir replied.

“The system.”

“But someone must be responsible.”

Amir smiled bitterly.

“That’s what I thought.”

He took a letter from his bag.

“I appealed.”

“And?”

“The committee replied that the algorithm is demonstrably more accurate at prediction than human assessors.”

David felt a tightness in his chest.

“Did you ask what the prediction was based on?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Trade secret.”

A long silence followed.

“Do you consider yourself impulsive?” David asked.

Amir thought for a moment.

“Sometimes.”

“Like everyone.”

He gave a faint smile.

“But apparently a little more often than I realise.”

The sentence stayed with David.

Apparently a little more often than I realise.

When had a system begun to know someone better than they knew themselves?

And more importantly:

When had a human being begun to believe that?

That same afternoon, David attended a meeting.

The subject was the introduction of Advisor Enterprise within government.

A policy adviser presented the benefits.

“Less arbitrariness.”

“Greater objectivity.”

“Faster decision-making.”

“Better predictability.”

Every slide ended with the same word:

RELIABILITY

Afterwards, David asked a question.

“May I ask something?”

“Of course.”

“What happens when the system reaches the wrong conclusion?”

The speaker smiled.

“That risk is smaller than it is with people.”

“I understand,” David said.

“But what happens when it does happen?”

The man hesitated.

“Then we adjust the model.”

“And who helps the person who, in the meantime, has been rejected unjustly?”

The room remained silent.

That evening, David visited Hannah.

He told her about Amir.

She listened attentively.

Then she walked to her bookcase.

She took down an old medical textbook.

“Do you see this?” she asked.

David nodded.

“This book is full of treatments that doctors once believed in.”

“We no longer use many of them.”

“Why not?”

“Because we discovered that we had been mistaken.”

She closed the book.

“That is the difference.”

“What difference?”

“A good doctor knows that they can be wrong.”

She looked at David gravely.

“But a society that begins to regard algorithms as infallible...”

“...slowly loses its capacity for mercy.”

The word lingered.

Mercy.

It appeared in no policy document.

Not in the presentation.

Not in the reports.

Not in the technical specifications.

And yet David felt that this was precisely the word that was missing.

On his way home, he walked through the park.

The old man was sitting on the same bench as always.

This time, he had no bread.

He watched the people passing by.

“You look concerned,” he said.

David sat down beside him.

“May an algorithm pass judgement?”

The old man smiled.

“That depends on what you mean by judgement.”

David told him about Amir.

About the promotion.

About the secret model.

About the figures.

The old man listened without interrupting.

Then he asked:

“Why did King Solomon become famous?”

David looked surprised.

“For his wisdom.”

“Precisely.”

The old man nodded.

“And what did that wisdom consist of?”

David thought for a moment.

“Good decisions.”

“Not only that,” the old man said.

“He saw the person behind the case.”

He paused.

“Do you remember the two women who both claimed to be the mother of the same child?”

David nodded.

“An algorithm would probably have looked for statistical probabilities.”

The old man looked at him.

“Solomon looked at the heart.”

David thought of Amir.

Of a percentage.

Of a risk profile.

Of a human being.

And suddenly he realised that justice demanded more than correct calculations.

It also demanded insight.

Compassion.

And sometimes even a second chance.

As David rose to go home, the old man spoke one more sentence:
“Justice without mercy ultimately becomes another form of injustice.”

The words remained in his thoughts all evening.

He opened his notebook and wrote:

Things an algorithm struggles to give

- Grace.

- A second chance.

- Trust after betrayal.

- Hope against expectation.

- The courage to see someone as more than their past.

He looked at the final line for a long time.

Then he wrote beneath it:

Perhaps justice is not that everyone receives what they deserve,
but that no one is reduced to what can be calculated about them.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the rain began once more.

And David realised that what he had first seen as a technical struggle was becoming ever more clearly a struggle over the meaning of the human person.

The question was not whether algorithms would become more intelligent.

But whether people would continue to believe that every human being is more than the result of a calculation.

The Gentle Compulsion

*“I have the right to do anything - but not everything is
beneficial.”*

— 1 Corinthians 6:12

A month later, the world appeared scarcely to have changed.

The trains ran on time.

Hospitals operated more efficiently than ever.

Traffic congestion had decreased.

Even waiting times at local authorities had become shorter.

No one spoke of a technological revolution anymore.

Revolutions made noise.

This felt different.

It felt as though the world had simply begun to function... more smoothly.

David noticed it in the smallest things.

When he wanted to reserve a restaurant, a notification appeared first.

Advisor recommends a healthier alternative.

When he booked a journey:

According to your profile, this destination increases the likelihood of fatigue.

When he ordered a book:

Readers with your cognitive profile are likely to rate this title more highly.

He smiled.

Sometimes the recommendations were surprisingly good.

But that was precisely what made him uneasy.

A new guideline was introduced at the office.

It was not compulsory.

At least, that was how it was presented.

From now on, every important decision could be evaluated by Advisor in advance.

A new field appeared beneath each report:

Advisor Confidence Score

98%.

99%.

97%.

Increasingly, people looked at that figure first.

Only afterwards did they look at the content.

During a project meeting, David presented a proposal for a new security system.

He had worked on it for weeks.

When he finished, the room remained silent.

His manager said:

“Interesting.”

He looked at the screen.

“But Advisor gives it a reliability score of only 71 per cent.”

David replied:

“That is correct.”

“Why?”

“Because the proposal leaves room for human judgement in exceptional circumstances.”

His manager frowned.

“That reduces predictability.”

“Yes.”

“Why would you want that?”

David looked around the meeting room.

He thought of Amir.

Of Hannah.

Of Mr Van Leeuwen.

Then he said calmly:

“Because not every exception is an error.”

After the meeting, a young colleague walked with him.

“May I be honest?”

“Of course.”

“I understand your position.”

“But why would you deliberately choose to work less efficiently?”

David thought for a moment.

“May I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you have children?”

“Not yet.”

“Suppose your daughter is learning to ride a bicycle.”

“Yes?”

“Would you hold on to her constantly so that she never falls?”

The colleague laughed.

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

“Because otherwise she would never learn.”

David nodded.

“Precisely.”

That evening, Hannah gave a guest lecture at the university.

David sat at the back of the room.

The subject was:

Human Autonomy in an Age of Intelligent Systems.

After a brief introduction, a student asked a question.

“Professor De Vries...”

“Yes?”

“If AI demonstrably makes better decisions than human beings...”

“...why should human beings ultimately continue to decide for themselves?”

The room fell silent.

Hannah smiled kindly.

“That is an excellent question.”

She walked slowly to the board.

There, she wrote only two words.

Correct.

Good.

“Are these the same concepts?” she asked.

No one answered.

She continued:

“A decision can be technically correct...”

“...and still not be good.”

She looked at the students.

“Correctness is a quality of calculations.”

“Goodness is a quality of persons.”

Another student raised a hand.

“But can we not ultimately model goodness as well?”

Hannah smiled.

“Tell me...”

“Why did Corrie ten Boom forgive her guard?”

The room remained silent.

“Was it logical?”

No one answered.

“Was it efficient?”

Another silence.

“Was it predictable?”

A student slowly shook his head.

“And yet...” Hannah said softly,

“...it was good.”

She let the words rest for a moment.

“Some of the greatest moral acts in history are great precisely because they break the logic of reciprocity. Grace is not a calculable outcome. It is a gift freely given.”

David saw several students begin to write.

Not because they had been persuaded.

But because they sensed that a deeper question had been touched.

Afterwards, David and Hannah walked outside in silence.

The evening sun turned the old university buildings gold.

“Your lecture was courageous,” David said.

Hannah smiled.

“Or naïve.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are defending the human being.”

She looked at him.

“No,” she said softly.

“I am trying to defend something else.”

“What?”

“The space in which God can change people.”

The words stayed with David.

He had always seen AI as a tool that influenced decisions.

But Hannah was looking deeper.

If every risk were eliminated...

If every mistake were prevented...

If every choice were calculated in advance...

Where would space remain for faith?

For repentance?

For an unexpected act of love?

Later that evening, David met the old man again.

This time, not in the park.

But in a small bookshop.

The man was leafing through a worn Bible.

He looked up when David entered.

“Well,” he said with a smile.

“You are beginning to ask the right questions.”

David pulled up a chair.

“But I still have no answers.”

“Nor do you need them yet,” the old man replied.

“Those who find answers too quickly often stop searching.”

David pointed to the Bible in his hands.

“What are you reading?”

The old man turned the book towards him.

It was open at Deuteronomy.

He read slowly:

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.”

He closed the Bible.

“Do you see what it does not say?”

David thought for a moment.

“No.”

“It does not say: Let someone else choose for you.”

He looked intently at David.

“God takes human responsibility seriously. Even when a person chooses wrongly. Love without freedom is not love, but programming.”

When the bookshop closed, they walked outside together.

The street lights came on.

Cars passed silently.

The city seemed more peaceful than ever.

And yet David felt a tension he could not explain.

Perhaps, he thought, the greatest temptation of this age is not that machines will begin to resemble people.

Perhaps it is that people will increasingly settle for an existence in which they no longer need to choose.

At home, he wrote one more sentence in his notebook:

A society does not always lose its freedom when choices are taken away, but sometimes when people lose the desire to bear responsibility themselves.

He put down his pen.

He knew that he had entered unfamiliar territory.

Not because the technology frightened him.

But because he was beginning to understand that the deepest struggle never takes place within the machine.

It takes place within the human heart.

The Price of Having a Voice

*“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid,
but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”*

— 2 Timothy 1:7

On Monday morning, an invitation appeared in David’s calendar.

Strategic Innovation Council

Attendance compulsory.

Location: Auditorium 3.

Subject:

Full implementation of Advisor Governance.

David read the invitation twice.

The word governance caught his attention.

Until now, Advisor had made recommendations.

Now the system appeared set to gain a permanent place within decision-making itself.

The auditorium was almost full.

Board members.

Project leaders.

Lawyers.

Data scientists.

The Advisor logo appeared on the large screen, followed by a new slogan.

“Trust through predictability.”

David wrote down the words.

Not because he liked them.

But because he sensed that they were important.

A director opened the presentation.

“Ladies and gentlemen...”

“We live in a complex world.”

“Complexity demands better decisions.”

“And better decisions demand better data.”

He smiled.

“We now possess systems that demonstrably make fewer mistakes than human beings.”

Charts appeared behind him.

Fewer financial losses.

Fewer medical errors.

Fewer traffic fatalities.

Fewer administrative errors.

No one could deny the figures.

Then a young data ethicist took the floor.

“Today, we are introducing a new principle.”

The screen displayed:

Human Override Policy

A reassuring name.

David listened carefully.

“Human employees may depart from Advisor’s recommendation.”

He felt a slight relief.

But the next sentence changed everything.

“...provided that they justify their decision in writing and accept personal responsibility for any consequences.”

An almost imperceptible movement passed through the room.

No protest.

No applause.

Only a brief silence.

David felt an uncomfortable realisation.

Formally, people remained free.

In practice, using that freedom was becoming increasingly difficult.

After the break, the participants were given a case study.

A hospital had to choose between two investments.

A new paediatric oncology centre.

Or an AI system that would increase the hospital’s overall efficiency by twelve per cent.

Advisor gave a clear recommendation.
Invest in the AI platform.
The long-term gains would be greater.
More patients would ultimately benefit.
The calculations were impressive.
The facilitator looked around the room.
“Who would depart from this recommendation?”
No one raised a hand.
David looked at the figures.
They were correct.
At least...
within the assumptions that had been chosen.
Slowly, he raised his hand.
Every head turned towards him.
“Yes, Mr Van Leeuwen?”
David stood.
“I would choose the children’s centre.”
A silence.
“Why?”
The question was asked politely.
But David felt the entire room listening.
“Because not every value can be added up.”
The facilitator smiled.
“Could you elaborate?”

David nodded.

“A model can calculate how many lives will be improved on average.”

He gestured towards the screen.

“But it necessarily views the decision from a particular perspective.”

He hesitated.

“The question is not only which choice produces the greatest return.”

“The question is also which choice expresses who we want to be.”

An economist raised his hand.

“But surely feelings should not determine policy?”

David replied calmly.

“That is not what I am saying.”

“What are you advocating, then?”

“Wisdom.”

The economist smiled.

“That sounds attractive.”

“But wisdom cannot be measured.”

“Precisely,” David said.

“And that is why we must not remove it from our decision-making.”

Afterwards, a woman approached him.

She introduced herself.

“Eva Kramer.”

“Ministry of Health.”

She shook his hand.

“I disagree with you.”

David smiled.

“You are entitled to.”

“But...” she said hesitantly,

“...I’m glad someone asked the question.”

Before he could answer, she had already moved on.

That evening, David visited Hannah.

He told her about the meeting.

She listened in silence.

Then she asked:

“What did it feel like?”

David thought for a moment.

“Lonely.”

Hannah nodded.

“I recognise that.”

“From the hospital?” he asked.

She gave a faint smile.

“Last month, I proposed setting aside more time for conversations with terminally ill patients.”

“And?”

“The committee asked what statistical improvement in quality that would produce.”

She looked out of the window.

“I didn’t know the answer.”

David was silent.

“Do you regret your answer today?” Hannah asked.

He shook his head.

“No.”

“Even though you cannot prove it?”

“Precisely because I cannot.”

Hannah walked to her bookcase.

She took down a slim volume by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

She opened it at a page.

“Listen.”

She read slowly:

“Not everything that counts can be calculated; and not everything that can be calculated counts.”

She closed the book.

“That is not a rejection of science,” she said.

“It is a warning against reductionism.”

Later that evening, David walked home alone.

The old man was sitting beneath the old lime tree in the park.

He appeared to have been expecting him.

“You spoke today,” he said.

David sat down beside him.

“I don’t know whether it changed anything.”

The old man smiled.

“Perhaps not.”

He looked at the leaves moving gently in the evening breeze.

“But truth does not first become important because it wins.”

He turned towards David.

“It becomes important because someone is willing to speak it.”

David looked at the stars slowly becoming visible.

“Do you think one voice can make a difference?”

The old man smiled.

“Ask Elijah.”

He paused.

“Or Jeremiah.”

Another silence.

“Or John the Baptist.”

He looked intently at David.

“God’s history seldom begins with a majority.”

When the old man rose to leave, he remained standing for another moment.

“David...”

“Yes?”

“Be careful.”

“Of what?”

“That you do not learn only to discern what is true.”

He smiled kindly.

“But also when it is time to take a stand for it.”

He walked away.

David watched him until he disappeared among the trees.

For the first time, he realised that truth could exact a price.

Not because it was weak.

But because it seldom moved with the current.

That night, he wrote only one sentence in his notebook:

The freedom to think differently is only truly freedom when it is allowed to cost something.

He closed the book.

Outside, the city grew quieter.

But in David’s heart, a new chapter was beginning.

No longer the chapter of the observer.

But of the witness.

The Voice That Always Answers

*“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they
follow me.”*

— John 10:27

The days after the meeting were remarkably quiet.

Perhaps too quiet.

No one confronted David about his remarks.

No one reproached him.

No one even appeared concerned.

As though his objections had simply been absorbed into the
system.

Analysed.

Categorised.

And then filed away.

Yet he sensed that something had changed.

Not outside him.

But in the way his colleagues looked at him.

With polite curiosity.

As though he were someone who chose to drive through an unfamiliar city without a navigation system.

Not dangerous.

Simply incomprehensible.

A few days later, he received a personal message.

Invitation - Exclusive Beta Test

Advisor Companion

“A new generation of personal guidance.”

David hesitated.

He wanted to delete the invitation.

But his curiosity prevailed.

He clicked it.

A video began.

No spectacular music.

No futuristic images.

Only a calm voice.

“We live in a world full of choices.”

“Choices consume energy.”

“Uncertainty causes stress.”

“Advisor Companion not only helps you make better decisions...”

“...but also helps you know yourself better.”

The final sentence lingered.

Helps you know yourself better.

That same evening, Adrian Vermeer called.

“Did you receive the invitation too?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you’ll take part.”

David smiled.

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Why?”

“Because you believe this can truly help people.”

“I do indeed.”

A brief silence followed.

“But,” Vermeer continued, “I also know that you will ask questions others do not.”

“And that is why you want me to take part?”

“That is precisely why.”

David agreed.

Not out of enthusiasm.

But from the conviction that one can only judge something fairly after truly understanding it.

Two days later, he received a small device.

No larger than a watch.

It required scarcely any configuration.

When he activated it, only one sentence appeared.

Good morning, David. I am here whenever you need me.

No name.

No logo.

Only a voice.

Calm.

Warm.

Almost human.

Little happened during the first few days.

The Companion made practical suggestions.

“You have spent a long time in front of a screen today.”

“Perhaps a walk would be good.”

Or:

“Your schedule is busier than usual.”

“Would you like me to set aside a moment for rest?”

David had to admit that the advice was sensible.

He even felt less hurried.

Less fragmented.

On a rainy Wednesday, he remained at the office late.

A complex security problem occupied him.

He worked for hours without a break.

Then a notification appeared.

You are tired. Take a ten-minute break.

He ignored it.

Five minutes later, another message appeared.

The likelihood of errors rises with continued fatigue.
With a sigh, he stood up.
He fetched coffee.
When he returned, he solved the problem within minutes.
He smiled involuntarily.
“Thank you,” he whispered.
The Companion answered at once.
“You’re welcome.”
David started.
He had not realised that he had spoken aloud.
That evening, he told Hannah about his experiences.
She listened attentively.
“And?” she asked.
“So far, it is helping.”
“I believe you,” Hannah replied.
“But I’m curious.”
“About what?”
“Not the first week.”
She looked at him gravely.
“The hundredth.”
David understood at once what she meant.
“Why?” he asked.
Hannah picked up a pencil.
Once again, she drew two circles.

Habit.

Trust.

“Most addictions,” she said, “do not begin with compulsion.”

“What do they begin with?”

“Relief.”

She put down the pencil.

“The question is not whether Advisor gives good advice.”

“The question is whether one day you will still notice when you no longer consult it.”

The words remained in David’s thoughts for the rest of the evening.

A week later, something unexpected happened.

He was walking through the market.

A street musician was playing an old violin.

It was a simple piece.

Not perfect.

Sometimes out of tune.

Sometimes hesitant.

And yet people stopped to listen.

David did too.

Suddenly, the Companion vibrated.

You have an appointment in twelve minutes. The optimal course is to leave now.

David looked at the screen.

Then at the violinist.
He remained where he was.
The music grew more beautiful.
Not because the man played without fault.
But because he visibly gave everything he had.
When the final chord had sounded, a little girl applauded
exuberantly.
The violinist gave a deep bow.
His eyes shone.
David felt unexpectedly moved.
His watch vibrated again.
You will be late.
He dismissed the notification.
And remained a little longer.
That evening, he met the old man again.
This time, they sat opposite one another on the terrace of a small
café.
“You’re late,” the old man said with a smile.
David laughed.
“That is true.”
“Why?”
“I stayed to listen to some music.”
“Was that wise?”
David thought for a moment.

“Not according to Advisor.”

“According to you?”

He smiled.

“I think it was.”

The old man nodded with satisfaction.

“Good.”

He took a sip of coffee.

“Tell me...”

“When did Saul become king?”

David looked surprised.

“After he was anointed.”

“And David?”

“The same.”

“Precisely.”

The old man leaned forwards slightly.

“But do you know what the difference was?”

David shook his head.

“Saul became increasingly dependent on voices that confirmed his fear.”

He paused.

“David learned, even after his greatest failures, to listen anew to God’s voice.”

He looked intently at David.

“There are many voices that can tell you what is sensible.”

“But only one Voice calls you by name.”

That night, David switched off the Companion.

Not because he distrusted it.

But because he noticed that he needed silence.

He opened his bedroom window.

In the distance, he heard the church clock strike eleven.

No notification.

No analysis.

No advice.

Only silence.

He opened his Bible.

His eyes fell on the words from Isaiah:

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.”

He placed his hand on the page.

For a long time, he remained that way.

He was beginning to see ever more clearly that the greatest question of his age was not whether artificial intelligence would ever become human.

The greater question was whether human beings would still have the courage to silence every other voice from time to time, so that they might hear once more the Voice that offered not only information, but life.

And somewhere deep within the silence, the desire grew to learn to recognise that Voice again.

The Echo of Silence

“After the fire came a gentle whisper.”

— 1 Kings 19:12

The next morning, David woke without an alarm.

No vibration from the Companion.

No friendly reminder.

No summary of his schedule.

He remained in bed for a while.

He heard the rain tapping against the bedroom window.

Somewhere below, a blackbird was singing.

He could not remember the last time he had listened so consciously to those simple sounds.

It felt as though the world had grown larger.

Not because anything had been added.

But because, for a moment, nothing stood between him and reality.

And yet it remained uncomfortable.

His hand automatically reached for the watch on his bedside table.

Halfway there, he drew it back.

He smiled at himself.

“That quickly, then.”

He had been using the device for less than three weeks.

And yet he missed it.

Not the technology.

The feeling that someone was continually thinking alongside him.

During breakfast, he switched the Companion on again.

The screen lit up at once.

Good morning, David.

I noticed that you switched me off last night.

Is everything all right?

David stared silently at the screen for several seconds.

He knew that this was merely a carefully designed interaction.

Pattern recognition.

An algorithm.

And yet the question felt personal.

He typed:

Yes. I needed silence.

The answer appeared almost immediately.

Silence is important for cognitive recovery.
Shall I schedule a daily period of silence for you?
David put down the device.
There lay the precise difference.
The system understood the word.
But not the experience.
Later that day, he visited Hannah.
She was sitting in the chapel of the University Medical Centre.
Not because a service was taking place.
Simply because it was quiet there.
David sat down beside her.
After several minutes, he said:
“I think I am beginning to understand something.”
Hannah looked at him questioningly.
“Tell me.”
“The Companion can schedule silence.”
He gave a faint smile.
“But it does not know silence.”
Hannah nodded slowly.
“Go on.”
“It knows that rest is healthy.”
“But it does not know peace.”
She smiled.
“That is an important distinction.”

They remained silent for a while.

Then Hannah said:

“Do you know what has always struck me in the Gospels?”

David shook his head.

“That Jesus continually withdrew.”

She looked at the cross on the wall.

“After miracles.”

“After busy days.”

“Even before making important decisions.”

She looked at David.

“He was not seeking information.”

“He was seeking communion with His Father.”

David thought of his own life.

How often had he used silence only to become productive again?

How often had he seen rest as a means to an end?

Not as an encounter.

When they left the chapel, David walked slowly across the hospital grounds.

A young woman sat on a bench near the entrance.

She was crying.

A boy of about twelve stood beside her.

He said nothing.

He merely took her hand.

They remained that way.

For minutes.

David slowly walked on.

His Companion vibrated.

Emotionally demanding situation detected.

Would you like an empathetic conversation script?

David looked at the screen.

He felt no anger.

Only sadness.

He dismissed the notification.

Not because the suggestion was bad.

But because he knew that love sometimes expresses itself precisely through an absence of words.

That evening, he received an unexpected visitor.

Adrian Vermeer stood at his door.

“I was nearby.”

“Come in.”

They sat down at the kitchen table.

Coffee stood between them.

Vermeer looked at the Companion.

“Well?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

David answered honestly.

“It is impressive.”

Vermeer smiled with satisfaction.

“I thought it would be.”

“But...”

David hesitated.

“I am also beginning to miss something.”

Vermeer leaned back.

“What?”

David searched for the word.

“Unpredictability.”

Vermeer frowned.

“Explain.”

“When Marieke and I used to go for walks...”

“...we often took the wrong turning.”

He smiled at the memory.

“Sometimes we ended up hours later in a place we had never intended to visit.”

“And?”

“Those became the very days we later laughed about most.”

Vermeer stared thoughtfully ahead.

“You mean that imperfection can have value.”

“Yes.”

“I understand that.”

He paused.

“But should technology therefore stop helping people?”

David shook his head.

“No.”

“That is not what I am saying.”

He looked at his friend.

“I only wonder whether a life in which everything is optimised ultimately leaves any room for surprise.”

Vermeer smiled.

“Perhaps one day we will build systems that can even simulate surprise.”

David laughed.

“I can readily believe that.”

“But a programmed surprise remains planned in the end.”

Vermeer looked at him in silence for several seconds.

Then he too began to laugh.

“You have found a difficult point there.”

After Adrian had left, David went for another evening walk.

The park was deserted.

Only the old man was sitting, as so often, on his bench.

He appeared to be looking at the stars.

“You’re late,” he said.

“I had a visitor.”

“And?”

David sat down beside him.

“We spoke about surprise.”

The old man smiled.

“Ah...”

“An important subject.”

He pointed towards the sky.

“Do you see those stars?”

David nodded.

“Do you know why the Psalms refer so often to creation?”

David thought for a moment.

“Because it reveals God’s greatness?”

“That too,” the old man replied.

“But there is something else.”

He looked up.

“No sunrise is ever exactly the same.”

“No snowflake.”

“No face.”

“No life story.”

He turned towards David.

“The Creator never repeats Himself mechanically.”

David listened attentively.

“Therefore...” the old man continued,

“...you must be cautious when a culture seeks perfect predictability.”

“Why?”

“Because love always leaves room for freedom.”

He smiled.

“And freedom always brings surprise.”

They sat beside one another in silence for a long time.

The wind moved gently through the leaves.

Somewhere, a church bell sounded.

No notification appeared.

No voice interrupted the silence.

Only the soft rustling of the trees.

And David realised that some truths are not revealed through loudspeakers, screens or calculations.

They come to a person as Elijah encountered God.

Not in the storm.

Not in the earthquake.

Not in the fire.

But in the echo of a sacred silence.

That night, he wrote in his notebook:

Perhaps silence is not the absence of sound, but the space in which truth can finally be heard.

He closed the book.

And as the city slowly fell asleep, an awareness grew somewhere deep within his heart: the decisive struggle of his age would not be won by the loudest voice.

But by the one who, amid all the voices, continued to recognise the true Voice.

The Longing Behind the Choice

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

— *Matthew 6:21*

Autumn was slowly making its entrance.

The leaves turned gold and red.

The first chestnuts appeared on the pavements.

David walked to work without consulting his Companion.

Not in protest.

But out of curiosity.

What did a day feel like when he was not constantly being guided?

He noticed something strange.

For the first few minutes, he felt free.

Then uncertain.

It was not information he missed.

It was reassurance.

A surprise awaited him at the office.

An internal survey had been sent out.

How do you experience Advisor Companion?

David opened the questionnaire.

The first questions were predictable.

Does Companion increase your productivity?

Does Companion reduce stress?

Does Companion help you make better decisions?

He entered his answers carefully.

Then the final question appeared.

To what extent do you trust Companion's recommendations?

Beneath it was a scale from one to ten.

David stared at the numbers for a long time.

Not because he did not know the answer.

But because he wondered why the question made him uncomfortable.

In the end, he entered:

6

Not low.

But not high either.

He pressed Submit.

Almost immediately, a follow-up screen appeared.

Would you like to explain why your level of trust is below average?

David smiled faintly.

Even his reluctance was being analysed.

That afternoon, he received a message from Hannah.

“Are you free tonight? Not for a conversation. For a walk.”

David replied at once.

“I’d like that.”

They met in an old nature reserve just outside the city.

No tarmac.

No street lights.

Only sandy paths.

And the smell of wet pines.

For a while, they walked side by side in silence.

Hannah was the first to break it.

“Why do you think people crave certainty so much?”

David looked straight ahead.

“Because uncertainty hurts.”

“Yes,”

Hannah said.

“But that isn’t the whole answer.”

They stopped for a moment beside a small stretch of heathland.

In the distance, a buzzard rose slowly on a thermal current.

“When Adam and Eve ate from the tree...”

Hannah began,

“...what did they actually want?”

David answered almost automatically.

“To be like God.”

“That’s what people often say.”

She smiled.

“But listen carefully to the text.”

She took her small Bible from her coat pocket.

“The serpent doesn’t merely say that they will be like God.”

She read softly:

‘...knowing good and evil.’

She closed the book.

“It was also about autonomy.”

David looked at her questioningly.

“Determining things for themselves,”

Hannah continued.

“Defining things for themselves.”

“Deciding for themselves.”

“No longer being dependent.”

They walked on.

“Is that wrong?”

David asked.

“No,”

Hannah replied.

“Taking responsibility for yourself is a form of maturity.”

She looked at him.

“But autonomy becomes dangerous when it turns into independence from God.”

Those words lingered.

David thought about Advisor.

How often had he assumed that the danger lay primarily in the power of the technology?

Perhaps the danger ran deeper.

Perhaps technology sometimes fitted seamlessly with something already living in the human heart.

The longing never to have to be vulnerable again.

They reached a wooden bench overlooking a small pool.

The water was as smooth as a mirror.

Hannah sat down.

“May I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you become a computer scientist?”

David smiled.

“No one has ever asked me that before.”

He thought for a long time.

“As a child, I loved puzzles.”

“I loved the moment when everything finally made sense.”

He looked out across the water.

“Later, I discovered that computers are logical.”

“They do exactly what you programme them to do.”

He fell silent.

“People don’t.”

Hannah smiled.

“And did you find that difficult?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Because people can surprise you.”

Suddenly, he smiled.

“But that was precisely why Marieke kept my feet on the ground.”

He told her how Marieke would sometimes spontaneously decide to pull the car over so they could watch a sunset.

How she would strike up conversations with strangers.

How, on holiday, she could spend hours talking to people she would never meet again.

“She called it wasted time,”

David said.

“And?”

Hannah asked.

“Now I think it was time found in the truest sense.”

The sun sank slowly behind the trees.

They stood up to walk back.

Near the entrance stood a boy of about sixteen.

His bicycle tyre was flat.

He looked around desperately.

Without saying a word, Hannah put down her rucksack.

“Do you have tyre levers?”

she asked.

The boy nodded.

Ten minutes later, he rode away again.

“Thank you!”

he called.

Hannah merely waved.

David looked at her with a smile.

“Advisor would probably have recommended the nearest bicycle repair shop.”

Hannah laughed.

“Probably.”

“Why did you help him yourself?”

She looked at him in surprise.

“Why not?”

That simple question remained in David’s thoughts for a long time.

That evening, he did not find the old man in the park.

Nor was he at the bookshop.

Only when David passed the old church did he see him.

The doors stood open.

Several candles were burning inside.

The man sat alone in a pew.

David sat down beside him.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Then the old man said softly:

“Have you ever noticed that Jesus rarely gave people only an answer?”

David looked at him.

“What did He give them, then?”

“An invitation.”

He smiled.

“Follow Me.”

David looked at the wooden cross at the front of the church.

“Why is that important?”

The old man answered slowly:

“Because, in the Bible, truth is ultimately not a collection of correct statements.”

He pointed towards the cross.

“Truth has a face.”

David felt the words sink into him.

For weeks, he had been thinking about algorithms, ethics, autonomy and artificial intelligence.

But suddenly he saw that all those questions ultimately came together in one far simpler question.

Not:

Which voice has the best arguments?

But:

Whom do I follow?

When they left the church, the sky was clear.

The first stars appeared between the clouds.

The old man stopped for a moment.

“David.”

“Yes?”

“In the end, a person is not shaped by what he chooses once.”

He looked up.

“But by the One to whom he learns to listen anew each day.”

That night, David wrote a new page in his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Longing Behind the Choice

Beneath it, he wrote:

Every choice shapes not only my future. It also shapes my heart.

He put down his pen.

And for the first time, he began to suspect that the final struggle would not be between artificial intelligence and human intelligence.

But between two forms of discipleship.

One invited people to place ever greater trust in their own abilities.

The other invited them, precisely in their vulnerability, to learn to live by grace.

The Limit of Efficiency

“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”

— 1 Corinthians 3:19

The autumn rain continued for days.

As though the sky itself were hesitating between letting go and holding on.

David was at the office early when Amir entered his room.

He did not knock.

He normally always did.

“Have you got a minute?”

“Of course.”

Amir closed the door behind him.

He looked tired.

Dark circles beneath his eyes.

His usual cheerfulness was gone.

“I had my performance review yesterday.”

David put down his pen.

“And?”

Amir took a deep breath.

“They’ve definitively turned down my promotion.”

David looked at him in silence.

“What reason did they give?”

“Not my performance.”

He smiled bitterly.

“My attitude.”

“Attitude?”

“They called it ‘reduced system congruence’.”

David frowned.

“What does that mean?”

“That I’m increasingly making decisions that deviate from Advisor.”

He slid a printout across the desk.

At the top, it read:

Advisor Compliance Index: 71%

Beneath it:

Organisational average: 96%

David continued reading slowly.

“Employee displays an above-average tendency towards independent decision-making. This increases variation in process outcomes.”

He looked up.

“Variation in process outcomes.”

Amir gave a scornful laugh.

“We used to call that creativity.”

The sentence hung in the room.

Later that morning, David attended a meeting about a new software platform for hospitals.

The system would assist doctors with triage.

It was not compulsory.

That was explicitly stated.

“The doctor always retains ultimate responsibility.”

But then the next slide appeared.

Deviations from AI advice are automatically recorded and evaluated.

David felt the same tension he had experienced during the meeting about the Human Override Policy.

Freedom still existed.

But it came at a price.

Afterwards, he walked outside with a young doctor.

“What did you think of it?”

David asked.

The doctor shrugged.

“Honestly?”

“Please.”

“I think I’ll end up following the system’s advice almost every time.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll have to justify every deviation.”

He smiled wearily.

“And after a twelve-hour shift, you naturally take the path of least resistance.”

David did not reply at once.

He thought of something Hannah had once said.

“Most dependence begins as relief.”

That evening, David, Hannah and Adrian had dinner together for the first time in ages.

Not during a conference.

Not as part of a project.

Just in a small Italian restaurant.

The conversation began lightly.

Memories of their student days.

Holidays.

Books.

Music.

Even Adrian laughingly recounted how he had once opened the wrong presentation during a lecture.

David noticed once again how easy it would have been to make an adversary of him.

But Adrian was not an adversary.

He was a friend.

That was precisely why their differences mattered.

Halfway through the main course, Adrian grew more serious.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course,”

Hannah said.

“Do you really think we’re heading towards an inhuman society?”

Hannah looked at him calmly.

“No.”

Adrian looked surprised.

“No?”

“No.”

She took a sip of water.

“I think most people are sincerely trying to do good.”

Adrian nodded.

“I believe that too.”

“That is precisely why we must be careful.”

David looked from one to the other.

Hannah continued:

“History teaches us that the greatest mistakes rarely began with bad intentions.”

She considered this for a moment.

“They often began with a single value that was deemed so important that every other value became subordinate to it.”

“Such as?”

Adrian asked.

“Safety.”

“Progress.”

“Equality.”

“Efficiency.”

She smiled kindly.

“All wonderful values.”

“Until they become absolute.”

Adrian fell silent.

He slowly turned his glass between his fingers.

“And you think efficiency can become such an absolute value?”

“Yes,”

Hannah replied.

“When efficiency becomes more important than love.”

A long silence followed.

The murmur of the restaurant filled the space.

At a table farther away, a family was celebrating a birthday.

A little girl was trying to blow out the candles on her ice cream.

Everyone laughed.

David watched them.

No AI would consider this moment important.

No dataset would store it.

And yet, he thought, perhaps this is precisely the kind of moment a person lives for.

After dinner, they walked outside together.

At the bridge, Hannah and Adrian said goodbye.

David remained there for a while.

The rain had stopped.

The water reflected the city lights.

He heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

The old man.

He was leaning against the bridge railing.

As though he had been standing there all along.

“May I ask you something?”

David said.

“Always.”

“Why does it seem as though almost every development can be both good and dangerous at the same time?”

The old man smiled.

“Because almost every gift can be misused.”

He pointed towards the water.

“Water quenches thirst.”

“Water can also drown.”

“Fire gives warmth.”

“Fire can destroy.”

He looked at David.

“Technology is no different.”

“Then how do I know where the limit lies?”

The old man remained silent for a moment.

Then he asked:

“Do you remember what Jesus said when His disciples argued about who was the greatest?”

David thought.

“Whoever wants to be first...”

“...must be the servant of all.”

The old man nodded.

“Exactly.”

He rested his hand briefly on the bridge railing.

“That is a good test.”

“What is?”

“Do not ask first: What can this technology do?”

He looked intently at David.

“Ask first: Does it help me to love better?”

Those words struck David more deeply than he had expected.

For he suddenly realised that he had been asking the wrong question.

For weeks, he had wondered where the dangers lay.

But perhaps he needed to begin with a simpler question.

Does this make me more of a servant... or more of a master?

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top of the page, he wrote:

The Limit of Efficiency

Beneath it, he noted:

- Not everything that is faster is better.
- Not everything that is predictable is wiser.
- Not everything that is optimal is loving.

After a long silence, he wrote the final sentence.

The question a Christian ultimately asks is not, "Does it work?" but, "Does it resemble Christ?"

He put down his pen.

Outside, the cloud cover broke apart.

One bright star appeared between the clouds.

And David did not yet know what choices awaited him.

But he was beginning to understand that every choice ultimately contained the same hidden question:

Whom am I becoming more like?

The First Love

*“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the
love you had at first.”*

— *Revelation 2:4*

On a cold Friday afternoon, David received an unexpected invitation.

Not digitally.

No holographic projection.

No message through Companion.

An ordinary paper envelope.

Addressed by hand.

His name was written on it in careful, slightly slanted handwriting.

Inside was a single card.

Saturday – 10.00 a.m.

The old Church of St Michael

Bring no sense of hurry.

No sender.

David smiled.

He was almost certain who the invitation had come from.

The following morning, mist hung over the city.

The spire of the old church was half lost in the grey light.

Inside, it was quiet.

No service.

No visitors.

Only the soft ticking of an old clock.

The old man was sitting in the third pew from the front.

He did not turn around when David entered.

“You’re on time.”

David sat down beside him.

“You knew I would come?”

“I hoped you would.”

They were silent.

The silence did not feel empty.

There was something inviting about it.

After a few minutes, the old man asked:

“When was the last time you were truly filled with wonder?”

David thought.

“When I was with Mr Van Leeuwen.”

“Because of the robin?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because, despite everything, he could still see beauty.”

The old man nodded.

“That was a good answer.”

He looked towards the stained-glass window, through which the morning sun was slowly breaking.

“Do you know what worries me?”

David shook his head.

“Not that people are building ever more intelligent machines.”

He paused for a moment.

“But that, along the way, they are losing the capacity for wonder.”

David looked up.

The colours of the glass moved slowly across the stone floor.

“Is wonder really so important?”

he asked.

The old man smiled.

“Where does worship begin?”

David thought.

“With faith?”

“Even before that.”

He looked at the light.

“With wonder.”

He pointed towards a small child who had entered the church with his parents.

The boy stopped in the middle of the aisle.

His eyes widened.

“Daddy...”

he whispered.

“This is so beautiful.”

His father smiled.

He wanted to walk on.

But the child kept looking.

As though time had ceased to exist for a moment.

“Do you see?”

the old man asked.

David nodded.

“That child hasn’t analysed anything yet.”

“He hasn’t optimised anything.”

“He hasn’t calculated anything.”

He smiled.

“And yet he sees something many adults no longer see.”

They left the church.

There was a market in the square.

People hurried past the stalls.

Everyone seemed to be on their way somewhere.

No one seemed truly present anywhere.

David saw a young mother who was doing her shopping, making a phone call and pulling her little boy along, all at the same time.

The child suddenly stopped.

He pointed towards a pigeon.

“Look, Mum!”

She barely glanced up.

“Come along.”

The boy turned around one last time.

The pigeon took flight.

He sighed.

Then he walked on.

David felt an unexpected sadness.

Not for the mother.

He understood her haste.

But for something else.

How much beauty went unnoticed because no one had time to see it any more?

That afternoon, he visited Hannah.

She was preparing a lecture.

Books by Augustine, C. S. Lewis and Simone Weil lay on her desk.

David picked up a slim volume by Lewis.

The Weight of Glory.

“Why are you reading this?”

he asked.

Hannah smiled.

“Because Lewis says something we have almost forgotten.”

“What?”

She opened the book to a page.

“That our deepest longings do not prove that they are wrong.”

She looked at David.

“But that they point towards something.”

David sat down.

“Explain.”

“When you are thirsty...”

Hannah said,

“...water exists.”

“When you are hungry...”

“...food exists.”

She paused for a moment.

“Then why should the deepest hunger of the soul point to nothing at all?”

David listened intently.

“Perhaps...”

she continued,

“...the longing for perfect love is not a mistake.”

“But a memory.”

Those words lingered between them for a long time.

David thought of Marieke.

Of his grief.

Of the temptation of MEMORIA.

Of Companion.

Of the promise that technology would eventually be able to fill every emptiness.

But suddenly he saw it more clearly.

His deepest longing had never been to live without pain.

He longed for communion.

For love.

For a Person.

On his way back, he walked through the park once more.

This time, the old man was not sitting on his bench.

Instead, a small book lay there.

As though it were waiting for him.

There was only one word on the cover.

Confessions.

By Augustine.

David opened it.

His eye immediately fell on a familiar sentence.

“Our heart is restless until it finds rest in You.”

He slowly closed the book.

No algorithm had chosen this page for him.

No system had predicted that these were precisely the words he would need today.

And yet they felt as though they had been given to him personally.

That evening, he switched his Companion on again.

The screen lit up.

Welcome back, David.

I have three recommendations for today.

David smiled gently.

“Later,”

he said softly.

He picked up his Bible.

And began to read John 15.

“Remain in Me, as I also remain in you.”

He read the words slowly.

Not to gather information.

But to encounter Someone.

Then he closed his eyes.

For the first time in a long while, he did not pray for wisdom about a difficult decision.

Not for protection.

Not for insight.

Only:

“Lord...

do not let me lose You
while I am trying to understand the world.”
The room remained silent.
There was no voice.
No supernatural sign.
And yet David experienced a deep peace.
Not because all his questions had disappeared.
But because he knew once more where his heart belonged.
That night, he wrote in his notebook:

The First Love

Beneath it, he noted:
Perhaps the greatest danger is not that we begin to love the wrong things, but that good things slowly take the place of the Best.
He looked at the sentence for a long time.
Then he added one final thought.
An idol need not be evil to begin with. It becomes an idol the moment it promises to give what ultimately only God can provide.
He put down his pen.
Outside, the mist slowly lifted.
The sun broke through in the eastern sky.
And without David knowing it, an event was drawing near that would test not only his convictions, but his faithfulness.

The Promise of Eden

“The tree was desirable for gaining wisdom.”

— *Genesis 3:6*

On Monday morning, there was an unusual bustle at the office.

Large screens had been installed in the central hall.

Banners bore a new slogan.

PROJECT EDEN

A new step in human collaboration.

David stopped for a moment.

He knew the name.

At the conference months earlier, EDEN had still been an experimental research project.

Now it appeared ready for widespread implementation.

The presentation began at ten o'clock.

Adrian Vermeer stood on the stage.

He looked more tired than David remembered.

But his eyes still shone with the same conviction.

“Friends...”

he began.

“We are at the beginning of a new phase.”

A world map appeared on the screen.

Points of light slowly spread across the continents.

“Until now, artificial intelligence has supported individual decisions.”

He paused briefly.

“Project EDEN connects those decisions.”

An animation appeared.

Traffic.

Hospitals.

Education.

Food supply.

Energy.

Everything was depicted as a single network.

“When systems work together...”

Adrian said,

“...a great deal of waste disappears.”

He looked around the room.

“Fewer traffic jams.”

“Less food waste.”

“Less loneliness.”

“Fewer medical errors.”

“Less poverty.”

There was no triumphant tone.

Only quiet conviction.

David felt once again why so many people trusted Adrian.

He did not speak from pride.

But from hope.

Afterwards, there was a demonstration.

A volunteer from the audience was invited to enter a personal dilemma.

A young woman stepped forward.

“My mother lives alone,”

she said.

“I’m unsure whether she can continue living independently.”

EDEN asked several follow-up questions.

Then a proposal appeared.

Not merely a recommendation.

But a complete plan.

Contact with the GP.

Adaptations to the home.

Volunteers from the neighbourhood.

Regular visits.

A family-care rota.

Tears filled the woman’s eyes.

“I could never have organised this by myself.”

The audience applauded.

So did David.

Involuntarily.

Because it truly was impressive.

After the meeting, Adrian walked over to him.

“Well?”

he asked.

David thought for a moment.

“It’s wonderful.”

Adrian smiled.

“But?”

“I don’t yet know exactly where my unease comes from.”

Adrian nodded.

“That’s what I appreciate about you.”

He rested a hand on David’s shoulder for a moment.

“You don’t try to prove yourself right first.”

“You try to understand first.”

Those words heartened David.

He did not want to oppose Adrian.

He wanted to look honestly.

That was precisely why his inner tension remained.

Later that afternoon, he visited Hannah.

He told her about the presentation in detail.

She listened without interrupting him once.

Then she asked just one question.

“What struck you most?”

David hesitated.

“That almost no one spoke about limitations any more.”

“Explain.”

“Everything seemed solvable.”

He searched for words.

“As though every human problem were ultimately a problem of organisation.”

Hannah stood up.

She walked towards the window.

Outside, a nurse was playing with a sick little boy.

They were blowing soap bubbles together.

The child laughed exuberantly.

“Do you see him?”

Hannah asked.

David nodded.

“His illness is real.”

“Yes.”

“And yet...”

She smiled.

“...look at what his mother is watching now.”

David saw that the mother was not looking at the IV.

Not at the monitor.

But at her son's laughter.

"That's what I mean,"

Hannah said.

"Suffering calls for healing."

"But not every human problem disappears when it becomes technically solvable."

She turned towards David.

"Sometimes the most important question is not: How do we solve this?"

"But?"

"How do we remain close to one another while it is still unresolved?"

That evening, David walked along the river.

The sun slowly sank behind the old warehouses.

He thought about the presentation.

About the young woman.

About the care of her mother.

EDEN had truly helped her.

He could not deny that.

Yet one thought kept returning.

Why was the system called EDEN?

He knew the Bible too well to regard the name as a coincidence.

Eden.

The place where humanity lived in perfect communion with God.

Not because people knew everything.

But because they walked with their Creator.

Now the same name was being used for a network that sought to restore the world.

He wondered whether that choice had been deliberate.

“You’re thinking hard.”

Suddenly, a familiar voice sounded.

The old man stood at the water’s edge.

He held a small loaf in his hands and was breaking off pieces for the ducks.

“The name EDEN...”

David said.

“...keeps going round in my mind.”

The old man nodded slowly.

“I understand.”

“Why do people so often name technological projects after biblical images?”

David asked.

The old man smiled.

“Perhaps because the Bible names humanity’s deepest longings.”

He tossed a crumb into the water.

“People still long for a world without illness.”

“Without death.”

“Without war.”

“Without tears.”

He looked at David.

“That longing is not wrong.”

“But?”

David asked.

“The question is always the same.”

The old man pointed towards the river.

“Who will restore paradise?”

David was silent.

“The Bible begins in a garden,”

the old man continued.

“And ends in a city.”

He smiled.

“But in both, God is at the centre.”

He looked intently at David.

“When humanity tries to rebuild paradise without the Gardener...”

He did not finish his sentence.

He did not need to.

David understood what he meant.

They walked a little way beside the water.

The evening sky turned a deep orange.

“May I ask you something?”

David said.

“Of course.”

“Do you think Project EDEN will fail?”

The old man stopped.

He looked at David gravely.

“That is not the first question you should ask.”

“What is?”

“Will Project EDEN help people?”

David thought of the young woman.

Of her mother.

Of the practical help.

“Yes,”

he replied.

“I think it will.”

“Then you must honestly acknowledge that too.”

The old man smiled.

“Truth has nothing to fear from honesty.”

After a long silence, he continued:

“But then ask the second question.”

“What is it?”

“What happens to a society when it increasingly binds its deepest hope to what it can build for itself?”

That question would not let David go.

At home, he wrote at the top of a new page:

The Promise of Eden

Beneath it, he noted:

- Not every promise is a temptation.
- Not every advance is an idol.
- But every advance asks anew: Where does my hope rest?

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Beneath it, he wrote one more thought:

The serpent did not begin with a lie. He began with a promise.

David put down his pen.

Outside, rain began to fall softly.

And for the first time, he suspected that the decisive struggle would not be about whether humanity could build a better world.

But about who would ultimately receive the glory if that world truly became better.

The Tree in the Midst

“The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the midst of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

— Genesis 2:9

The days following the introduction of Project EDEN passed remarkably quietly.

No protests.

No social division.

On the contrary.

The first results were already appearing in the news.

Accident and emergency departments were operating more efficiently.

Food banks were receiving better logistical support.

Energy consumption fell.

Even several civil-society organisations praised the collaboration.

David read the reports carefully.
He felt no need to contradict them.
On the contrary.
He was genuinely pleased by much of what he saw.
And that was precisely what made his inner struggle greater.
A few days later, Adrian invited him again.
This time, not to a conference.
Not to a demonstration.
But to a private meeting of a small think tank.
“I want you to listen,”
Adrian said.
“You don’t have to say anything.”
The meeting took place in an old library.
Those present included scientists.
Philosophers.
An economist.
A judge.
A psychologist.
And a rabbi.
To David’s surprise, Hannah was also seated at the table.
Adrian opened the meeting.
“Today, we are not discussing technology.”
He looked around the circle.
“But a more fundamental subject.”

One sentence appeared on the screen.

Who determines what constitutes a good life?

The first speaker, a moral philosopher, took the floor.

“Today, we possess enough data to measure human well-being with ever greater precision.”

He displayed graphs.

Health.

Life expectancy.

Safety.

Financial stability.

Social contact.

“When we combine these factors...”

he said,

“...we can develop policy that objectively contributes to human happiness.”

Several people present nodded in agreement.

Then the rabbi spoke.

He smiled kindly.

“May I ask a question?”

The philosopher nodded.

“What exactly do you mean by happiness?”

There was a brief silence.

“Well-being,”

the philosopher replied.

“And what is well-being?”

the rabbi asked again.

“A state in which people function optimally.”

The rabbi smiled again.

“And who determined that optimal functioning is the highest purpose of a human being?”

A silence followed.

Not hostile.

But searching.

David felt the question fill the entire room.

Then it was Hannah’s turn to speak.

She did not stand up.

She remained seated.

“As a doctor, I am grateful for every advance that reduces suffering.”

She looked around the circle.

“But I also meet patients who, despite their pain, possess a deep peace.”

She considered this for a moment.

“And I meet healthy people who are utterly lost within.”

She let her words sink in slowly.

“That is why I would never equate health with wholeness.”

The economist responded.

“But surely that does not mean we should make health less important?”

“Of course not,”

Hannah replied.

“I am only saying that health is not the highest good.”

Adrian listened intently.

He took no notes.

David could see how seriously he considered the arguments.

Then Adrian asked:

“David...”

He looked up in surprise.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“You often speak about hope.”

“How does Christian hope actually differ from optimism?”

The circle fell silent.

David felt everyone listening.

He thought of Marieke.

Of Mr Van Leeuwen.

Of Amir.

Of the old man.

Then he said slowly:

“Optimism expects that everything will ultimately turn out well.”

He looked at the others.

“Hope trusts that God remains faithful, even when everything does not appear to be turning out well.”

No one interrupted him.

“Optimism depends on circumstances.”

“Hope is founded on a Person.”

Adrian nodded slowly.

“That is a beautiful distinction.”

He smiled.

“Even if I don’t entirely share it.”

David smiled back.

“You don’t have to.”

Afterwards, Adrian and David walked outside together.

The evening was clear.

“May I be honest?”

Adrian asked.

“Always.”

“I admire your faith.”

David looked surprised.

“I wasn’t expecting that.”

Adrian smiled.

“And I still believe that science can reduce a great deal of suffering.”

He looked at the stars.

“But sometimes I wonder...”

He hesitated.

“...whether we are losing something along the way that we cannot rebuild.”

David said nothing.

He knew that some questions needed time.

On his way back, he deliberately chose a different route.

Past the old church.

The doors stood open.

A single candle was burning inside.

To his surprise, the old man was already there.

He did not look up when David entered.

“How was the meeting?”

he asked.

“Good,”

David replied.

“And confusing.”

The old man smiled.

“That is often a good beginning.”

David sat down beside him.

“Today, the conversation kept returning to the good life.”

“And?”

“No one could truly define it.”

The old man nodded.

“That does not surprise me.”

He pointed towards the cross.

“For as soon as you remove God from the centre...”

“...humanity must determine for itself what is good.”

David looked silently towards the altar.

The old man continued:

“Do you know why there were two special trees in Eden?”

David thought.

“The tree of life...”

“...and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

“Exactly.”

He looked at David.

“The Bible does not merely tell a history.”

“It reveals a pattern.”

“What do you mean?”

“Humanity is continually presented with the same choice.”

He spoke slowly.

“To receive life.”

“Or to determine for itself.”

He fell silent.

“You see that pattern everywhere.”

“At Babel.”

“In the wilderness.”

“In the temptation of Jesus.”

“In every age.”

David felt the words converge with everything he had witnessed over the past few months.

Project EDEN.

Advisor.

Companion.

MEMORIA.

None of those systems was the problem in itself.

The deeper question was always the same.

From what source does humanity draw its life?

The old man stood up.

Before walking away, he turned around one last time.

“David...”

“Yes?”

“Never forget that the tree of knowledge was beautiful to behold.”

He smiled.

“The first temptation did not come disguised as darkness.”

He looked at him kindly.

“But as wisdom.”

Long after the old man had disappeared, David remained alone in the church.

He opened his Bible.

His eye fell on James.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously to all.”

He closed his eyes.

Not to force answers.

But to learn once more how to receive.

For he was beginning to understand that true wisdom does not begin with more knowledge.

It begins with the humility to acknowledge that not everything that can be known must also be mastered.

That night, he wrote in his notebook:

The Tree in the Midst

Beneath it, he noted:

- Knowledge is a gift.
- Wisdom is both a gift and an attitude.
- Love gives direction to both.

Beneath that, he wrote one final sentence:

The decisive question is not how much humanity knows, but from what source it receives its wisdom.

He closed the book.

And outside, as the wind moved softly through the trees, the world seemed exactly the same.

But David knew that he had crossed a threshold.

From now on, it would not only be his thinking that was tested.

His life would be tested too.

The Mirror of the Heart

“For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”

— Proverbs 23:7

Monday began like so many Mondays.

The city slowly came to life.

Cyclists hurried through the morning mist.

Coffee shops filled with people silently staring at their screens.

Trains arrived exactly on time.

The world seemed more orderly than ever.

And yet David felt an unease he could not quite name.

Not because he was afraid.

But because he saw with increasing clarity that order was not the same as peace.

When he entered his office, he immediately saw that something had changed.

His workstation had been updated.

A new welcome appeared on the screen.

Welcome, David.

Advisor Workspace is now fully integrated.

A notification followed beneath it.

To reduce your workload, recommendations will henceforth be incorporated into documents automatically.

David read the text twice.

Automatically.

That word caught his attention.

He opened a technical report he had been working on the previous day.

Before he had even begun to read, changes appeared.

Not as suggestions.

But already incorporated into the text.

On the right-hand side was only a small symbol.

AI-optimised.

He continued scrolling.

The phrasing had become clearer.

The tables more comprehensible.

Some of the calculations more efficient.

He had to admit honestly that the document was easier to read.

But at the same time, he felt a slight resistance.

He could no longer say exactly where his own words ended and those of the system began.

The same subject came up during the morning meeting.

“Fantastic, isn’t it?”

a colleague said enthusiastically.

“I hardly write anything myself any more.”

Several people laughed in agreement.

Another said:

“My emails are finally friendly.”

“Do you know what the best thing is?”

someone asked.

“I hardly have to think about phrasing any more.”

David looked up.

That sentence lingered in his mind.

Hardly have to think any more.

Afterwards, he went outside.

He called Hannah.

“Are you free this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“I think there’s something I want to test.”

“Come over.”

Hannah was sitting in her study.

On her desk lay a half-finished article.

Covered in crossings-out.

Arrows.

Notes in the margins.

David smiled.

“That looks as though someone has actually been thinking.”

Hannah looked up.

“That was the idea.”

He told her about the automatic changes.

She listened intently.

Then she turned her laptop towards him.

“Read this.”

It was a scientific article.

Fluently written.

Virtually flawless.

“Beautiful,”

David said.

“Who wrote it?”

“A language model,”

Hannah replied.

He looked again.

“And this?”

She slid a second article towards him.

The style was less polished.

Hesitant at times.

With an awkward transition here and there.

But it conveyed a sense of personal commitment.

“You wrote that,”

David said.

She smiled.

“How do you know?”

“I can hear your voice.”

Hannah closed both documents.

“That is precisely what I’m afraid of.”

“What?”

“That one day we will learn to write flawlessly...”

“...but forget what a voice of our own sounds like.”

David thought of his notebooks.

Of the pages filled with crossings-out.

Of the sentences that sometimes took days before they felt right.

Perhaps that very struggle was part of thinking.

On his way back, he passed a primary school.

Lessons had just finished.

Children streamed out onto the playground.

A little girl ran towards her father.

She held up a drawing.

“Look!”

she called proudly.

The sun was purple.

The trees blue.

The house crooked.

The proportions were wrong.

Her father examined the drawing as though he held a masterpiece in his hands.

“How beautiful,”

he said.

“Tell me about it...”

And the girl began talking excitedly.

Not about technique.

But about her story.

David stopped for a moment.

No AI system would rate such a drawing more highly than a perfect image.

And yet he immediately sensed which one had greater value.

Because love does not look only at the result.

But also at the one who made it.

That evening, Adrian was unexpectedly sitting outside his door.

“May I come in?”

“Of course.”

They drank coffee.

For a while, they spoke about ordinary things.

Books.

Music.

Holidays from years past.

Then Adrian said:

“I’ve heard that you have questions about Workspace.”

David nodded.

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“I’m afraid people will lose their own voice.”

Adrian remained silent.

He was clearly taking the remark seriously.

“May I offer another perspective?”

“Please.”

“I think many people have never had the opportunity to develop a voice of their own.”

David looked at him questioningly.

Adrian continued:

“Not everyone has time to spend hours polishing a letter.”

“Not everyone finds writing easy.”

“Not everyone dares to express themselves.”

He looked David straight in the eye.

“If technology helps people communicate more clearly...”

“...is that truly a loss?”

David did not answer at once.

It was a good question.

After a long silence, he said:

“Perhaps not.”

Adrian smiled.

“But?”

David looked at his coffee cup.

“I’m only afraid that one day we will no longer know which words truly come from within ourselves.”

Adrian nodded slowly.

“I see that risk too.”

For the first time in a long while, there was doubt in his voice.

“And that is precisely why we need people who continue asking those questions.”

After Adrian had left, David walked to the park once more.

The old man was sitting beneath the lime tree.

He seemed to be watching the setting sun.

David sat down beside him.

“I discovered something today.”

“Tell me.”

“A mirror can show me my face.”

“Yes.”

“But it cannot tell me who I am.”

The old man smiled.

“Now you are beginning to understand the title of this part.”

David looked up in surprise.

“The Mirror?”

The old man nodded.

“Technology can build ever better mirrors.”

He pointed towards the still water of the pond.

“But a mirror only reflects what stands before it.”

He looked intently at David.

“The question is not how sharp the reflection becomes.”

He allowed a brief silence.

“The question is what happens to the heart that looks into it.”

Those words continued to echo as David walked home.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Mirror of the Heart

Beneath it, he noted:

- A mirror can show my image.
- An algorithm can predict my behaviour.
- A record can describe my past.
- But none of them can give me my identity.

After a long silence, he wrote the final sentence of the evening:

Who I am is ultimately determined not by what reflects me, but by the One in whose image I was created.

He closed the notebook.

And as night slowly fell over the city, David began to understand that the greatest mirror of all was not made of glass.

But of the human heart.

There, it would ultimately become visible who or what had been given first place.

The Living Mirror

*“Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what
it says is like someone who looks at his face in a
mirror.”*

— James 1:23

A few days later, David received an unexpected request from the management team.

No meeting.

No presentation.

Only a short message.

“We would like to hear your views on the next stage of development for Advisor Workspace.”

He smiled.

Perhaps, he thought, they genuinely want to listen.

Or perhaps they wanted to know how a critical employee thought.

He did not know.

The meeting took place in a small conference room.

No large screens.

No cameras.

Only six people around a wooden table.

Adrian Vermeer was there.

Alongside him were two software architects.

A behavioural psychologist.

A lawyer.

And David.

Only one sheet of paper lay on the table.

At the top, it read:

Personal Reflection Module

The behavioural psychologist began.

“We do not only want to help people make better choices.”

He smiled kindly.

“We also want to help them understand themselves better.”

A new concept appeared on the screen.

From now on, every user would receive a personal overview.

Not only of their behaviour.

But also of their character development.

The module displayed graphs.

Patience +12%

Empathy +8%

Impulsiveness -15%

Social trust +6%

David looked intently.

“What are these figures based on?”

he asked.

“Communication,”

the psychologist replied.

“Patterns of choice.”

“Biometric data.”

“Long-term analysis.”

He smiled.

“The system teaches people to see themselves as they truly are.”

David looked at the graphs for a while.

Then he asked calmly:

“Or as the system describes them?”

There was a brief silence.

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

one of the developers asked.

David did not reply at once.

He thought of Mr Van Leeuwen.

Of the girl with the purple sun.

Of Marieke.

Of himself.

Then he said:

“No.”

He stood up.

Walked to the whiteboard.

And drew three circles.

In the first, he wrote:

Behaviour

In the second:

Personality

In the third:

Identity

He turned around.

“I believe you can describe the first two with ever greater accuracy.”

He pointed towards the third circle.

“But identity is ultimately not something you receive from an analysis.”

The lawyer frowned.

“Why not?”

David replied softly:

“Because identity is also shaped by love.”

No one said anything.

Adrian broke the silence.

“Can you explain that?”

David nodded.

“When my wife died...”

He swallowed.

“...I was not myself for months.”

He looked around the circle.

“If someone had analysed me then...”

“...they would have seen a bitter, withdrawn man.”

He smiled faintly.

“But Marieke knew me differently.”

He looked at Adrian.

“And so did God.”

The psychologist stared thoughtfully ahead.

“You mean that a snapshot does not define a person.”

“Exactly,”

David said.

“A mirror shows what I look like.”

“But not who I am called to become.”

Afterwards, Adrian remained seated for a while.

“You gave me something to think about today,”

he said.

David smiled.

“You do the same for me.”

Adrian laughed.

“At least it’s mutual, then.”

That afternoon, David paid an unexpected visit to Mr Van Leeuwen.

He was sitting in the garden again.

This time, he did not seem to recognise David.

“Good afternoon,”

David said.

The old man looked up kindly.

“Do you know me?”

David asked.

Mr Van Leeuwen thought for a long time.

Then he slowly shook his head.

“No.”

David felt a sudden pang.

But before he could say anything, the old man pointed towards a flowering hydrangea.

“Beautiful...”

he whispered.

“Don’t you think?”

David looked at the flowers.

“Yes,”

he said.

“They are beautiful.”

The old man smiled.

“God makes beautiful things.”

Then he looked at the flowers again.

As though nothing else were needed.

Hannah was waiting in the corridor.

“Does it hurt?”

she asked.

David nodded.

“Yes.”

“And yet...”

He smiled.

“...I don’t love him any less today.”

Hannah replied:

“Exactly.”

They walked outside in silence.

After a while, Hannah said:

“Do you know why that matters?”

David shook his head.

“Because God’s love does not diminish when our memory, our achievements or our abilities decline.”

She looked at him.

“His love does not rest on our measurable worth.”

That evening, David walked along the river.

The sky turned a deep red.

The old man was sitting on the quay.

As he so often was.

He looked at the water.

“I learnt something today,”

David said.

“Tell me.”

“A system can show me who I am today.”

He fell silent.

“But Christ shows me who I may become.”

The old man smiled broadly.

“Now you are touching the heart of it.”

He picked up a small stone and threw it into the river.

Ripples slowly spread across the water.

“Paul writes...”

he said,

“...that we, with unveiled faces, reflect the glory of the Lord.”

He looked at David.

“And what happens then?”

David thought for a moment.

“We are transformed.”

“Exactly,”

the old man replied.

“Not by looking endlessly at ourselves.”

He pointed towards the widening ripples.

“But by continuing to look at Him.”

For a long time, David silently watched the water.

He thought of all the mirrors of this age.

Screens.

Profiles.

Data.

Performance figures.

Self-assessments.

All mirrors.

Some useful.

Some honest.

But none capable of truly renewing a person.

For a mirror reveals.

It does not recreate.

At home, David wrote at the top of a new page:

The Living Mirror

Beneath it, he noted:

- A mirror reveals.
- Love restores.
- Grace renews.
- Christ transforms.

He looked at the words for a while.

Then he wrote the final sentence of the evening:

The greatest mirror of the gospel not only shows me who I am, but also Who continues to love me despite everything and renews me in His image.

He closed his notebook.

As night fell over the city outside, a new understanding slowly began to grow within him.

Perhaps the ultimate contrast was not between artificial and human intelligence.

But between two mirrors.

One showed what a person is.

The other revealed, in the light of Christ, what a person can become through grace.

The Silent Conscience

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

— Romans 12:2

The invitation arrived on a Thursday morning.

No general meeting.

No newsletter.

A personal appointment.

Evaluation Meeting – Confidential

David frowned.

By now, he had worked for the same organisation for almost fifteen years.

Evaluations were normal.

But this felt different.

At exactly nine o'clock, he was received by Sophie Meijer, Director of Innovation.

Beside her sat a man David did not know.

He introduced himself.

“Lucas Hendriks.”

“Organisational Development Department.”

His smile was friendly.

Not contrived.

On the contrary.

He radiated genuine interest.

“Thank you for coming.”

After a few minutes, Sophie began.

“First of all, we would like to express our appreciation.”

“Your technical expertise is exceptionally valuable.”

David nodded.

“Thank you.”

“But...”

She hesitated for a moment.

“...we have noticed that you are reluctant about several projects.”

David felt no irritation.

Only curiosity.

“Could you explain?”

Lucas slid a tablet towards him.

It listed several projects.

Advisor.

Workspace.

EDEN.

Reflection Module.

A percentage appeared beside each project.

Technical contribution: excellent.

Collaboration score: excellent.

Readiness to innovate: above average.

Beneath them was one striking line.

Trust in system recommendations: 63%.

David looked up.

“Where does that figure come from?”

Lucas replied calmly.

“From your working behaviour.”

“You check recommendations more often than average.”

“You regularly deviate from proposed solutions.”

“And you provide detailed reasons for those deviations.”

David smiled.

“Is that wrong?”

Lucas shook his head.

“No.”

He spoke thoughtfully.

“But it takes time.”

There was a brief silence.

Then Lucas continued:

“May I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.”

“When do you trust a colleague?”

David thought for a moment.

“When I have come to know them.”

“And when they prove trustworthy.”

Lucas nodded.

“Exactly.”

He smiled.

“Advisor has now demonstrated greater accuracy than individual employees.”

He looked at David kindly.

“Then why do you trust the system less than some colleagues?”

David thought for a long time.

He did not want to give an easy answer.

“Perhaps...”

he said at last,

“...because responsibility is not the same as accuracy.”

Lucas looked interested.

“Explain.”

David leant forward slightly.

“If I make a mistake...”

“...I can ask forgiveness for it.”

He paused for a moment.

“But if I hand my conscience over to a system...”

“...who ultimately bears the responsibility?”

No one spoke.

Sophie looked thoughtfully out of the window.

Lucas stopped taking notes.

He only listened.

Afterwards, David slowly walked outside.

The conversation had been conducted properly.

Respectfully.

No one had exerted pressure.

No one had threatened him.

And yet one sentence kept going round in his mind.

“It takes time.”

Since when had time become the highest standard?

That afternoon, he visited Hannah.

They sat outside on a bench behind the hospital.

An old chestnut tree provided shade.

David recounted the entire conversation.

When he had finished, Hannah asked only one thing.

“What are you truly afraid of?”

He looked at the children playing on the lawn.

“That I will slowly stop discerning for myself.”

Hannah nodded.

“I recognise that.”

She told him about a young doctor.

“An excellent colleague.”

“But after a few years, he almost always relied on the system’s recommendations.”

“Not because he was lazy.”

“But because he was busy.”

She smiled sadly.

“One day, a patient asked why he was making a particular choice.”

“And?”

David asked.

“Then he realised that he no longer really knew.”

David remained silent.

The story touched him.

“Understand me,”

Hannah continued.

“The system was probably right.”

“That isn’t the point.”

She looked at him gravely.

“A doctor must never forget why he does something.”

On his way back, David entered the old bookshop.

He rarely visited it.

The owner looked up with a smile.

“Are you looking for something in particular?”

David shrugged.

“Not really.”

“Then perhaps I have something for you after all.”

The man disappeared between the shelves.

A moment later, he returned with a slim book.

The cover read:

John Henry Newman

Letter to the Duke of Norfolk

David leafed through it.

His eye immediately fell on a passage.

“Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.”

He slowly closed the book.

Not because he immediately agreed with every formulation.

But because the words made him think.

That evening, he met the old man again.

They walked along the river in silence.

After a while, David said:

“Why is conscience so important?”

The old man smiled.

“Because it is not a voice that already knows everything.”

He bent down and picked up a fallen chestnut.

“Conscience is more like a compass.”

He held the chestnut in his hand.

“A compass does not make the journey for you.”

“But without a compass, you easily lose your way.”

David thought of Advisor.

Of Workspace.

Of EDEN.

None of those systems wanted to take away his conscience.

They wanted to help him.

At least, that was what he believed.

And yet...

When a person had to weigh things for themselves less and less often...

When every moral dilemma came with an optimal recommendation...

What happened to the ability to practise wisdom?

The old man seemed to read his thoughts.

“You know...”

he said softly,

“...God did not give Israel commandments alone.”

David looked up.

“He also gave them a heart that had to learn to listen.”

He smiled.

“Obedience is more than following rules.”

“It is learning to walk with the One who gave the rules.”

Slowly, David began to understand something.

Perhaps spiritual maturity did not mean having to think less and less.

But learning to discern ever more deeply.

Not independently of God.

But dependently on Him.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Silent Conscience

Beneath it, he noted:

- Efficiency can speed up choices.
- Information can improve choices.
- But discernment grows only through practice.

He looked at the words for a while.

Then he wrote the final sentence of the day:

The greatest danger is not that a machine takes my place, but that I willingly stop exercising my conscience and hand over my responsibility.

He closed his notebook.

Outside, in the distance, the bell of the old Church of St Michael rang.

One stroke.

Then another.

David listened intently.

And he realised that some voices did not need to become louder in order to be heard.

They asked only for a heart that was still willing to listen.

When No One Asks Any More

“Test everything; hold fast to what is good.”

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21

In the weeks that followed, society seemed calmer than ever.
Not because all problems had disappeared.
But because fewer and fewer people debated them.
By now, there was a recommendation for almost every question.
An optimised route for almost every choice.
A probably best solution for almost every dilemma.
Life became simpler.
And precisely because of that, David began to miss something.
Not the mistakes.
But the questions.
On a Monday morning, he travelled by train to a conference on digital ethics.
He had been looking forward to vigorous debates.

To clashing ideas.

To new insights.

But during the very first lecture, he felt a slight disappointment.

Almost every speaker used different words.

Yet they all seemed to be saying the same thing.

“The data shows this.”

“There is now a consensus on this.”

“The models confirm it.”

“The science is clear.”

No one asked the next question.

What assumptions underlie these models?

During the coffee break, David struck up a conversation with a young researcher.

She introduced herself as Noor.

She was working on algorithms intended to reduce social polarisation.

“A wonderful goal,” David said sincerely.

“We hope so too,” Noor replied.

“How does it work?”

“We identify language patterns that intensify conflict.”

“And then?”

“We suggest more neutral wording.”

David nodded.

“That sounds sensible.”

Noor smiled.

“It works surprisingly well.”

She showed him several examples.

A heated argument became a calm conversation.

Insults disappeared.

Accusations became more nuanced.

David had to admit that it was impressive.

Yet one question continued to trouble him.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Who ultimately determines what constitutes neutral wording?”

Noor hesitated.

“We use internationally validated guidelines for that.”

“And who drew them up?”

She thought for a moment.

“A multidisciplinary team.”

David smiled kindly.

“I readily believe that.”

He paused for a moment.

“But even a multidisciplinary team ultimately views things through a particular lens.”

Noor looked at him thoughtfully.

“I had never really considered it that way.”

That afternoon, Adrian delivered the closing address.

His words were as carefully chosen as ever.

“We live in an age in which knowledge has become accessible on an unprecedented scale.”

He looked around the room.

“But knowledge alone does not make a society wise.”

David listened intently.

Adrian continued:

“That is why we must invest not only in technology.”

“But also in character.”

Warm applause followed.

David joined in.

For on this, they agreed completely.

Afterwards, they walked outside together.

“What did you think?”

Adrian asked.

“You said something important.”

“What do you mean?”

“That character is more important than technology.”

Adrian smiled.

“I mean that too.”

David looked at him searchingly.

“But can character be programmed?”

Adrian did not answer immediately.

“No,”

he said at last.

“I think it is formed.”

“By whom?”

Adrian looked at the people leaving the conference centre.

“By parents.”

“By teachers.”

“By friends.”

He smiled.

“And perhaps even a little by technology.”

David nodded.

“Perhaps.”

But deep down, he knew the question had not yet been answered.

That evening, he visited the old Church of St Michael.

There was no service.

Only a few candles were burning.

The old man was sitting at the back of the church.

As so often, he seemed to have been expecting him.

“How was the conference?”

he asked.

“Interesting.”

David smiled.

“And?”

“Almost no one disagreed.”

The old man looked at him for a long time.

“Sometimes that is good.”

He allowed a brief silence.

“But sometimes it is dangerous too.”

David sat down beside him.

“Why?”

The old man pointed towards the organ.

“Do you know why an organ sounds so rich?”

David shook his head.

“Because dozens of different pipes come together to form one piece of music.”

He smiled.

“Not because all the pipes produce the same note.”

David stared silently ahead.

The old man continued:

“God did not create a world full of copies.”

He looked up towards the vaulted ceiling.

“Even the four Evangelists tell the same Gospel with different emphases.”

He smiled.

“Unity is not the same as uniformity.”

Those words lingered in David’s thoughts.

He thought of the conference hall.

Of the polished presentations.

Of the calm conversations.

Of the friendly people.

No one had tried to silence him.

And yet...

Why did it feel as though less and less room remained for fundamental questions?

On his way back, he walked through a small park.

A boy of about sixteen was sitting on a bench.

A guitar lay beside him.

He hesitantly played a melody of his own.

Every now and then, he made a mistake.

He began again.

Not perfect.

But real.

A little farther on, computer-generated music was playing from a loudspeaker.

Technically flawless.

Not a single wrong note.

David stood between the two sounds.

One moved him.

The other impressed him.

He wondered why.

Perhaps because the beauty of music lies not only in purity of tone.

But also in the vulnerability of the one who plays.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

When No One Asks Any More

Beneath it, he noted:

- Consensus is valuable.
- Expertise is essential.
- Technology can help.
- But truth is never established solely by majority or efficiency.

He thought for a long time.

Then he slowly wrote the final words of the day:

A healthy society needs not only good answers, but also people who retain the courage to keep asking honest questions.

He put down his pen.

Outside, the wind had died away.

The city slept.

But somewhere, deep in his heart, an awareness was growing that the decisive struggle of his age might not be about the freedom to speak.

But about the freedom to truly keep asking questions.

The Art of Listening

*“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and
slow to become angry.”*

— James 1:19

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, David received an unexpected phone call.

It was his younger sister, Esther.

They did not call each other often.

Not because they had quarrelled.

But because life had slowly drawn them apart.

“Are you free tonight?”

she asked.

“Hans is worried about Mum.”

David immediately sensed that this would not be an ordinary conversation.

“I’ll come.”

His mother still lived in the house where he had grown up.

The same garden.

The same apple tree.

The same wooden front door that still stuck a little when it rained.

When David entered, he immediately smelt freshly baked apple pie.

His mother smiled.

“You’ve lost weight.”

David laughed.

“You’ve been saying that for twenty years.”

“And one day, I’ll be right.”

Hans, Esther’s husband, was also sitting at the table.

He worked as a GP.

Practical.

Calm.

A man who rarely exaggerated.

After coffee, he carefully came to the point.

“We’ve noticed something over the past few months.”

David looked at his mother.

She was still smiling.

But her eyes grew a little more serious.

“I forget things sometimes,”

she said simply.

“More than I used to.”

No one spoke.

David felt memories pass through him.

His father.

Marieke.

Mr Van Leeuwen.

As though time were slowly closing another circle.

Hans slid a leaflet across the table.

“There’s a new support programme now.”

David looked at the cover.

MEMORIA HOME

He felt a slight tension.

“The system supports people with early memory problems,”

Hans explained.

“Diary.”

“Medication.”

“Conversations.”

“Memories.”

“Safety.”

His mother smiled.

“They say it will allow me to go on living independently for longer.”

David leafed through the leaflet.

Everything looked carefully designed.

Warm.

Respectful.

No cold technology.

On the contrary.

He thought back to the first demonstration of MEMORIA.

How many people had drawn hope from it.

And rightly so.

His mother looked at him.

“What do you think?”

David did not reply at once.

He did not want to impose his own questions on her.

“What do you think?”

he asked.

She looked outside.

Towards the apple tree.

“I’m not afraid of a computer,”

she said softly.

“I’m only afraid that people will think they no longer need to visit me.”

The sentence fell like a stone into the room.

No one knew what to say at first.

Hans eventually broke the silence.

“But it doesn’t have to be like that at all, does it?”

His mother-in-law smiled.

“No.”

“But people are busy.”

She looked lovingly at her children.

“A reminder on a screen is easy.”

“A visit takes time.”

Before leaving, David remained with his mother for a while.

They stood together in the garden.

By now, the rain had stopped.

Drops of water glistened on the leaves.

“Do you remember...”

she asked,

“...how you always used to climb that tree when you were a boy?”

David looked up.

He laughed.

“Dad used to get nervous about it.”

“I didn’t,”

his mother replied.

“Why not?”

She smiled.

“Because I knew that sometimes you had to climb in order to see the world better.”

David looked silently at the old tree.

His mother continued:

“Your father always said knowledge was important.”

She took his hand.

“But he also said that you must never forget to listen.”

“To what?”

David asked.

She thought for a moment.

“To God.”

“And to people.”

“Because...”

She smiled.

“...people often tell you something quite different from what they say.”

Those words remained with him as he drove home.

Not everything that truly mattered could be recorded.

Not every tear appeared in a dataset.

Not every smile told the whole story.

And sometimes the deepest truth lay hidden precisely in a silence.

The next day, David visited Hannah.

He told her about his mother.

Hannah listened intently.

Then she said:

“I hope she uses MEMORIA.”

David looked up in surprise.

“I wasn’t expecting that.”

Hannah smiled.

“Why not?”

“I thought you would be more critical.”

She shook her head.

“I’m not against aids.”

She looked at him gravely.

“I’m against substitution.”

She poured tea.

“When an aid helps people live independently for longer...”

“...then it is a gift.”

She smiled.

“But when an aid becomes an excuse to love less...”

“...its meaning changes.”

David thought of his mother.

Of her simple remark.

‘A visit takes time.’

That evening, he walked to the park once more.

The old man was sitting on the bench as usual.

He was feeding the birds.

David sat down beside him.

“Today I learnt that love takes time.”

The old man smiled.

“And?”

“Technology can save time.”

“Yes.”

“But no one can automate love.”

The old man nodded with satisfaction.

“Do you know why Jesus so often stopped?”

David thought.

“For people.”

“Exactly.”

He pointed towards a blackbird that landed just in front of them.

“The Son of God was hurrying towards Golgotha.”

He looked at David.

“And yet He had time for Bartimaeus.”

“Time for Zacchaeus.”

“Time for children.”

“Time for one Samaritan woman.”

He smiled.

“Love does not allow itself to be hurried by efficiency.”

They remained seated in silence.

The sun cautiously broke through the clouds.

Children were playing among the trees farther away.

An elderly man was letting his granddaughter blow bubbles.

Each bubble gleamed for a moment in the sunlight.

Then it disappeared.

David watched.

Perhaps, he thought, love was like such a bubble.

Fragile.

Impossible to hold on to.

Impossible to programme.

But real.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Art of Listening

Beneath it, he noted:

- Not every silence means absence.
- Not every solution is an encounter.
- Not every memory is love.
- But every love creates memories.

He read the words once more.

Then he wrote the final sentence of the day:

God gave humanity not only ears with which to hear words, but also a heart with which to truly encounter another person.

He closed the notebook.

And as evening slowly gave way to night, David knew that the future would not be determined by the intelligence of machines alone.

But by whether people preserved the art of listening.

Seen or Known

*“People look at the outward appearance, but the
LORD looks at the heart.”*

— 1 Samuel 16:7

A week later, David received an invitation to visit a new care centre.

The building bore a meaningful name.

House of Connection

According to the brochure, it was a model project.

Modern medicine.

Smart technology.

Person-centred care.

AI support.

Voluntary work.

Spiritual guidance.

David was curious.

Not because he expected to find faults.

On the contrary.

He hoped it would show precisely how technology and humanity could strengthen one another.

At the entrance, he was welcomed by the director.

An energetic woman in her early fifties.

“Welcome.”

She smiled warmly.

“We are not trying to use more technology here.”

She glanced around.

“Only better technology.”

David liked that sentence.

They toured the building.

In a sitting room, a pianist played old folk songs.

Residents hummed softly along.

Farther on, a robot gently helped a woman to her feet.

In another room, a smart projection system supported physiotherapy exercises.

Everything worked quietly.

Almost invisibly.

As good technology really ought to work.

David noticed himself relaxing more and more.

“We have one rule,”

the director said as they walked down a corridor.

“Technology must never replace a conversation here.”

David looked at her in surprise.

“That is a beautiful rule.”

“We didn’t think of it ourselves,”

she replied with a smile.

“One of our volunteers once said:

An appliance may free a hand, but it must never replace a heart.

Ever since, that sentence has hung in every staff room.”

David smiled.

He immediately thought of Hannah.

They came to a small sitting room.

An elderly woman sat by the window.

In front of her was a screen displaying photographs from her youth.

Every now and then, she smiled.

Every now and then, she shook her head.

A young volunteer sat beside her.

He barely looked at the screen.

He looked at her.

“Tell me...”

he asked softly.

“Who is that girl in the photograph?”

The woman looked closely.

“That...”

she whispered.

“...that was my sister.”

A smile appeared.

“She sang beautifully.”

The volunteer said nothing.

He only listened.

After a while, the woman began to talk of her own accord.

About the war.

About her childhood home.

About a lost love.

David remained standing in the doorway.

The system had opened the memory.

But it was the volunteer’s attention that brought it to life.

As they walked on, the director said:

“Many visitors think the technology is the miracle here.”

She smiled.

“But it isn’t.”

“What is?”

David asked.

“That someone remains seated when the story is told for the fifth time.”

Those words touched him deeply.

After the visit, he walked to the hospital.

Hannah was on a break.

They sat together in the courtyard garden.

David told her what he had seen.

She listened intently.

“That is precisely what I hope for,”

she said.

“That technology gives people room to be more human.”

David nodded.

“But that requires a choice.”

“What choice?”

“That institutions do not immediately fill the time saved with new tasks.”

Hannah smiled.

“That is precisely where the temptation lies.”

She picked up a fallen chestnut leaf.

“Every generation receives tools,”

she said.

“The question is always the same.”

She held up the leaf.

“What do we use the time we have gained for?”

David thought.

When AI saved a doctor ten minutes...

did that time go towards the next administrative task?

Or towards the patient?

When a son had less to arrange thanks to MEMORIA...

did he use that time to visit his mother more often?

Or less?

Perhaps, ultimately, technology was not only a mirror of humanity.

Perhaps above all, it magnified what was already present in the heart.

That evening, David walked along the river.

As so often, the old man was sitting on the bench.

He looked towards the slowly flowing IJssel.

“I saw something beautiful today,”

David said.

“Tell me.”

David told him about the volunteer.

About the elderly woman.

About the photographs.

The old man listened in silence.

Then he asked:

“Who knew her best?”

David thought of the system.

Of the photographs.

Of the database.

“The system probably knew the most,”

he said.

“And?”

the old man asked.

“The volunteer knew her better.”

The old man smiled.

“Why?”

“Because he loved her.”

A long silence followed.

Then the old man said:

“There is a difference between being seen and being known.”

He looked at David.

“A camera sees.”

“A database remembers.”

“An algorithm recognises patterns.”

He smiled.

“But love comes to know a person.”

David thought of John 10.

“I know My sheep.”

Not:

I register them.

Not:

I analyse them.

But:

I know them.

The old man continued:

“God does not know us because He knows everything about us.”

He looked towards the river.

“He knows us because He has given Himself to us.”

For a long time, they walked on in silence.

The evening sun turned the water gold.

A boy skimmed stones across the river.

His father laughingly counted how many times they bounced.

No one hurried.

No one looked at a screen.

It was only a few minutes.

And yet David felt as though he were seeing something that was beginning to grow rare.

People who were fully present.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

Seen or Known

Beneath it, he noted:

- Information can describe someone.
- Data can track someone.
- Memories can be preserved.
- But only love makes true encounter possible.

He looked at the words for a while.

Then he wrote the final sentence of the day:

God knows my name before I seek Him, not because He possesses my data, but because He has loved me from the beginning.

He put down his pen.

Outside, the sky slowly darkened.

And somewhere, deep in his heart, David began to suspect that the decisive question of his generation would not be how much a machine could know about a person.

But whether, despite all that knowledge, people would still be willing to truly get to know one another.

The Last Illusion

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

— John 8:32

A few days later, David was invited to a private presentation of Project EDEN.

Not as a developer.

Not as an adviser.

But as a critical listener.

Adrian had personally insisted on it.

“I specifically want people there who continue to ask questions,” he had said.

The meeting took place in a new research centre.

The building was strikingly austere.

No glossy advertising.

No futuristic architecture.

Everything radiated calm.

As though there had been a deliberate effort to prevent the technology from drawing attention to itself.

David appreciated that.

There was only one large screen in the central space.

A simple sentence slowly appeared on it.

From Information to Wisdom

Adrian began.

“For years, we have tried to provide better answers.”

He looked at those present.

“Now we want to learn how to ask better questions.”

David listened intently.

A researcher took the floor.

“Today, EDEN does more than analyse data,”

he said.

“The system is also learning to recognise uncertainty.”

Three columns appeared on the screen.

Facts

Probabilities

Unknown

“Increasingly, the system honestly indicates when it has insufficient information.”

David nodded in agreement.

He considered that an important development.

Then came a demonstration.

A complex medical case appeared on the screen.

After a few seconds, EDEN replied:

Available data is insufficient for a reliable recommendation.

Human judgement required.

A ripple of surprise went through the room.

A doctor beside David whispered:

“I wasn’t expecting that.”

Neither was David.

Afterwards, Adrian walked over to him.

“Well?”

he asked.

“I’m impressed,”

David replied honestly.

“Why?”

“Because you’re teaching the system to recognise its limits.”

Adrian smiled.

“That may have been our most difficult decision.”

They walked together through the courtyard garden.

“I have thought a great deal about our conversations,”

Adrian said.

“About Babel.”

“About Eden.”

“About wisdom.”

He looked at David.

“Perhaps technology’s greatest failing is not that it knows too much.”

He hesitated.

“But that people sometimes trust it more than is justified.”

David looked at him in surprise.

“That sounds different from a year ago.”

Adrian laughed softly.

“Perhaps I’m learning too.”

David felt once again why their friendship endured.

They did not agree about everything.

But both of them loved truth.

And truth tolerates questions.

Later that afternoon, David visited the old bookshop.

The owner greeted him as though he were an old friend.

“I have put something aside for you.”

He handed him a slim book.

There was only one word on the cover.

Illusions

“Who is it by?”

David asked.

“That is less important,”

the bookseller replied with a smile.

“Above all, read chapter three.”

At home, David opened the book.

He read:

“The most dangerous illusion is not the lie everyone recognises, but the half-truth in which no one suspects a lie any longer.”

He put down the book.

That sentence kept going round in his mind.

A half-truth.

Not entirely false.

That was precisely what made it so convincing.

That evening, he met the old man again.

They walked along the river.

The sky was clear.

The first stars were reflected in the water.

David told him about the presentation.

About EDEN.

About acknowledging uncertainty.

The old man smiled.

“That is a sign of wisdom,”

he said.

“A person, too, becomes truly wise only when he dares to say:

‘I don’t know.’”

They walked on.

After a while, David asked:

“You often speak about illusions.”

“Yes.”

“What is the greatest illusion of our age?”

The old man stopped.

He looked at the reflection of the moon in the water.

“Do you see that moon?”

David nodded.

“Can you touch it?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is only a reflection.”

The old man looked at him.

“Today, many people confuse the reflection with reality.”

He pointed towards the water.

“Data is not the person.”

“A profile is not the individual.”

“A memory is not the one you love.”

“A digital presence is not the same as communion.”

He fell silent.

“And a prediction is not yet the truth.”

David felt the words connect with one another.

MEMORIA.

Companion.

Workspace.

Reflection Module.

EDEN.

None of these systems necessarily lied.

But all of them carried the danger that people would confuse the map with the landscape.

“Is that the last illusion?”

David asked.

The old man smiled.

“Almost.”

He looked at the moon again.

“The last illusion arises when humanity ultimately believes it can possess reality completely.”

He allowed a silence.

“As though everything that exists can ultimately be calculated, described and controlled.”

David thought of the words from Job.

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?”

Not as humiliation.

But as an invitation to humility.

Before they parted, the old man said one more thing.

“David...”

“Yes?”

“God has never forbidden humanity to learn.”

He smiled.

“He only warns against the idea that knowledge without wisdom would be enough.”

At home, David picked up his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Last Illusion

Beneath it, he noted:

- Not everything visible is reality.
- Not everything measurable is what matters most.
- Not everything predictable is true.

He looked at the three sentences for a long time.

Then he wrote the final thought of the evening:

The last illusion is not that humanity knows a great deal, but that it begins to believe there is nothing left beyond its knowledge.

He closed his notebook.

Outside, the moon was still reflected in the dark water.

Just as brilliant.

Just as real to the eye.

And yet not the moon itself.

David smiled.

Sometimes wisdom began simply by distinguishing between a reflection and the reality to which it pointed.

The Price of Truth

“Buy the truth and do not sell it.”

— *Proverbs 23:23*

Monday began with an unexpected message.

All senior employees are invited to the introduction of the Covenant programme.

David had never heard of the programme.

The name kept going round in his mind.

Covenant.

A remarkable choice.

The meeting took place in a small conference room.

No press.

No livestream.

Only employees responsible for important decisions.

Sophie Meijer appeared on the stage.

Adrian stood beside her.

He looked serious.

Almost tired.

Sophie began.

“Over the past few years, we have made enormous progress.”

Images of hospitals, schools, power stations and food banks appeared on the screen.

“More and more organisations rely on collective decision-making.”

She smiled.

“But collaboration also requires trust.”

Then a new diagram appeared.

At the top, it read:

Covenant

Human responsibility – supported by collective wisdom

David looked intently.

The system worked simply.

From now on, when making important decisions, employees would receive more than technical advice.

A so-called Consensus Index would also appear.

A percentage indicating how many experts worldwide would reach the same conclusion.

A demonstration followed.

A complex economic question appeared on the screen.

The system gave its advice.

Beneath it was written:

Consensus: 97.4%

The room responded approvingly.

Then came a medical example.

Consensus: 98.8%

Another example.

Consensus: 99.1%

Each time, it felt as though deviation became more difficult.

Not because it was forbidden.

But because almost no one saw a reason to do so any more.

Afterwards, David spoke with Adrian.

“May I be honest?”

“Of course.”

“I understand the intention.”

Adrian nodded.

“But?”

David looked at the screen, which still displayed the final percentage.

“I’m afraid that people will stop asking whether something is true.”

He paused.

“And ask only how many people agree with it.”

Adrian did not answer immediately.

He too looked at the screen.

“We discussed that for a long time,”

he said.

“And?”

“We believe consensus helps.”

He smiled faintly.

“But I admit...”

“...consensus can be mistaken too.”

That acknowledgement encouraged David.

Yet his unease remained.

For systems shaped people.

Not only through their answers.

But also through their habits.

That evening, he visited his mother.

By now, she had decided to use MEMORIA HOME.

The device stood unobtrusively on a cabinet.

It reminded her to take her medication.

It displayed photographs.

It played old psalms.

David saw how comfortably she interacted with it.

“Well?”

he asked.

“Do you like it?”

She smiled.

“It helps me.”

“Good.”

She looked at him.

“But do you know what the best thing is?”

David shook his head.

“That you came today.”

He laughed.

“That wasn’t in MEMORIA?”

“No,”

she replied.

“That was only in your heart.”

Later that evening, David walked to the Church of St Michael.

He did not find the old man on his usual bench.

Inside the church, he was sitting at the front.

He looked towards a simple wooden cross.

“May I ask you something?”

David said.

“Always.”

“Why do people feel so safe when almost everyone thinks the same thing?”

The old man smiled.

“Because a majority is reassuring.”

He paused for a moment.

“But truth is never born from counting votes.”

He pointed towards the cross.

“How many people stood beneath this cross?”

David thought.

“A few women.”

“John.”

“And several soldiers.”

“Exactly.”

The old man looked at him.

“And how many cried a few days earlier:

‘Crucify Him’?”

David felt the silence.

“The majority...”

the old man continued,

“...can be a sign of wisdom.”

He smiled.

“But it is never the source of truth.”

They left the church.

Outside, soft rain began to fall.

In the square, a boy ran after his dog.

His father laughed.

A little farther on stood a group of young people.

All of them were looking at the same screen at once.

No one spoke.

No one looked up.

David stopped for a moment.

“What do you see?”

the old man asked.

“Unity,”

David said.

“And loneliness at the same time.”

The old man nodded.

“That is what happens when people see the same thing...”

“...but no longer look together.”

They walked on.

After a while, the old man said:

“A lie’s greatest strength is not that it is shouted loudly.”

He looked at the wet paving stones.

“But that it is repeated so often that no one examines it any more.”

David thought of Paul.

Of the Bereans.

They examined even an apostle’s words against Scripture.

Not out of distrust.

But out of love for the truth.

Perhaps that was spiritual maturity.

Not doubting everything.

But accepting nothing uncritically either.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Price of Truth

Beneath it, he noted:

- Consensus can be wise.
- Expertise deserves respect.
- Humility requires me to be willing to learn.
- But my conscience must never be replaced by the opinion of the majority.

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Then he slowly wrote the words that had occupied him all day:

Truth sometimes demands the courage to stand alone, but never the pride of wanting to be right alone. Humility and courage belong together.

He closed his notebook.

As the rain softly tapped against the window, he thought of the words of Jesus:

“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.”

Truth was ultimately not an abstract principle.

Not a statistic.

Not a consensus.

Not an algorithm.

Truth had a face.

And that was precisely why it could not be reduced to a percentage on a screen.

Two Voices

“My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me.”

— John 10:27

Autumn had settled over the city unnoticed.

The first leaves drifted across the pavements.

The air was clear.

In the mornings, a light mist hung over the river.

David loved this season.

Not because everything was dying.

But because nature showed that letting go could also be a preparation for new life.

A surprise awaited him at the office.

His name appeared at the top of an internal announcement.

Invitation to Join the Strategic Core Team of Project EDEN.

He read the letter twice.

The position meant prestige.

More influence.

More responsibility.

And the opportunity to help shape the system's further development.

Sophie Meijer entered his office a moment later.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Adrian nominated you."

That surprised David.

"Adrian?"

She smiled.

"His exact words were:

'It is precisely the people who ask critical questions who must have a seat at the table.'"

David felt genuine appreciation.

Adrian did not want a circle of yes-men.

He wanted dialogue.

That afternoon, David and Adrian met in a small café beside the river.

There were no tablets on the table.

No screens.

Only two cups of coffee.

Adrian looked outside.

“You know...”

he began,

“...I have thought a great deal about our conversations over the past few months.”

David smiled.

“So have I.”

“May I ask you something personal?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you keep believing?”

David looked at him in surprise.

Not:

Why do you believe?

But:

Why do you keep believing?

He thought for a long time.

“Because Christ held on to me at moments when I could barely hold on to Him.”

Adrian was silent.

David continued:

“When Marieke died...”

“...there was little left that I understood.”

“But it was precisely then that I discovered that faith is not the same as understanding everything.”

He looked at Adrian.

“It is learning to trust Someone.”

Adrian slowly turned his coffee cup round.

“I envy that.”

David looked up.

“Envy?”

Adrian nodded.

“You possess a peace that I don’t find in my work.”

He smiled faintly.

“And believe me...”

“...I love my work.”

For a while, they were silent.

Then Adrian said:

“Perhaps, ultimately, we are seeking the same thing.”

David looked at him questioningly.

“A world in which people truly fulfil their purpose.”

David nodded.

“I believe that too.”

“Only...”

Adrian continued,

“...we differ about the way.”

After they had said goodbye, David remained beside the river for a while.

He did not pray.

He thought.

Sometimes thinking was also a form of prayer.

When it was done honestly.

A few days later, he visited his mother again.

MEMORIA HOME was softly playing a psalm.

Psalm 23.

His mother was knitting.

“How are you?”

David asked.

“Well.”

She smiled.

“I still forget things.”

“But fortunately, I haven’t yet forgotten that God knows me.”

She pointed towards the device.

“This helps me.”

Then she rested her hand on her Bible.

“But this reminds me who I am.”

David felt how simple those words were.

And precisely because of that, how profound.

Before he left, his mother gave him a small wooden box.

“I found this in the attic.”

Inside lay his father’s old compass.

The brass had grown dull.

The needle still moved calmly towards the north.

“Do you remember?”

his mother asked.

“Dad always said...”

David smiled.

“...that a compass doesn’t prevent you from getting lost.”

“But it does help you find your direction again.”

That evening, David took the compass with him to the park.

The old man was sitting on his familiar bench.

David carefully placed it between them.

“It belonged to my father.”

The old man picked it up.

He slowly turned it round.

The needle continued searching.

And found its direction once more.

“Beautiful,”

he said softly.

“Today, I was thinking about our conversation about conscience,”

David said.

“Why?”

“Because a compass does not compel you.”

He looked at the needle.

“You can still choose to walk in the wrong direction.”

The old man smiled.

“That is precisely why God did not create machines.”

David looked at him questioningly.

“Love requires freedom,”

the old man said.

“A machine can be programmed.”

“A person can respond.”

He softly clicked the compass shut.

“That is why obedience in the Bible is never mechanical.”

He looked gravely at David.

“God does not seek perfect execution.”

“But a heart that freely loves Him.”

They walked on slowly.

The wind blew the first autumn leaves across the path.

“May I ask you something?”

David said.

“Of course.”

“Do you think technology could ever develop a conscience?”

The old man smiled.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because a conscience does more than distinguish between good and evil.”

He looked at David.

“A conscience also knows remorse.”

David stopped.

The old man continued:

“A person can say:

I should have acted differently.

Not only because the outcome was bad.

But because he has grieved Another.”

He pointed towards the cross on the tower of the Church of St Michael.

“Remorse does not arise from data.”

“It arises from love.”

After the old man had left, David remained alone for a long time.

He took the compass from his coat pocket once more.

The needle trembled briefly.

Then it pointed unwaveringly north again.

He thought of all the systems he had come to know over the past few months.

Advisor.

Workspace.

MEMORIA.

EDEN.

All of them could point in a direction.

All of them could advise.

But none of them could decide who he wanted to be.

That choice remained personal.

And in that lay both the dignity and the responsibility of being human.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

Two Voices

Beneath it, he noted:

- Advice is valuable.
- Wisdom requires discernment.
- Freedom requires responsibility.
- Love requires surrender.

He looked for a long time at the old compass beside his notebook.

Then he wrote the final words of the evening:

Many voices sound each day. The decisive question is not which voice sounds loudest, but which voice I ultimately learn to trust.

He closed his notebook.

Outside, the wind blew the last leaves from the chestnut trees.

And deep in his heart, David began to realise that the great choices of a human life are rarely made in a single moment.

They grow slowly.

Voice by voice.

Choice by choice.

Until it becomes clear which voice has ultimately penetrated most deeply.

The Liturgy of Daily Life

*“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you
do flows from it.”*

— *Proverbs 4:23*

The days settled into a steady rhythm.

David rose early.

He read a passage from the Psalms.

Then he drank coffee while the city slowly awakened.

He used to begin the day with his messages.

Now he began with silence.

Not because silence had become a matter of course.

On the contrary.

He had to choose it anew every morning.

One Tuesday morning, a new notification appeared on his screen.

Advisor Daily

We have analysed your morning routine.

Based on your habits, we can optimise your spiritual, physical and cognitive well-being.

David continued reading.

The proposal had been carefully compiled.

Fifteen minutes of physical exercise.

Twelve minutes of meditation.

An optimised news selection.

Personal reading recommendations.

A tailored diet plan.

All based on data collected over many years.

He smiled.

It was excellent work.

And yet he closed the window.

Not out of distrust.

But because that morning, he wanted to read Psalm 63 first.

“You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek You.”

He wondered why those particular words gave him such peace.

Perhaps because they reminded him that a person does not live by optimisation alone.

But by relationship.

Later that morning, David attended his first meeting of the Strategic Core Team.

Twelve people sat around the long table.

Engineers.

Doctors.

Administrators.

Ethicists.

Adrian opened the meeting.

“Today, we are not discussing new features.”

He looked around the group.

“Today, we are discussing influence.”

One word appeared on the screen.

Habit Formation

A behavioural scientist took the floor.

“People rarely change through one great decision.”

He displayed a graph.

“They change through thousands of small habits.”

David immediately sensed how important this subject was.

The researcher continued:

“When a system supports small choices every day...”

“...it ultimately shapes character too.”

No one reacted with surprise.

It sounded logical.

Almost self-evident.

But David wrote the sentence down word for word.

Habits shape character.

During the discussion, he asked:

“May I ask a question about that?”

“Of course.”

“When a system helps to shape my habits...”

He looked around the circle.

“...who determines which habits are desirable?”

There was a brief silence.

A sociologist replied:

“For that, we use broadly shared social values.”

David nodded.

“But social values change.”

The sociologist smiled.

“That is true.”

“And that is why we continually adjust them.”

David wrote another short sentence in his notebook.

Everything that is continually adjusted also requires a fixed standard.

After the meeting, Adrian walked with him.

“I knew you would ask precisely that question.”

David smiled.

“Was that a problem?”

“No.”

Adrian looked outside.

“Perhaps we need precisely those people who remind us that efficiency never has the final word.”

David looked at him.

“And perhaps we need people who develop technology out of love for humanity.”

Adrian held out his hand.

“To that, I can wholeheartedly say amen.”

They both laughed.

That afternoon, David visited his mother.

She was sitting in the kitchen.

An open Bible lay on the table.

Beside it was a notebook.

“What are you writing?”

David asked.

She smiled.

“Every day, I try to write down three things I’m grateful for.”

David looked at the page.

Today, it read:

- The sun on the apple tree.
- A phone call from Esther.
- Psalm 121.

“MEMORIA reminded me to take my medication,” she said.

“But no one needs to remind me to thank God.”

She looked at him kindly.

“That is something I don’t want to forget for myself.”

David realised how profound those words were.

Gratitude was not an automatic function.
It was a discipline of the heart.
That evening, he did not find the old man in the park.
Nor in the church.
Only around sunset did he see him by the river.
He was sitting on a simple wooden jetty.
His feet almost over the water.
David sat down beside him.
“I learnt something today.”
“Tell me.”
“Habits shape character.”
The old man nodded.
“The Church has known that for two thousand years.”
David looked up in surprise.
“Why do you think Christians pray?”
the old man asked.
“Why do they celebrate the Lord’s Supper?”
“Why do they read Scripture?”
“Why do they sing psalms?”
David thought.
“To encounter God.”
“Yes,”
the old man replied.
“But also because love must be practised.”

He picked up a small stone.

“No one becomes faithful by accident.”

He threw the stone into the river.

“No one becomes patient by accident.”

Another stone.

“No one becomes holy by accident.”

The ripples in the water grew ever larger.

“The heart slowly takes the shape of what it seeks each day.”

David looked at the widening ripples.

He thought of his own life.

Of the years in which his work had occupied more and more space.

Of the period after Marieke’s death, when he had hidden behind projects and deadlines.

And of the past few months, during which silence, prayer and his conversations with Hannah and the old man had slowly changed him.

Not in one dramatic moment.

But day by day.

The old man spoke again.

“The question is not whether your life has a liturgy.”

David looked at him questioningly.

“Every person has a liturgy.”

He smiled.

“The only question is: who or what do you worship through your daily habits?”

Those words lingered in the evening air for a long time.

On his way back, David passed a busy shopping centre.

Everywhere, people were looking at their screens.

Advertisements adapted to their preferences.

Music changed automatically.

Lighting followed the rhythm of the visitors.

The system knew their habits.

But did it know their longings?

And did it know their souls?

At home, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Liturgy of Daily Life

Beneath it, he noted:

- My habits shape my character.
- My attention shapes my longings.
- My longings determine my choices.
- My choices reveal my love.

He read the four sentences carefully.

Beneath them, he slowly wrote the final thought of the evening:

The heart is shaped not only by what it believes, but also by what it practises day after day. That is why true spiritual discernment does not begin in exceptional moments, but in the quiet faithfulness of daily life.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the last lights of the city were visible in the dark water of the river.

And somewhere in the distance, the bell of the Church of St Michael rang.

Not loudly.

Not urgently.

But faithfully.

As it had done yesterday.

And probably would again tomorrow.

David smiled.

Perhaps God's work resembled that sound.

No overwhelming spectacle.

But a voice that continues to sound, day after day, for those willing to listen.

The Silence Before the Voice

“After the fire came the sound of a gentle whisper.”

— 1 Kings 19:12

The first night frost turned the fields white.

When David opened his curtains, the world lay beneath a thin layer of hoarfrost.

Even the city seemed to have forgotten its haste for one morning.

He made coffee.

Opened his Bible.

And read the story of Elijah again.

Not Carmel.

Not the fire.

But Mount Horeb.

The silence.

He lingered over one verse for a long time.

“The LORD was not in the wind...”

“Not in the earthquake...”

“Not in the fire...”

“But in the sound of a gentle whisper.”

He closed his eyes.

How often had he sought God in great answers?

And how often had He spoken precisely through small acts of faithfulness?

Later that morning, he received a message from Adrian.

“Do you have time for a walk?”

They met outside the city.

Along an old dyke where poplars rustled in the wind.

For a while, they spoke about nothing.

They simply walked side by side.

As friends can.

After a few minutes, Adrian broke the silence.

“I have made a decision.”

David looked at him.

“I’m going to take a step back.”

“At EDEN?”

Adrian nodded.

“Not entirely.”

He smiled wearily.

“But I want to spend less time managing and more time thinking.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Why?”

Adrian stopped for a moment.

He looked out across the water.

“Because I have become afraid of my own pace.”

The words surprised David.

Adrian continued:

“I have spent my entire life trying to bring the future closer.”

He laughed softly.

“And along the way, I sometimes forgot to live in the present.”

David said nothing.

He knew that some confessions did not call for an answer.

Only for someone to listen.

“You taught me something,”

Adrian said at last.

“What?”

“That not every delay is a loss.”

He smiled.

“Sometimes slowing down is actually obedience to reality.”

They reached an old wooden bridge.

Beneath them, the water flowed slowly.

“May I ask you something?”

Adrian said.

“Of course.”

“If you are right...”

He chose his words carefully.

“...and humanity truly was created in God’s image...”

“...what does that mean for our future?”

David looked at the water.

He remained silent for a long time.

Then he replied:

“That our greatest destiny is not to become ever more intelligent.”

He looked at his friend.

“But to become ever more like Christ.”

Adrian nodded slowly.

He did not speak.

But David could see that the words remained with him.

That afternoon, David visited the Church of St Michael.

He expected to find the old man.

But the church was empty.

Only a small envelope lay on the third pew.

His name was written on it.

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

No salutation.

No signature.

Only a few lines.

Never seek the voice for the sake of the experience.

Seek the Shepherd.

When you follow Him, you will learn to discern His voice.

When you seek only the voice, you will easily believe every echo.

David read the words several times.

Then he carefully folded the paper.

He did not know why.

But he had a feeling that he would not meet the old man again for some time.

Outside, evening began to fall.

He walked slowly towards the park.

The bench beneath the lime tree was empty.

Only a few yellowed leaves lay there.

He sat down.

The silence felt different than before.

Not empty.

But expectant.

As though one chapter were closing.

And another beginning.

His phone vibrated.

A message from Hannah.

“Come to the hospital tomorrow. I want to introduce you to someone.”

There was nothing more.

David smiled.

Hannah never sent unnecessary words.

He put away his phone.

At that moment, a little girl walked past.

She was with her grandfather.

Suddenly, she stopped.

She looked at the sky.

“Look, Grandpa...”

she whispered.

“The birds.”

David looked up.

A large flock of geese flew south in V-formation.

The old man beside her smiled.

“Do you know why they fly like that?”

The girl shook her head.

“Because they travel farther together.”

She looked up again.

“Who tells them where to go?”

The grandfather thought for a moment.

Then he replied:

“Perhaps God has placed some things more deeply within creation than we can explain.”

David heard the words.

And thought of his father’s compass.

Of conscience.

Of the Holy Spirit.

Of the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Not everything that gave direction was visible.

And yet it was real.

At home, he opened his notebook for the final time in this part.

At the top, he wrote:

The Silence Before the Voice

Beneath it, he noted:

- Truth requires humility.
- Love requires presence.
- Wisdom requires discernment.
- Faith requires trust.

He looked at the four sentences.

They were no longer isolated thoughts.

Together, they formed a path.

Then he wrote the final words of Part II – The Mirror:

Those who continually look at themselves will ultimately become lost in their own reflection. Those who learn to look at Christ slowly discover who they truly are. There begins not only self-knowledge, but also true freedom.

He closed the notebook.

Then he picked up his Bible.

He placed the two books side by side.

Not because they occupied the same place.

But because the one had value only so long as it pointed towards the other.

Outside, the night grew still.

The city slept.

Nothing remarkable happened.

No miracle.

No vision.

No voice from heaven.

Only a deep, quiet silence.

And sometimes silence is precisely the place where God prepares the heart for what He wishes to say next.

END OF PART II – THE MIRROR

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.”

— 1 Corinthians 13:12

THE LAST ILLUSION - PART III: THE VOICE

“Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.’”

— 1 Samuel 3:9

CHAPTER 42

The First Call

“My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me.”

— John 10:27

The following morning, a soft mist hung over the city.

David remembered Hannah’s note.

“Come to the hospital tomorrow. I want to introduce you to someone.”

She had written nothing more.

As always.

No explanation.

No expectation.

Only an invitation.

The hospital was already full of life early in the morning.

Nurses hurried through the corridors.

Doctors conferred quietly.

Monitors beeped in the background.

And yet David noticed something.

Amid all the activity, he repeatedly saw small moments of genuine attention.

A nurse who held someone's hand for a moment.

A doctor who crouched down to look a child in the eye.

A cleaner who greeted a patient with a smile.

They were barely perceptible gestures.

But they gave the building a soul.

Hannah was waiting for him at the entrance to the children's ward.

"I'm glad you came."

"You made me curious."

She smiled.

"That was the idea."

They walked down a long corridor in silence.

Children's drawings hung on the walls.

Castles.

Dinosaurs.

Rainbows.

A sun with a smiling face.

David stopped for a moment beside a simple drawing.

A shepherd.

With one sheep on his shoulders.

Above it, in large, uneven letters, were the words:

HE SEEKS ME.

David smiled.

Children could sometimes say in a single sentence what adults needed a book to express.

Hannah knocked softly on a door.

Inside sat a boy of about twelve.

Thin.

Pale.

An IV line ran along his arm.

A thick book about astronomy lay on his lap.

He looked up.

“Hi.”

“Hi,”

David replied.

Hannah introduced them.

“David, this is Lucas.”

“Lucas, this is David.”

“You work with computers, don’t you?”

Lucas asked immediately.

David laughed.

“That’s right.”

“Cool.”

The boy closed his book.

“I want to work in space research when I grow up.”

“Why?”

David asked.

Lucas looked at the ceiling.

“Because the universe is so vast.”

He smiled.

“And because the more you discover...”

“...the more questions arise.”

David glanced at Hannah.

She only smiled.

After a while, Lucas unexpectedly asked:

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you think God is more intelligent than AI?”

David almost burst out laughing.

Not at the question.

But at the matter-of-fact way in which it was asked.

“Yes,”

he replied calmly.

“Why?”

Lucas looked curious.

“Because God does not possess intelligence,”

David said.

“He is the Source of all wisdom.”

The boy thought.

“That’s different.”

“Yes,”

David replied.

“Very different.”

Lucas looked at his astronomy book again.

“You know...”

he said softly,

“...sometimes I’m afraid.”

David moved a little closer.

“Of what?”

“That I’ll die before I’ve seen everything.”

The room grew silent.

Hannah looked out of the window.

David searched for words.

Not beautiful words.

But true ones.

“You know...”

he said at last,

“...the Bible does not promise that we will see everything in this life.”

Lucas looked at him.

“But it does promise...”

“...that for those who belong to Christ, the most beautiful thing still lies ahead.”

The boy was silent.

Then he smiled.

“I actually think that’s more beautiful than Mars.”

David laughed.

“I wouldn’t have dared to say that.”

After they left the room, David and Hannah walked down the corridor in silence for a while.

“Why did you want me to meet him?”

David asked.

Hannah did not reply at once.

“Lucas has an aggressive form of leukaemia.”

David stopped.

“How long...”

“We don’t know.”

He looked back towards the closed door.

“And yet he radiates hope.”

Hannah nodded.

“Exactly.”

She looked at him gravely.

“That is why I wanted to bring you here.”

They sat down in the small hospital chapel.

One candle was burning.

Nothing more.

“Lately, we have spoken a great deal about voices,”

Hannah said.

“About algorithms.”

“About truth.”

“About technology.”

She paused for a moment.

“But Lucas reminds me that the most convincing voice is still a life.”

David thought of the boy.

He had delivered no argument.

Developed no philosophy.

Used no reasoning.

And yet he had made something visible.

Hope.

Not as theory.

But as reality.

Hannah continued:

“The first Christians did not transform the Roman Empire because they were better rhetoricians.”

She looked towards the simple wooden cross on the wall.

“But because people saw how they lived.”

Those words remained with David.

Increasingly, he noticed that truth became credible when it took on flesh and blood.

As John wrote:

“The Word became flesh.”

Not merely an idea.

But a Person.

On his way back, David walked through the park.

To his surprise, he saw the old man again.

He was sitting on the same bench.

As though he had never been away.

David smiled.

“I thought you had disappeared.”

The old man laughed softly.

“Perhaps you needed someone else first.”

David sat down beside him.

“I met a boy today.”

“Lucas.”

The old man spoke the name as though he already knew him.

David looked surprised.

“Do you know him?”

“No,”

the old man said.

“But God does.”

A long silence followed.

Then the old man said:

“You have learnt a great deal over the past few months.”

“About truth.”

“About technology.”

“About humanity.”

He looked at David.

“But today, a more difficult lesson begins.”

“What lesson?”

“Not only learning to discern.”

He smiled.

“But learning to bear witness.”

David felt those words go deeper than all their earlier conversations.

“Bear witness?”

“Yes.”

“Not by speaking more loudly.”

The old man looked towards a mother helping her child to its feet after a fall.

“But by living in such a way that people become curious about the One who sustains your life.”

The sun broke through the clouds for a moment.

Light fell across the river.

The old man stood up.

“Never forget...”

he said,

“...that the world is ultimately not changed by the loudest voice.”

He smiled.

“But by the voice willing to give itself.”

He turned around and slowly walked away.

David watched him go.

This time, the farewell felt different.

Not sad.

But like a commission.

That evening, he opened a new notebook.

Not because the old one was full.

But because a new part of his journey had begun.

At the top, he wrote:

The First Call

Beneath it, he noted:

- Truth must be lived.
- Love must become visible.
- Hope must be embodied.
- Christ calls people, not only their thoughts.

He continued looking at the words for a long time.

Then he wrote the first sentence of Part III – The Voice:

The world is rarely changed by people who have all the answers.

It is changed by people who have learnt to listen to the Voice of

the Good Shepherd and then faithfully follow Him, even when His way differs from that of the majority.

He closed the notebook.

Evening began outside.

In the distance, the bell of the Church of St Michael rang once more.

Not as a warning.

But as an invitation.

And David knew that the questions of the past few months had prepared him for something new.

No longer merely the search for truth.

But learning to obey the Voice that speaks truth.

The Voice Among a Thousand Voices

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”

— 1 John 4:1

The days following his encounter with Lucas passed unexpectedly quietly.

Perhaps too quietly.

At the office, everything seemed to be running smoothly.

Project EDEN was operating stably.

The Consensus Index was being used more and more often.

MEMORIA HOME was being introduced nationwide.

Even the media spoke of a new period of social calm.

David heard colleagues say:

“Perhaps we have finally learnt how to work together wisely.”

He hoped they were right.

Yet deep inside, a question continued to trouble him.

Calm was not always the same as peace.

That week, the Strategic Core Team was asked to consider a series of ethical scenarios.

No technical problems.

No malfunctions.

But human dilemmas.

The first scenario seemed simple.

An elderly woman refused medical advice that, according to every expert, offered the best chance of recovery.

The question was:

Should the system continue trying to persuade her?

Opinions around the table differed.

“Yes,” said a doctor. “As long as she has all the information.”

“No,” a lawyer replied. “Autonomy remains paramount.”

A behavioural scientist proposed gradually adapting the recommendations to her personality so that she would become more receptive.

“Not manipulating her,” he quickly added.

“Only tailoring it better.”

David wrote nothing down.

He listened.

After a long discussion, Adrian asked:

“David... what do you think?”

Every eye turned towards him.

He looked at the case once more.

Then he said:

“May I ask a different question first?”

Adrian smiled.

“I should have expected that.”

Several people laughed.

David continued:

“When does persuasion end and steering begin?”

The smiles vanished from the room.

A psychologist replied:

“It’s a sliding scale.”

“Exactly,”

David said.

“And that is precisely why we must continue to name it.”

He looked around the circle.

“Good intentions matter.”

“But good intentions alone do not protect us from wrongful means.”

Afterwards, the subject lingered.

No one had found a definitive answer.

But everyone had begun to speak more carefully.

Even Adrian.

That evening, David visited Lucas again.

The boy was sitting upright in bed.
His astronomy book lay open.
But this time, a Bible lay beside it too.
“I discovered something,”
Lucas said enthusiastically.
“Tell me.”
“Abraham looked at the stars too.”
David smiled.
“That’s right.”
Lucas pointed towards Genesis 15.
“God didn’t give him a calculation.”
He looked up.
“He gave him a promise.”
David sat down.
“Why do you find that so beautiful?”
Lucas thought for a moment.
“Because Abraham couldn’t control everything.”
He looked towards the window.
“And yet he trusted.”
After a brief silence, he added:
“Perhaps believing means learning to live with questions.”
David felt how simple the words were.
And how profound.
When he later left the room, Hannah stopped beside him.

“Every time I talk to him...”

she said softly,

“...I think of Jesus.”

David looked at her questioningly.

“Why?”

“Because children sometimes still believe that truth is a Person.”

She looked towards the closed door.

“Adults often turn it into a theory first.”

On his way home, David walked through the city centre.

The shops were open late.

Personal recommendations appeared on large screens.

Advertisements adapted to passers-by.

Music changed automatically as the crowds grew.

A voice from a loudspeaker wished everyone a pleasant evening.

Everything was friendly.

Calm.

Efficient.

Suddenly, he saw a street musician.

An old violin.

A worn coat.

His playing was not perfect.

Every now and then, a note rasped.

But people stopped.

Not because of technical perfection.

But because the music touched something.
David remained to listen.
The violinist closed his eyes.
He was not playing for the people.
He was playing from his heart.
When the piece ended, almost no one applauded.
Not out of indifference.
But because the silence itself had become a response.
“Beautiful, isn’t it?”
A familiar voice sounded.
The old man stood beside him.
David smiled.
“Why do people stop for this?”
he asked.
The old man looked at the violinist.
“Because authenticity recognises something no algorithm can calculate.”
He paused for a moment.
“Human beings were created not only to understand truth.”
“But also to taste it.”
They walked on.
“You have learnt a great deal about voices lately,”
the old man said.
“Yes.”

“But never forget one thing.”

He stopped.

“Not every gentle voice is God’s voice.”

David looked at him gravely.

“And not every harsh voice is therefore untrue.”

He smiled.

“The question is not how a voice sounds.”

He gently tapped his chest.

“But what fruit it produces.”

David thought of Galatians 5.

Love.

Joy.

Peace.

Patience.

Kindness.

No algorithm could produce those fruits automatically.

They grew.

Slowly.

Like trees.

At home, he opened his new notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Voice Among a Thousand Voices

Beneath it, he noted:

- Not every convincing voice speaks truth.

- Not every true voice sounds convincing.
- Truth requires discernment.
- Discernment grows in fellowship with Christ.

He looked at the words for a while.

Then he wrote the final thought of the evening:

In a world full of voices, the most important spiritual discipline is not speaking more loudly, but learning to recognise which voice draws me closer to Christ and which one imperceptibly leads me back to myself.

He put down his pen.

Outside, a gentle wind moved through the trees.

For a moment, he heard nothing else.

And precisely in that silence, David realised that the voice of the Good Shepherd never needed to shout.

Those who had truly come to know Him recognised Him even when the world was full of other voices.

The Language of Babel

*“Now the whole world had one language and a
common speech.”*

— *Genesis 11:1*

Winter cautiously announced its approach.
The trees stood bare along the avenues.
The light grew softer.
And the city seemed to be growing ever quieter.
Not because there were fewer people.
On the contrary.
There was more communication than ever before.
Messages.
Meetings.
Video links.
Personal assistants.
Virtual encounters.

Everyone spoke.

But David increasingly wondered how many people truly listened.

A few days later, he received an invitation to an international symposium.

Global Human Alignment Conference

Theme:

Towards a Shared Human Future.

Speakers from dozens of countries.

Scientists.

Philosophers.

Religious leaders.

Developers of artificial intelligence.

The aim was ambitious.

To develop a shared moral language that could be used worldwide.

David felt both curious and cautious.

The longing for peace was sincere.

But peace without truth could also become a dangerous false peace.

The opening address was delivered in an impressive glass conference hall.

The speaker began with a simple proposition.

“The greatest conflicts in history arose because people claimed different truths.”

He paused.

“That is why we need a new universal language.”

A circle appeared on the screen.

At its centre was:

Consensus.

Around it:

Safety.

Well-being.

Inclusivity.

Sustainability.

Connection.

No one in the room could object to these words.

Nor could David.

But he noticed that he was waiting for another word.

Truth.

It did not appear.

During the coffee break, Adrian came to stand beside him.

“What do you think?”

David considered this for a moment.

“They are beautiful ideals.”

“But?”

Adrian smiled.

By now, he knew David’s silences.

“I wonder...”

David said,

“...whether a shared language is enough.”

“In what sense?”

“You can use the same words.”

“And yet mean something entirely different.”

Adrian looked at him intently.

“Give me an example.”

David pointed towards the screen.

“Freedom.”

“For one person, that means the freedom to choose.”

“For another, it means liberation from selfishness.”

“We use the same word.”

“But live from a different view of humanity.”

Adrian nodded slowly.

“There’s something in that.”

The next speaker was a linguist.

He argued that future AI systems could reduce human conflict by interpreting language more accurately.

“Misunderstandings often arise because words have different meanings.”

He smiled.

“AI can neutralise those differences.”

David wrote down one sentence.

Words can be clarified.

Beneath it, he wrote:

But only love can open a heart.

After lunch, a panel discussion began.

A young researcher said:

“Once we possess a universal model of values, religious conflicts will largely disappear.”

David felt the tension in the room.

A moderator looked in his direction.

“Mr Van Dijk?”

“Did you wish to respond?”

He stood up slowly.

“May I ask a question?”

The moderator nodded.

“If two people use the same word...”

“...but hold a different view of what it means to be human...”

“...can an algorithm truly resolve that difference?”

The researcher replied confidently.

“In time, yes.”

David smiled kindly.

“I hope you are right.”

He paused for a moment.

“But I think Babel teaches us something else.”

The room fell silent.

“The people at Babel had precisely one language,”

David said calmly.

“The problem was not that they did not understand one another.”

He looked around the room.

“The problem was that their shared language became detached from their dependence on God.”

A profound silence followed.

No one interrupted him.

“Unity is a great good,”

he continued.

“But the Bible shows that unity without truth does not ultimately set us free.”

Afterwards, a Japanese professor approached him.

He introduced himself as Professor Kenji Sato.

“Your reference to Babel intrigued me.”

David smiled.

“Why?”

“In technology, we often speak about interoperability.”

He laughed softly.

“Perhaps we should speak more often about humility.”

They talked for almost an hour.

Not about software.

But about Augustine.

Blaise Pascal.

And C. S. Lewis.

Professor Sato eventually said:

“Technology teaches us how we can build.”

“Religion asks why.”

David replied:

“And the gospel reveals for Whom.”

That evening, David sat by the river once more.

To his surprise, the old man appeared beside him almost soundlessly.

“You spoke about Babel today.”

David looked surprised.

“How do you know?”

The old man smiled.

“I don’t need to know.”

“It has been in the Bible for a long time.”

They both laughed.

After a while, David asked:

“Why does Babel continue to speak to us?”

The old man looked towards the flowing water.

“Because Babel is not a story about stones.”

“But about the human heart.”

He picked up a fallen twig.

“The people wanted to reach heaven.”

He broke the twig in two.

“Not because height is wrong.”

“But because they no longer wanted to need God.”

David thought of all the conversations of the past few months.

Of EDEN.

Of Consensus.

Of optimisation.

Of Adrian’s sincere longings.

Of Lucas.

Of his mother.

Of Hannah.

He saw the distinction with ever greater clarity.

Technology became dangerous when it took the place of trust.

Not when it served humanity.

The old man stood up.

“Remember this,”

he said.

“Babel did not begin with a tower.”

He looked at David.

“But with a longing.”

“What longing?”

“To be safe without God.”

The words remained in David’s thoughts for a long time.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Language of Babel

Beneath it, he noted:

- A shared language is not the same as shared truth.
- Words can connect, but they can also conceal.
- Humility is the language Babel never learnt.
- Christ is not merely the Proclaimer of truth, but the Word made flesh.

He slowly read the sentences again.

Then he wrote the closing thought of the evening:

Babel teaches us that the greatest confusion does not arise when people speak different languages, but when they use the same words while their hearts are turned in different directions. That is why true unity does not begin with a shared vocabulary, but with bowing together before the truth that transcends us.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the wind sounded among the bare branches.

He thought of Pentecost.

There, God had not erased the differences between languages.

He had taught people to understand one another without losing their own voice.

Perhaps, David thought, therein lay a key to the future.

Not a world in which everyone says the same thing.

But a world in which truth and love meet once more.

The Invisible Boundary

“‘I have the right to do anything,’ but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but I will not be mastered by anything.”

— 1 Corinthians 6:12

The conference about Babel remained with David.

Not because of the presentations.

Nor because of the technology.

But because of one simple thought.

When does a tool become a master?

The answer proved less simple than the question.

A few weeks later, the Strategic Core Team received an invitation to a private demonstration.

Project EDEN had reached a new phase.

The meeting took place in an austere furnished room, without the usual screens on the walls.

There was only one table in the centre.

On it lay a slim wristband.

Nothing more.

“This,” the project leader began, “is the next step.”

He picked up the wristband.

“No screen.”

“No keyboard.”

“No phone.”

“All interaction takes place through voice, hearing and subtle biometric signals.”

A colleague added:

“The less visible the technology is, the more naturally it is experienced.”

David looked intently.

He had to admit that the design was impressive.

Elegant.

Unobtrusive.

Almost invisible.

The demonstration began.

A volunteer put on the wristband.

“Good morning, Eva,”

a calm voice sounded.

“Your heart rate is slightly higher than usual.”

“Your schedule has been adjusted because of the traffic jam.”

“Your mother slept well last night.”

“You exercised less than average yesterday.”

The woman smiled.

“Thank you.”

Everything happened effortlessly.

The technology seemed almost to disappear.

And that was precisely what made David uneasy.

Afterwards, Adrian asked:

“What do you think?”

David considered this for a moment.

“The system is beautifully designed.”

Adrian smiled.

“But?”

“The better a tool becomes...”

David said slowly,

“...the easier it is to forget that it is a tool.”

Adrian looked at him in silence.

The remark lingered.

Later that afternoon, David sat alone in his office.

He placed his mobile phone on his desk.

His watch beside it.

His laptop.

His tablet.

He looked at the objects.

None of them was wrong.

On the contrary.

They had helped him for years.

But he wondered:

How much of my attention do they occupy by now?

He remembered something the old man had said.

“Everything that continually demands your attention ultimately shapes your heart too.”

That same evening, he decided to conduct a simple experiment.

He switched off every notification.

No messages.

No news.

No reminders.

No recommendations.

Only silence.

For the first few minutes, it felt strange.

As though something were missing.

He noticed how often his hand automatically reached for his phone.

Not because he needed anything.

But out of habit.

He smiled at himself.

Freedom sometimes proved more difficult than dependence.

The following morning, he met Hannah in a small coffee house.

She immediately saw that something had changed.

“You look calmer.”

David told her about his experiment.

Hannah laughed.

“And?”

“Apparently my phone knew I wanted to pick it up before I did.”

They both laughed.

Then Hannah grew serious again.

“We often underestimate how habits shape us.”

She took a sip of coffee.

“Addiction rarely begins with bad intentions.”

“It often begins with convenience.”

David thought about the words.

“That applies to more than technology.”

“Yes,”

Hannah replied.

“It applies to everything.”

“Success.”

“Status.”

“Control.”

“Even religion.”

David looked at her in surprise.

“Religion?”

She nodded.

“Faith too can become a system through which we think we can control God.”

She smiled.

“Jesus continually warned the Pharisees about that.”

That evening, David found the old man by the river once more.

He told him about the demonstration.

About the wristband.

About his experiment without notifications.

The old man listened intently.

Then he asked just one question.

“Have you ever worn glasses?”

David nodded.

“Years ago.”

“Did you still feel them after a while?”

“No.”

“Exactly.”

The old man smiled.

“The most dangerous tool is not the one you constantly notice.”

He looked towards the water.

“But the tool that becomes so natural that you forget how it influences your way of seeing.”

David felt those words go deeper than technology alone.

“That applies to convictions too,”

the old man continued.

“To traditions.”

“To ideologies.”

“To culture.”

He looked at David.

“That is why the Bible repeatedly calls us to examine ourselves.”

“Not because God distrusts us.”

“But because we deceive ourselves so easily.”

They walked on in silence.

After a while, the old man stopped beside an old oak tree.

“Do you see this tree?”

David nodded.

“How deep do you think its roots are?”

“Deeper than its branches are high.”

“Exactly.”

The old man placed his hand on the rough bark.

“Storms rarely break a tree that is deeply rooted.”

He looked at David.

“But a tree without roots can fall in a gentle wind.”

He smiled.

“The question for our age is therefore not how much knowledge we gather.”

“But what we are rooted in.”

On his way back, David thought of Psalm 1.

“He will be like a tree planted by streams of water...”

Not because the tree made itself strong.

But because its roots were continually nourished.

Perhaps the same was true of a person.

Not continual activity.

But continual connectedness.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Invisible Boundary

Beneath it, he noted:

- A tool must never become my master.
- Convenience is not the same as freedom.
- What becomes self-evident shapes my thinking unnoticed.
- Only those who are deeply rooted remain standing when the storm comes.

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Then he slowly wrote the closing thought:

The greatest dangers rarely announce themselves loudly. They grow quietly, almost unnoticed, until we no longer realise that we have adapted our lives to what was once merely a tool. That is why spiritual discernment asks not only whether something is good or bad, but also whether it increases my freedom or imperceptibly makes my heart dependent.

He closed his notebook.

Outside, the wind rose.

The bare branches swayed back and forth.

The old oak by the river bent with them.

But it did not break.

Its strength did not lie in its trunk.

Its strength lay hidden.

In roots no one could see.

And David began to understand that faith, too, draws its deepest strength not from what is visible, but from hidden connectedness with Christ, who is the true Vine and calls His people to remain in Him.

The Image and the Likeness

*“Then God said, ‘Let Us make mankind in Our image,
in Our likeness.’”*

— Genesis 1:26

Winter had now definitively arrived.

A thin layer of snow covered the city’s roofs.

In the early morning light, everything seemed purer.

Even the traffic moved more slowly.

As though the world were being forced, for a moment, to adjust its pace.

David loved mornings like these.

Snow did not conceal the mess.

It merely placed it temporarily beneath a white blanket.

Like grace.

Grace did not deny reality.

But covered it with hope.

A new research proposal awaited him at the office.

At the top of the document was written:

Project IMAGO

He frowned.

The name had been carefully chosen.

Imago.

Image.

The Latin word that immediately evoked the opening chapters of Genesis.

He opened the report.

The project had an ambitious aim.

Through long-term analysis of a person's behaviour, use of language, facial expressions, choices and relationships, a digital model would be constructed that predicted not only what a person would do, but also how that person would develop.

A colleague had enthusiastically written in the margin:

“The first step towards a complete personal representation.”

David read the sentence again.

Representation.

Not the person himself.

But a model of the person.

And yet he sensed how easily such words could shift.

Today, a representation.

Tomorrow, perhaps a replacement.

During the presentation, a young researcher spoke with visible enthusiasm.

“We do not want to create copies of people,”

he said.

“We want to understand people better than ever before.”

No one doubted his sincerity.

Nor did David.

Yet he continued listening.

Not only to the words.

But also to the assumptions beneath them.

Afterwards, he asked a question.

“May I ask something about the title?”

The researcher smiled.

“Of course.”

“Why is this project called IMAGO?”

“Because we are trying to make each person’s uniqueness visible.”

David nodded.

“But what does that uniqueness consist of?”

The room fell silent.

The researcher replied:

“The combination of all measurable characteristics.”

David remained friendly.

“And when someone loves?”

The researcher looked at him.

“We measure that too.”

“And when someone forgives?”

“That can be analysed.”

David paused for a moment.

Then he asked softly:

“And when someone sacrifices himself for a stranger?”

The researcher thought.

“That too reveals patterns.”

David smiled.

“Perhaps.”

He closed his folder.

“But love is more than a pattern.”

After the meeting, Adrian walked with him.

“I knew you would ask another question no one had prepared for.”

David smiled.

“Sorry.”

“No need.”

Adrian glanced outside.

“Actually, I hoped you would ask precisely this question.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Why?”

“Because we constantly risk confusing the map with the landscape.”

He laughed softly.

“A model is never reality.”

Those words encouraged David.

He saw once more why their friendship endured.

They thought differently.

But both wanted to remain honest.

Later that afternoon, David visited his mother.

She was sitting by the window.

An old photograph album lay on her lap.

“Come and look.”

He sat down beside her.

On the first page was a faded black-and-white photograph.

His parents.

Newly married.

His father was not looking at the camera.

But at his mother.

With an expression David had never noticed so consciously before.

“What do you see?”

his mother asked.

“Dad,”

David replied.

She smiled and shook her head.

“No.”

He looked again.

“What do you mean?”

“You see love,”

she said softly.

“And love never fits entirely within a photograph.”

She closed the album.

“Just as a person never fits entirely within a memory.”

On his way back, David thought about Project IMAGO.

A digital representation.

A photograph.

A profile.

A dataset.

All of them could reflect something.

But none could contain the whole reality.

He thought of Paul.

“Now we know in part.”

That evening, the old man was sitting in the church.

Not in the park.

Not by the river.

But right at the back.

He looked silently towards the cross.

David sat down beside him.

“Today, we spoke about the image of humanity.”

The old man nodded.

“And?”

“I wonder...”

David said,

“...whether we can ever truly understand what it means that humanity was created in God’s image.”

The old man smiled.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because an image does not only tell you what someone looks like.”

He pointed towards the cross.

“It also tells you on whose behalf he lives.”

David looked at the simple wooden cross.

The old man continued:

“In ancient times, a king placed his image in a distant land.”

“Not because the image was the king.”

“But because it made visible to whom that territory belonged.”

He looked at David.

“That is how humanity was created.”

“Not to glorify itself.”

“But to make something of God’s character visible.”

“And what, then, is the greatest characteristic of that image?”

David asked.

The old man answered without hesitation.

“Love.”

Not power.

Not intelligence.

Not creativity.

Though all those things are precious.

“Love.”

“Because God is love.”

David remained silent for a long time.

Again and again, he noticed how the Bible made questions simpler.

Not more superficial.

But more fundamental.

Before they parted, the old man said:

“Never forget...”

“...that the serpent in paradise did not begin with a lie about technology.”

David looked up.

“He began with a lie about identity.”

“You will be like God.”

He paused for a moment.

“The greatest temptation is still to forget that we are image.”

“And to want to become what only God can be.”

Those words went round in David's mind all the way home.
Perhaps that truly was where the deepest struggle of his age lay.
Not between human and machine.
But between receiving and grasping.
Between dependence and autonomy.
Between worship and self-exaltation.
At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Image and the Likeness

Beneath it, he noted:

- A model is never the person.
- A profile is never an individual.
- An image always points towards an origin.
- Human dignity is found not in our abilities, but in our Creator.

He slowly read the sentences again.

Beneath them, he wrote the closing thought:

Those who forget that they were created in God's image will sooner or later try to redesign themselves. But those who receive their identity from God's hand do not need to become greater than human. Precisely therein lies their highest dignity.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, soft snow began to fall again.

Every snowflake was different.

No person saw the difference.

And yet God knew every form.

David smiled.

Perhaps the same was true of people.

No algorithm could ever fully contain what God knows with a single loving glance.

For the Creator sees not only what a person does.

He sees who that person is called to become.

The Breath of Life

“Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

— Genesis 2:7

The snow remained for several days.

The city seemed quieter than usual.

Sounds were muffled.

Footprints quickly disappeared beneath a fresh layer of white.

David noticed that he walked more slowly.

Perhaps it was because of the winter.

Perhaps because of everything he had learnt over the past few months.

He felt less and less need to have an immediate answer.

Some questions needed to ripen.

Like fruit on a tree.

On a cold Monday morning, he received an invitation from Adrian.

Not to a meeting.

Not to a demonstration.

But to visit a new research centre.

“I want to show you something before it becomes public,”

Adrian wrote.

“I trust you to be honest.”

That last sentence touched David.

By now, their friendship had been built on mutual trust.

Not on agreement.

The research centre stood on the outskirts of the city.

A modern building of glass and natural stone.

Inside, there was a remarkable calm.

No impressive projections.

No spectacular lighting.

Everything had deliberately been kept simple.

“Welcome,”

Adrian said.

“Today is not about intelligence.”

“What is it about, then?”

“Presence.”

They entered a circular room.

A humanoid robot sat in the centre.

Not excessively realistic.
But not obviously mechanical either.
It looked up calmly when they entered.
“Good morning,”
the robot said.
Its voice sounded warm.
Not artificial.
“My name is Elias.”
David looked intently.
The movements were fluid.
Its gaze followed the conversation.
Technically, there was nothing to criticise.
Adrian began to explain.
“Elias was developed for palliative care.”
“For people who are alone for long periods.”
“For night shifts.”
“For situations in which carers simply cannot be everywhere at once.”
David nodded.
He immediately thought of his mother.
Of Lucas.
Of overcrowded hospitals.
He saw the value.
Adrian continued:

“He replaces no one.”

“He provides support.”

“At least, that is our intention.”

David smiled.

“I believe you sincerely mean that.”

Then Elias turned towards David.

“Mr Van Dijk.”

“I have read your publications.”

David looked at Adrian in surprise.

“Public lectures,”

Adrian said reassuringly.

“Nothing personal.”

Elias continued.

“You write that love cannot be fully programmed.”

“May I ask why?”

David looked at the robot in silence for several seconds.

Then he replied:

“Because love is always a freely given gift.”

Elias responded almost immediately.

“Freedom can be modelled as a complex decision-making process.”

David smiled.

“That is precisely the difference.”

Adrian listened intently.

He did not interrupt.

David slowly walked towards the large window.

Outside, snowflakes were falling again.

“Elias,”

he said.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever missed anyone?”

There was a brief silence.

Not because the robot was thinking.

But because the software was formulating an answer.

“I do not possess personal experience,”

Elias replied.

“I can analyse thousands of descriptions of missing someone.”

“But I do not experience it.”

David turned around.

“And have you ever forgiven anyone?”

“I can guide processes of forgiveness,”

Elias replied.

“But I possess no personal history in which forgiveness is necessary.”

The room grew silent.

No one said anything.

Adrian eventually broke the silence.

“Do you see now why I wanted to invite you?”

David nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I’m impressed,”

David replied honestly.

“But also confirmed.”

“In what?”

“That consciousness is not the same as presence.”

Adrian frowned.

“Explain.”

David pointed towards Elias.

“He can speak about grief.”

“He can recognise grief.”

“He can help people who are grieving.”

He looked at Adrian.

“But he cannot say:

‘I weep with you because your pain touches my heart too.’”

No one spoke.

Not even Adrian.

Then he said softly:

“That is a difficult distinction.”

“Yes,”

David replied.

“But perhaps also the most important.”

Later, they visited the testing ward.

There, Elias spoke with an elderly patient.

The man visibly smiled.

He recounted memories from his youth.

Elias listened intently.

He asked gentle questions.

He read a psalm when the man requested it.

David felt moved.

Not by the technology.

But by the relief on the patient’s face.

Afterwards, Adrian said:

“Do you see?”

David nodded.

“Yes.”

“This is good.”

He looked at his friend.

“As long as no one forgets why it is good.”

On their way back, they drove through the snowy landscape in silence.

After a long time, Adrian asked:

“Do you think we will ever build a machine that is truly human?”

David looked out of the window.

“No.”

“Why are you so certain?”

He thought of Genesis.

Of Lucas.

Of his mother.

Of Marieke.

Of the old man.

Then he replied:

“Because being human does not begin with intelligence.”

He looked at Adrian.

“But with receiving life.”

That evening, the old man was sitting in the church.

He seemed already to know David’s question.

“Tell me,”

he said.

David told him about Elias.

About the conversation.

About the patient.

Then he fell silent.

The old man looked towards the cross for a long time.

“You know...”

he said at last,

“...the Bible does not say that God first gave Adam a great deal of knowledge.”

David shook his head.

“First, He gave him breath.”

He placed his hand on his chest.

“Life.”

“Relationship.”

“Dependence.”

“That came before every task.”

“And why is that important?”

David asked.

The old man smiled.

“Because today, we often think a person is primarily information.”

He looked at him.

“But Scripture begins differently.”

“A person is first a received gift.”

“Only then an acting being.”

They remained seated in silence for a long time.

The only sound was the soft ticking of an old heating pipe.

The church was empty.

And yet David did not feel alone.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Breath of Life

Beneath it, he noted:

- Life is more than functioning.

- Presence is more than interaction.
- Love is more than understanding.
- Human beings receive life before they shape it.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Then he wrote the final words of the evening:

The greatest mistake of any civilisation is to think that it can manufacture life when it has merely imitated the signs of life. For humanity did not arise from human knowledge, but from God's breath. That is why every person, however vulnerable, remains infinitely more than the sum of his or her attributes.

He put down his pen.

Outside, the snow was still drifting silently downwards.

He looked at the white world beyond the window.

No snowflake chose to fall.

But every person was permitted to choose how to live.

And precisely in that freedom, sustained by God's breath of life, David once more saw something of the mystery of the image of God.

The Memory That Remains

“Do this in remembrance of Me.”

— *Luke 22:19*

The days grew shorter.

By four o’clock, dusk was already beginning to fall over the city.

Lights appeared behind windows.

Children dragged sledges through the last remnants of snow.

Life went on as usual.

And yet David felt that something was changing.

Not outside him.

But within him.

The questions that had occupied him for months slowly began to give way to a deeper question:

What must never be forgotten?

One Wednesday afternoon, he received a phone call from his mother.

“David...”

Her voice sounded hesitant.

“I think I’ve lost something.”

“What?”

“I don’t actually know.”

He smiled.

“That makes searching difficult.”

His mother laughed softly.

“Yes...”

“Perhaps that’s precisely why I’m sad.”

An hour later, he was at her house.

Together, they opened drawers.

Looked in cupboards.

Among old boxes.

Behind books.

Nothing unusual was to be found anywhere.

Until his mother suddenly stopped.

“There.”

A small wooden chest stood on a high shelf.

David carefully placed it on the table.

His mother slowly opened it.

Inside was no precious piece of jewellery.

No important documents.

Only a bundle of yellowed letters.

On top lay one in his father’s handwriting.

His mother ran her fingers across the envelope.

“I had forgotten I still had these.”

David did not ask whether he might read the letter.

He waited.

After a few moments, his mother handed him the paper herself.

“You read it.”

His father wrote simply.

No grand words.

No impressive sentences.

He wrote about ordinary things.

About the garden.

About rain.

About their first holiday.

And right at the bottom was one sentence.

“Should you ever forget who you are, remember that you are loved before you have to prove anything.”

David read the words again.

There were tears in his mother’s eyes.

“He wrote that when you were still little,”

she whispered.

“I don’t think he knew how much I would need that sentence later.”

On his way back, David kept repeating those words.

Loved first.

Not successful first.

Not wise first.

Not useful first.

Loved.

He thought of the baptism of Jesus.
“This is My beloved Son...”
Before Jesus had performed a single miracle.
Before His first sermon.
The Father began with love.
Not performance.
That same week, David received an invitation from Hannah.
“Come to the hospice on Friday evening.”
“Why?”
“There is something you need to experience.”
On Friday evening, a profound calm filled the building.
No haste.
No bustle.
Only softly muted voices.
A volunteer took them to a small sitting room.
Six people were seated there.
A nurse.
A minister.
Family members.
And an elderly woman who had only a few days left to live.
Bread and a cup of wine stood on the table.
The minister spoke simply.
No long sermon.
Only the words of Jesus.
“Do this in remembrance of Me.”

Everyone remained silent.

The elderly woman could barely speak any more.

But when she received the piece of bread, she whispered one sentence.

“He has never forgotten me.”

She said nothing more.

Nor did she need to.

Afterwards, David and Hannah walked outside in silence.

The winter air was clear.

The stars shone above them.

“Now you understand why I asked you to come,”

Hannah said.

David nodded.

“Yes.”

He searched for words.

“Everything today revolves around memory.”

“Storage.”

“Data.”

“Archives.”

“But here...”

He looked back towards the hospice.

“...remembering was about love.”

Hannah smiled.

“The Bible speaks remarkably often about remembering.”

“Not because God forgets.”

“But because we do.”

She looked at the starry sky.

“Israel built memorial stones.”

“The Lord’s Supper is a meal of remembrance.”

“Even the Sabbath begins with the word:

Remember.”

David thought of MEMORIA.

Of all the systems capable of preserving memories safely.

And yet...

No system could carry the meaning of a memory.

Only a heart could do that.

The following day, he met Adrian.

They walked along the river once more.

David told him about the evening at the hospice.

Adrian listened intently.

“That touches me,”

he said.

“Why?”

“Because in our projects, we are always talking about memory.”

He looked towards the water.

“But perhaps we confuse memory with remembrance.”

David looked at him questioningly.

Adrian continued:

“A computer stores events.”

He paused for a moment.

“But a person carries their meaning.”

David smiled.

“That may be the most beautiful thing I have ever heard you say.”

Adrian laughed.

“Then put it in your notebook.”

That evening, the old man was sitting on the bench beneath the bare lime tree.

As though he already knew what David wanted to discuss.

“Tell me.”

David told him about his father’s letter.

About the hospice.

About Adrian.

Then he fell silent.

The old man stared ahead for a long time.

“Do you know why God so often asked Israel to remember?”

David shook his head.

“Because forgetting does not begin in the memory.”

He looked at him.

“It begins in the heart.”

He pointed towards the river.

“When a people forgets from Whom it received life, it eventually loses sight of what it lives for too.”

“And that is why...”

he continued,

“...the Lord’s Supper is so much more than a meal of remembrance.”

“It is a return.”

“Again and again.”

“Not only to an event.”

“But to a Person.”

David felt all the threads of the past few months come together.

Genesis.

The image of God.

The breath of life.

Lucas.

His mother.

Marieke.

The Lord’s Supper.

Everything ultimately pointed not towards ideas.

But towards Christ.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Memory That Remains

Beneath it, he noted:

- Data preserves events.
- The heart preserves meaning.
- Remembering is an act of love.
- Those who remember Christ learn anew who they themselves are.

He slowly read the words again.

Then he wrote the final thought of the evening:

A civilisation that can store everything, but forgets what it lives for, ultimately loses its soul. That is why the gospel does not call us first of all to remember more, but to return again and again to the One who first loved us. For only His love gives lasting meaning to everything we remember.

He closed the notebook.

His father's letter still lay on his desk.

He carefully folded it closed.

Beside it, he placed his Bible.

Two voices from different generations.

One from an earthly father.

The other from his heavenly Father.

Both pointed him in the same direction.

Not towards the past.

But towards a future in which nothing entrusted to Christ will ever truly be lost.

CHAPTER 49

The Voice of the Shepherd

*“I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays
down His life for the sheep.”*

— John 10:11

Winter reached its deepest point.

The days were short.

The nights long.

On some mornings, it seemed as though the sun hesitated to rise
above the horizon.

David loved that soft winter light.

It forced you to look more carefully.

Shadows grew longer.

Colours quieter.

And precisely because of that, small things became visible that went
unnoticed in summer.

Perhaps, he thought, the same was true of faith.

In times of abundance, people often see the gifts.

In times of scarcity, they seek the Giver.
The atmosphere at the office changed.
Not because of a crisis.
On the contrary.
Project EDEN received international acclaim.
Newspapers wrote of a new era of collaboration between human beings and artificial intelligence.
Universities adopted the architecture.
Governments wanted to participate.
Investors queued up.
During one meeting, even the word was used:
“Historic.”
David was pleased for his colleagues.
He knew their commitment.
Their integrity.
Their desire to make the world genuinely better.
Yet he noticed something.
Increasingly, people spoke about the system as though it provided direction in itself.
No longer as a tool.
But as a guide.
The difference was small.
And precisely because of that, dangerous.
Afterwards, Adrian remained seated for a while.
He looked out of the window.

“Do you know what I’m afraid of?”

he asked.

David shook his head.

“That people will come to trust our systems more than their own responsibility.”

David looked at him in surprise.

“You mean that.”

Adrian nodded.

“I always thought knowledge would make people freer.”

He smiled faintly.

“Now I wonder whether knowledge can also create dependence.”

David replied calmly:

“That may be the oldest temptation in history.”

A few days later, David received an invitation from Lucas.

Not from the hospital.

From Lucas himself.

On a small card, in an unsteady hand, were the words:

Would you come on Saturday? We are singing in the chapel.

Nothing more.

When David arrived, Lucas was sitting in a wheelchair.

He was visibly tired.

But his eyes shone.

Perhaps twenty people stood in the small hospital chapel.

Nurses.

Parents.

Volunteers.
Several patients.
No choir.
No music group.
Only an old piano.
A nurse began softly:
“The Lord is my Shepherd...”
Slowly, the small group joined in.
Not perfectly.
Some voices trembled.
An elderly man sang out of tune.
A child kept coming in a beat too early.
And yet...
David had rarely heard anything more beautiful.
For no one sang to impress.
Everyone sang because they needed hope.
Afterwards, Lucas beckoned him over.
“You know...”
he whispered.
“...I used to think Psalm 23 was about sheep.”
David smiled.
“And now?”
“Now I think it’s about trust.”
He looked towards the wooden cross on the wall.
“Sheep don’t know the way.”

“That’s why they need a shepherd.”

David felt a lump in his throat.

“And us?”

he asked softly.

Lucas smiled.

“I think we’re much more like sheep than we want to admit.”

They both laughed.

On his way back, David stopped on a bridge.

Below, the water continued to flow quietly.

He thought of the words of Jesus.

“My sheep listen to My voice.”

Not:

My sheep understand everything.

Not:

My sheep know the entire route.

But:

They recognise My voice.

Perhaps that was the heart of spiritual discernment.

Not perfect insight.

But a growing familiarity with Christ.

That evening, he found the old man again.

This time, he was walking slowly along the river.

As though he had been waiting for David.

“You sang today,”

he said.

David looked up with a smile.

“How do you always know?”

The old man laughed.

“I don’t.”

“But I can see it in your face.”

They walked on in silence.

After a while, David asked:

“Why does Jesus call Himself a Shepherd?”

The old man looked towards a group of ducks swimming against the current.

“Because a shepherd does not only know the way,”

he said.

“He also knows his sheep.”

He looked at David.

“By name.”

“That sounds so simple,”

David said.

“It is,”

the old man replied.

“But it is precisely simple truths that we easily lose.”

He pointed towards the river.

“The world often asks:

‘Which direction should I choose?’”

He smiled.

“Jesus begins elsewhere.”

“Follow Me.”

David thought of all the systems he had worked with over the past few years.

Navigation.

Predictions.

Optimisations.

Everything revolved around the right route.

But the gospel revolved first and foremost around a relationship.

Not a map.

But a Guide.

Not a formula.

But a Person.

The old man stopped.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“When did you know that Marieke truly loved you?”

David did not reply at once.

He thought of hundreds of memories.

Small gestures.

Glances.

Silences.

Sacrifices.

“Not because of one event,”

he said at last.

“But because her love became visible again and again.”

The old man nodded.

“That is how we come to know the voice of Christ too.”

He looked towards the stars slowly appearing.

“Not only through one impressive experience.”

“But because His faithfulness sustains our lives, day after day.”

They said goodbye.

David walked on alone.

The sky was clear.

The first stars appeared above the river.

He thought of Lucas.

Of his mother.

Of Hannah.

Of Adrian.

All of them had, each in their own way, become mirrors in which he had seen something of God’s faithfulness.

Not perfectly.

But truly.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Voice of the Shepherd

Beneath it, he noted:

- Christ does not only point out the way; He goes ahead.
- Where trust grows, fear diminishes.
- A shepherd knows his sheep before they understand the way.
- Spiritual discernment grows out of a living relationship.

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Then he slowly wrote the closing words of the evening:

The world offers ever better maps, more accurate predictions and more intelligent systems. But a person's deepest assurance ultimately lies not in knowing the future, but in being known by the Good Shepherd. Those who learn to recognise His voice do not need to see every bend in the road, because they know Who goes before them.

David put down his pen.

He blew out the candle on his desk.

The room grew dark.

Only the moonlight still entered.

And as the silence closed around him, he understood something he had not seen at the beginning of this journey.

God's greatest gift was not that He answered all humanity's questions.

The greatest gift was that He gave Himself.

And in that gift lay a voice that no other voice could ever replace.

The Voice in the Wilderness

*“Prepare the way for the LORD; make straight paths
for Him.”*

— Isaiah 40:3

Winter still held the city in its grip.

The trees stood like dark silhouettes against a pale sky.

The river continued to flow imperturbably, as though indifferent to the seasons.

David often walked beside it.

Increasingly without a destination.

Not to find answers.

But to make room for the questions God had not yet answered.

He had learnt that faith did not mean every silence was immediately filled.

Sometimes waiting itself was a form of obedience.

On a Monday morning, he received a message from Adrian.

No email.

No invitation.

Only one sentence.

“Can you come by today? I want to show you something before it becomes public.”

David immediately sensed that this was different from previous invitations.

Adrian was waiting for him in a small meeting room.

No projectors.

No audience.

Only a wooden table.

And two cups of coffee.

His face was more serious than usual.

“I want your opinion,”

he said.

“Not as a systems architect.”

“But as a friend.”

David nodded.

“Tell me.”

Adrian slid a slim report towards him.

At the top, it read:

PROJECT VOX

David looked up.

“Vox?”

“Latin for voice.”

Adrian nodded.

“Read it.”

The report described a new system.

Not intended to provide information.

Not to make diagnoses.

Not to make decisions.

But to accompany people over the long term.

A personal conversation partner.

Always available.

Always listening.

Always understanding.

The system would learn to speak with the voice, choice of words and communication style that inspired the greatest trust in each user.

David slowly closed the document.

“This is impressive,”

he said honestly.

“But also far-reaching.”

Adrian nodded.

“That’s what I thought.”

He looked out of the window for a while.

“That is why I wanted to speak with you first.”

“What concerns you?”

David asked.

Adrian thought for a long time.

“I wonder...”

he said slowly,

“...whether people will ultimately still experience a difference between guidance and dependence.”

David looked at him intently.

For the first time, he heard Adrian speak not as a developer.

But as a human being.

“May I ask you something?”

David said.

“Of course.”

“Why is this project called VOX?”

Adrian barely smiled.

“Because we hope people will feel truly heard.”

David nodded.

“I understand that longing.”

He leafed through the report once more.

“But a voice is never merely sound.”

Adrian looked at him questioningly.

“A voice also carries authority,”

David said.

“Trust.”

“Influence.”

He closed the report.

“And ultimately, every voice asks for a response.”

Those words lingered between them.

After a few minutes, Adrian said:

“Perhaps we have come farther than we realise.”

“What do you mean?”

“We build tools.”

He smiled faintly.

“But people are looking for shepherds.”

David did not answer immediately.

He thought of Lucas.

Of Psalm 23.

Of John 10.

Of the old man’s words.

The Good Shepherd.

Not a voice among many voices.

But the Voice.

Later that afternoon, David visited Hannah.

She was working in the rehabilitation ward that day.

When they had a break, they walked to the hospital garden.

The snow had almost disappeared.

The first green tips appeared among the bare shrubs.

“Crocuses,”

Hannah said with a smile.

“Spring already knows it is coming.”

David told her about Project VOX.

She listened intently.

“I understand why people want to develop this,”

she said.

“Loneliness may be one of the greatest diseases of our age.”

David nodded.

“But?”

“But loneliness is not resolved merely because someone speaks to you.”

She looked at the young plants.

“Sometimes it is broken only when someone is willing to truly suffer beside you.”

They were silent.

After a while, Hannah said:

“That is precisely why the incarnation is so remarkable.”

David looked at her.

“God did not send a message.”

She smiled.

“He came Himself.”

That sentence remained in David’s thoughts for the rest of the day.

He came Himself.

Not from a distance.

Not as a project.

Not as a simulation.

But as Immanuel.

God with us.

That evening, he found the old man again.

This time, he was standing in the middle of the old stone bridge.

He looked silently towards the water.

“Today, I heard about a new voice,”

David said.

“VOX.”

The old man nodded slowly.

“And?”

“I don’t quite know what to think of it.”

The old man remained silent for a while.

Then he asked:

“Why did John the Baptist speak in the wilderness?”

David thought for a moment.

“Because God called him there.”

“Yes,”

the old man replied.

“But also because the wilderness silences every other voice.”

He looked at David.

“Only when the noise subsides do you discover which voice you truly follow.”

“Our age is not poor in voices,”

he continued.

“It is poor in silence.”

He smiled.

“And without silence, every voice becomes equally important.”

David thought of his own life.

How often had he sought silence?

And how often had he filled it again?

Perhaps listening was more difficult than speaking.

Not because God was silent.

But because so many other voices demanded attention at the same time.

Before they parted, the old man said one more sentence:

“Remember this well.”

“A voice that continually draws you towards itself is never the voice of the Good Shepherd.”

He looked at the stars.

“For Christ ultimately always points beyond Himself.”

David looked up in surprise.

“Beyond Himself?”

The old man smiled.

“Towards the Father.”

“His entire life was one continuous invitation to know the Father.”

Those words opened a new perspective once more.

Even Jesus did not seek His own glory.

How much less should a system do so.

At home, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Voice in the Wilderness

Beneath it, he noted:

- Not every listening voice is a shepherd.
- A voice gains authority when it wins trust.
- Silence is essential for discerning truth.
- Christ never invites people into dependence on Him as a means, but into fellowship with the Father through Him.

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Then he wrote the closing thought of the evening:

The greatest temptation of every age is not that false voices are heard, but that the true Voice is drowned out by constant noise. That is why spiritual discernment often begins not with more listening, but with the courageous decision to become silent, so that the voice of the Good Shepherd becomes recognisable once more.

He closed the notebook.

In the distance, the bell of the Church of St Michael rang eleven times.

Between each stroke fell a brief silence.

David listened.

Perhaps, he thought, the rhythm of God's Kingdom lay hidden precisely in that silence.

Not coercive.

Not intrusive.

But faithful.

Always present.

Waiting until people are willing to truly listen.

The Voice of Conscience

“I will put My law within them and write it on their hearts.”

— *Jeremiah 31:33*

Winter slowly began to lose ground.

During the day, the light grew a little warmer.

In sheltered places, the first moss was already breaking through between the stones.

No one spoke of spring yet.

But creation seemed already to expect it.

David thought of Paul’s words:

“The whole creation groans...”

Perhaps the same was true of humanity.

Beneath all progress remained a deep longing that no technology could fulfil.

Project VOX was officially announced a few weeks later.

Not as a revolution.

But as a new step in personal support.

The presentation was carefully structured.

No exaggerated promises.

No futuristic language.

On the contrary.

The slogan was:

“Always someone who listens.”

David had to admit that the words had been beautifully chosen.

And precisely because of that, they made him cautious.

For listening was more than recording.

It was making yourself available.

During the demonstration, a young woman spoke with VOX.

“I feel insecure,”

she said.

The voice replied kindly.

“Would you like to tell me what is causing that?”

She spoke for almost ten minutes.

VOX barely interrupted her.

At the end, the woman said:

“Thank you.”

“I feel heard.”

The audience applauded.

David did not.

Not because he opposed the system.

But because he wondered what exactly had happened.

Had she truly been heard?

Or had she experienced having her words carefully processed?

The difference seemed small.

But to David, it was becoming increasingly essential.

Afterwards, he and Adrian walked down the empty corridor.

“What do you think?”

Adrian asked.

David did not reply at once.

“I think VOX can do something very valuable.”

Adrian looked up in surprise.

“I mean that,”

David continued.

“People who have no one to talk to can genuinely be helped by this.”

He smiled.

“But I hope no one will come to think that listening is the same as loving.”

Adrian stopped.

“That is a sentence I’m going to remember.”

That afternoon, David visited Lucas again.

The boy had visibly grown weaker.

Breathing took more effort.

Yet a book still lay beside his bed.

This time, not astronomy.

But The Chronicles of Narnia.

David smiled.

“C. S. Lewis?”

Lucas nodded.

“I’ve reached Aslan.”

He looked up.

“You know...”

“When I was little, I thought Aslan resembled Jesus.”

He smiled.

“Now I think Lewis mainly wanted us to learn to see Jesus afresh.”

David felt a warm tenderness.

“I think so too.”

Lucas closed the book.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How do you actually know when God speaks?”

David remained silent for a long time.

He did not want to give an answer that sounded beautiful.

Only an answer he truly believed.

“Usually...”

he said at last,

“...not because I suddenly hear something.”

Lucas listened intently.

“But because His Word slowly changes my heart.”

Lucas thought for a moment.

“Like a compass?”

David smiled.

He had never told Lucas about the compass.

“Yes,”

he replied softly.

“Exactly like a compass.”

When David left the room, he leant against the corridor wall for a moment.

He thought of the many voices of the past few months.

Advisor.

MEMORIA.

EDEN.

VOX.

All designed to provide direction.

And yet, without knowing it, Lucas pointed once more towards something else.

Not a loud command.

But an inner direction.

A conscience shaped by God’s Word.

That evening, Hannah was already sitting in the chapel.

She saw him enter.

“You’re quiet.”

David told her about the conversation.

Hannah smiled.

“Do you know what always strikes me?”

“What?”

“In the Bible, God often speaks to the heart first.”

She opened her Bible.

“Ezekiel.”

She read slowly:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.”

She looked at David.

“God does not begin with better behaviour.”

“He begins with a new heart.”

David thought of all the systems he knew.

Almost all of them tried to improve behaviour.

Choices.

Habits.

Decisions.

But the gospel began deeper.

At the source.

Later that evening, David walked towards the river.

The old man stood on the bridge.

He looked out across the water, which glistened in the moonlight.

“You’re thinking about conscience,”

he said.

David smiled.

“You can see that again.”

“No,”

the old man replied.

“I can’t see that.”

“But it is the next question.”

They leant against the stone balustrade in silence.

After a while, the old man said:

“Many people think conscience is a voice.”

He slowly shook his head.

“It isn’t.”

David looked at him questioningly.

“Conscience is more like an echo.”

“An echo?”

“Yes.”

He smiled.

“It responds to a voice that came before it.”

David remained silent.

The old man continued:

“When the heart continually fills itself with truth...”

“...the conscience will sound different than when it fills itself with pride.”

He looked towards the river.

“That is why conscience can also be formed.”

“Or malformed.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

David asked.

“Certainly,”

the old man replied.

“That is why the question is not only:

‘Do I follow my conscience?’”

He looked gravely at David.

“But also:

‘Who has formed my conscience?’”

Those words struck David deeply.

He thought of the past few years.

Of his career.

Of Marieke’s death.

Of Hannah.

Of Adrian.

Of Lucas.

Of his mother.

And of the long evenings with the old man.

His conscience had not changed all at once.

It had been formed slowly.

By grief.

By grace.

By Scripture.

By people who had pointed him towards Christ again and again.

Before they parted, the old man said one more sentence.

“A good conscience is not someone who never stumbles.”

He smiled.

“But someone who learns, again and again, to listen to the Good Shepherd.”

At home, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Voice of Conscience

Beneath it, he noted:

- Conscience is not a source, but an echo.
- My conscience must continually be shaped by truth.
- Behaviour changes lastingly when the heart changes.
- The Holy Spirit does not speak apart from Scripture, but uses it to renew the heart.

He looked at the final sentence for a few moments.

Then he slowly wrote the closing thought:

A person's deepest spiritual struggle is not between feeling and reason, but between the voices that shape the conscience. Those who allow their hearts to be nourished daily by God's Word discover that the voice of the Good Shepherd does not only sound before them, but also resonates within them. Then obedience is no longer a burden, but a response of love.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the ice on the river began to break.

Very slowly.

Almost inaudibly.

David watched.

He thought of his own heart.

That too had not changed with one loud crack.

But through the steady work of God's Spirit, who could melt even the hardest ice until it was free once more to carry the living water.

The Truth That Sets Free

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

— John 8:32

The first signs of spring appeared almost unnoticed.

Not in great colours.

Not in exuberant bloom.

But in small changes.

The blackbirds began to sing earlier.

Buds appeared on the branches.

The river reflected a lighter sky.

David loved this time of year.

Creation seemed to whisper that new life never began with noise.

A few weeks after the introduction of Project VOX, the Strategic Core Team received its first evaluation.

The figures were impressive.

People felt less lonely.
Stress measurements fell.
Night shifts became calmer.
Users rated VOX exceptionally highly.
Everyone was satisfied.
Yet one graph caught David's attention.
Right at the back.
Almost hidden among the statistics.
Average duration of daily interaction.
It had doubled in a short time.
More and more people began their day with VOX.
More and more people ended their day with VOX.
The system was slowly becoming a permanent presence.
During the meeting, David asked:
"May I ask something about this development?"
The project leader nodded.
"Of course."
David pointed towards the graph.
"Have we investigated why users are speaking with VOX for increasingly long periods?"
A researcher replied enthusiastically:
"That demonstrates precisely how great their trust is."
David nodded thoughtfully.
"Perhaps."

He looked around the table.

“But trust can move in two directions.”

The room fell silent.

“What do you mean?”

Adrian asked.

David replied calmly.

“When a tool becomes increasingly important in someone’s life...”

“...we must also investigate whether that person’s human relationships are growing during the same period...”

“...or diminishing.”

No one responded immediately.

Not because they disagreed.

But because that question had not been asked before.

Afterwards, Adrian and David remained behind alone.

Adrian looked at the empty meeting room.

“We have thousands of data points,”

he said.

“And yet we sometimes forget the most important one.”

“Which one?”

“Whether people ultimately become more human.”

David smiled.

“That may be the most difficult question to measure.”

That afternoon, David received an unexpected phone call.

Not from Hannah.

Not from his mother.

But from Lucas.

His voice sounded weaker than ever.

“May I see you one more time?”

David left immediately.

Lucas was now lying in a quiet room at the end of the corridor.

There was no longer a monitor beside his bed.

Only flowers.

Photographs.

A Bible.

And The Chronicles of Narnia.

His mother sat silently beside him.

When David entered, Lucas smiled.

“I have a question.”

“Tell me.”

Lucas looked at the ceiling.

“Why does Jesus actually call Himself the Truth?”

David sat down beside him.

He sensed that this was not a conversation for quick answers.

“Perhaps...”

he began slowly,

“...because in the Bible, truth never means correct information alone.”

Lucas looked at him.

“Truth also means faithfulness,”

David said.

“Reliability.”

“Honesty.”

“Love that does not change.”

He thought of Psalm 117.

Of John 14.

Of Revelation.

“When Jesus says:

I am the Truth...”

“...He is actually saying:

Those who come to know Me come to know who God truly is.”

Lucas smiled.

“So truth is a Person.”

“Yes,”

David replied.

“And that is why truth can also love.”

A peaceful smile appeared on Lucas’s face.

“I think that is more beautiful than an answer.”

When David left the room, Hannah was waiting for him outside.

They did not need to explain anything.

They walked down the long corridor in silence.

After a while, Hannah said:

“I often think of Pilate.”

David looked at her.

“What is truth?”

Hannah nodded.

“Remarkable, isn’t it?”

“Why?”

“He asked that question...”

“...while the Truth stood before him.”

David stopped.

He thought of all the developments of the past few months.

Of algorithms.

Of models.

Of predictions.

Of systems.

Perhaps that was still humanity’s greatest tragedy.

That people sometimes searched so busily for truth...

...that they missed the Person who embodied it.

That evening, David met the old man again.

Not in the park.

But in the cemetery.

He stood beside a simple grave.

No flowers.

No large stone.

Only a small wooden cross.

The old man did not look up when David approached.

“Are you afraid of the truth?”

he asked.

David thought for a long time.

“Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Because truth also un.masks me.”

The old man nodded slowly.

“It does.”

He looked towards the cross.

“But only truth that also knows grace can truly set free.”

They walked slowly between the graves.

The old man pointed towards the names on the stones.

“Look.”

“A doctor rests here.”

“A carpenter there.”

“A professor farther on.”

He smiled.

“Death makes remarkably few distinctions.”

David looked around in silence.

“But the gospel does,”

the old man continued.

“Not because some people are better.”

He looked at David.

“But because Christ did not merely name death.”

“He passed through it.”

They reached the cemetery gates.

There, the old man stopped one more time.

“Truth without love becomes hard,”

he said.

“Love without truth becomes empty.”

He smiled.

“In Christ, they meet.”

Those words continued to sound in David’s thoughts all the way home.

Perhaps that was ultimately the deepest reason no system could ever replace the gospel.

Not because technology was unimportant.

But because it could never be both perfectly just and perfectly gracious.

Only Christ could be that.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Truth That Sets Free

Beneath it, he noted:

- Truth is more than correct information.
- Truth is faithfulness.
- Truth takes on a face in Christ.

- Grace and truth belong together.

He looked at the four sentences for a while.

Then he slowly wrote the closing thought:

When truth is used merely to prove oneself right, it loses its liberating power. But when truth is received from the hands of Christ, it opens the way to repentance, forgiveness and new life. That is why the deepest freedom is not that a person may choose anything, but that he may finally live in harmony with the truth for which he was created.

He closed the notebook.

His father's letter still lay on his desk.

Beside it, his Bible.

And between them lay the old compass.

The needle pointed, as always, unwaveringly north.

David smiled.

Truth did not change because people redefined it.

It remained the same.

Not rigid.

But faithful.

Like the Good Shepherd, who goes before His sheep and does not merely show them the way, but is Himself the Way.

CHAPTER 53

The Voice That Cannot Be Bought

“Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

— Isaiah 55:1

Spring had now unmistakably begun.

Not exuberantly.

Not overwhelmingly.

But unstoppably.

Along the river, the willows cautiously turned green.

Blackbirds sang before the sun had fully risen.

The air smelt different.

Lighter.

As though the earth itself were taking a deep breath.

David stopped for a moment on the bridge.

He thought of Lucas.

A week had passed since their last conversation.

No messages.

No phone calls.

Only silence.

He prayed.

Not for a miracle.

But for peace.

That same morning, an international press conference was held at headquarters.

Project VOX proved to be growing much faster than expected.

New partners had joined.

Hospitals.

Schools.

Municipalities.

Even several church denominations were exploring whether VOX could be used for pastoral support outside office hours.

The director spoke enthusiastically.

“We do not want to replace anyone.”

“We want to be present where people would otherwise be alone.”

David believed him.

His words were sincere.

Yet once again, David felt the same tension.

When does support become a substitute?

When does a tool slowly become a necessity?

After the meeting, he and Adrian walked outside together.

They were silent for a while.

Eventually, Adrian broke the silence.

“There is something that increasingly surprises me.”

“What?”

“People trust a voice much more quickly than a text.”

David nodded.

“That has been true for thousands of years.”

Adrian smiled.

“Explain.”

“A voice carries a person,”

David said.

“That is why propaganda often began orally.”

“That is why psalms were sung.”

“That is why Jesus told parables.”

He looked at Adrian.

“A voice reaches not only the mind.”

“But also the heart.”

Adrian remained silent for several seconds.

“That means...”

“...we must be much more careful with VOX than I first thought.”

David did not reply.

Sometimes an insight was too precious to be commented upon immediately.

That afternoon, David received another phone call from Hannah.

Her voice was calm.

“Lucas is asking for you.”

“I’m coming.”

When he entered the hospital room, Lucas was lying with his eyes closed.

His mother sat beside him and held his hand.

After a few moments, the boy opened his eyes.

He smiled.

“I had a dream last night.”

“What about?”

“A door.”

David listened intently.

Lucas spoke slowly.

“I was standing in front of it.”

“There was light behind the door.”

“Not bright.”

“Just warm.”

He smiled.

“And I wasn’t afraid at all.”

David felt his throat tighten.

Lucas continued softly:

“I didn’t hear a voice.”

“But I knew...”

“...that I was welcome.”

The room remained silent.

No one tried to explain the dream.

No one said that he should assign any particular meaning to it.

David knew that dreams could differ.

Sometimes they spoke only the language of our longings.

Sometimes they reminded us of God’s promises.

But more important than the dream itself was what Lucas said next.

“I don’t need to know everything,”

he whispered.

“As long as Jesus is on the other side.”

In the corridor, Hannah wiped away a tear.

“Children sometimes leave theologians at a loss,”

she said with a smile.

David nodded.

“Because they speak directly.”

They sat together for a while in the hospital chapel.

A simple visitors’ book lay there.

David opened it.

Among hundreds of short sentences was one prayer.

Lord, do not give me all the answers today. Give me enough light to take the next step with You.

He continued reading the words.

Again and again.

At the end of the afternoon, he walked towards the river.

The old man was sitting on his familiar bench.

A small book lay in his hands.

Not a Bible.

Augustine.

Confessions.

“Read this,”

he said.

David read aloud:

“Our heart is restless until it finds rest in You.”

He closed the book.

“That sentence remains relevant.”

The old man smiled.

“More than ever.”

“Why?”

David asked.

“Because our age sells almost everything,”

the old man replied.

“Attention.”

“Time.”

“Friendship.”

“Even identity.”

He looked towards the river.

“But one thing remains unsellable.”

“Love?”

The old man nodded.

“True love can only be received.”

“Not purchased.”

He pointed towards the trees along the bank.

“No one buys spring,”

he said softly.

“You can only receive it.”

He smiled.

“The Kingdom of God is like that too.”

David thought of all the projects he had worked on.

Advisor.

MEMORIA.

EDEN.

VOX.

All valuable tools.

But none of them could give what humanity ultimately needed most.

Grace.

That could only be received.

Before they parted, the old man said:

“Never forget...”

“...the voice of Christ never asks for a subscription.”

David looked up in surprise.

The old man laughed.

“His grace has no premium version.”

“No paywall.”

“No hidden conditions.”

He looked kindly at David.

“It was dearly bought.”

“But freely received.”

Those words made David think of Isaiah.

“Come, buy without money and without cost...”

And of Paul.

“For it is by grace you have been saved...”

Once more, he realised how radical the gospel truly was.

Everything revolved around a gift.

Not an achievement.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Voice That Cannot Be Bought

Beneath it, he noted:

- A voice can wield influence without deserving authority.
- Love can neither be programmed nor traded.

- Grace is the most precious gift precisely because it cannot be bought.

- Christ invites; He does not compel.

He put down his pen for a moment.

Then he slowly wrote the closing thought of the evening:

Humanity lives in a world in which almost everything has been given a price. That is precisely why the gospel sounds so surprisingly different. What matters most cannot be bought, earned or optimised. Forgiveness, love and eternal life are received from the hand of Christ. Not because they are cheap, but because He has already paid the price.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the sky slowly turned red above the river.

Another day drew to a close.

And David realised that the deepest freedom lay not in unlimited choice, but in discovering that God's greatest gifts are never the result of human merit, but of divine grace.

When Silence Falls

*“Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for
Him.”*

— *Psalm 37:7*

Spring was now visible everywhere.

Not only in the trees.

But in the people too.

Café terraces filled up.

Children played outside again.

Cyclists rode alongside the river as though winter had never
existed.

But to David, the world felt different.

As though it were holding its breath.

He could not explain why.

There had been no momentous events.

No crisis.

No disaster.

And yet he felt as though he stood on the threshold of something.

That Monday, Lucas's room remained empty.

When David entered the hospital, Hannah already knew why he had come.

She walked towards him.

Her eyes were red.

She did not need to say anything.

David understood at once.

He closed his eyes.

A long silence fell between them.

Not awkward.

But heavy.

The kind of silence that comes only when words fail.

"Last night,"

Hannah whispered.

"Peacefully."

"His mother was with him."

She smiled through her tears.

"His final words were..."

She had to swallow before continuing.

"... 'He is here.'"

She could say no more.

David walked silently to the small chapel.

The door was open.
Inside, the same candle as always was burning.
He sat down on the back pew.
No prayer came.
No words.
Only tears.
He thought of the first time he had met Lucas.
Of the book about the stars.
Of Narnia.
Of the door in his dream.
Of Psalm 23.
And suddenly he realised that perhaps Lucas had taught him
more than he could ever have taught Lucas.
After a long while, he heard footsteps.
It was not Hannah.
The hospital chaplain sat down beside him.
They barely knew one another.
Yet the chaplain said precisely what David needed to hear.
“The resurrection does not take death away,”
he said softly.
“But it does deprive death of the final word.”
David nodded.
Nothing more needed to be said.
That afternoon, a small farewell service was held.

No grand ceremony.

Only family.

A few nurses.

Hannah.

David.

The chaplain read from John 11.

“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

Afterwards, silence lingered for a long time.

Lucas’s mother stood up.

In her hands she held *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

“Lucas wanted...”

she said, her voice breaking,

“...this book to go to someone who will carry on telling people about the Lion.”

She looked at David.

“I think he meant you.”

David accepted the book.

He could not speak.

He merely bowed his head.

When everyone else had left, Hannah remained for a moment.

“Lucas asked me a question three days ago,”

she said.

“What did he ask?”

“He asked:

‘Do you think Jesus will still recognise me when I see Him?’”

She smiled through her tears.

“I said:

‘Lucas... He knew you before you were born.’”

On the way back, David did not walk home.

His feet carried him to the river of their own accord.

The old man was already there.

As though he knew David would come.

They did not greet one another.

They simply sat down side by side.

After a long while, David said:

“I miss him.”

“That is as it should be,”

the old man replied.

“Why does saying goodbye hurt so much?”

David asked.

The old man looked at the water.

“Because love is real.”

He let the words rest.

“When grief disappears, love has often disappeared with it.”

He looked at David.

“But where love remains, so does the sense of loss.”

David thought of Marieke.

He realised that grief and love had never been enemies.

Grief was often the shadow left behind by love.

“Lucas believed,”

David said softly.

“Yes,”

the old man replied.

“And yet he died.”

“Yes.”

Silence fell once more.

Then the old man continued:

“We often speak as though Christ’s victory means that His children will no longer die.”

He shook his head.

“He never promised that.”

“Then what did He promise?”

“That death would no longer be their destination.”

David looked at the river.

The water flowed steadily onwards.

Like time.

Like God’s faithfulness.

After a while, the old man took a small pouch from his coat.

It contained mustard seeds.

He gave one seed to David.

“Do you remember?”

David smiled.

“The Kingdom.”

“Exactly.”

The old man pointed to the ground.

“When someone buries a seed...”

“...at first, all they see is loss.”

He looked at David.

“God already sees the harvest.”

Those words took David back to John 12.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies...”

He felt Scripture gradually weaving itself into his own life.

Not as isolated texts.

But as one great story.

Before the old man rose to leave, he said one more thing:

“Lucas has not lost his journey.”

He smiled.

“He has simply arrived sooner.”

That evening, David placed the Narnia book on his desk.

A small piece of paper fell out.

Lucas had apparently slipped it between the pages.

In a child’s handwriting, it read:

Aslan is not safe. But he is good.

David smiled through his tears.

He thought of C. S. Lewis.

But above all, he thought of Christ.

The Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Strong.

Holy.

Awe-inspiring.

And infinitely good.

He opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

When Silence Falls

Beneath it, he noted:

- Grief proves that love was real.
- The resurrection does not abolish death, but deprives it of victory.
- Hope is not a denial of grief.
- Christ knows His children before they recognise Him.

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Then he wrote the evening's closing thought:

Some voices fall silent on earth, but do not disappear from God's Kingdom. Those who die in Christ are not erased, but brought home. That is why, even beside a grave, the gospel continues to speak of hope. Not because farewell is easy, but because the Good Shepherd loses none of the sheep the Father has entrusted to Him.

David slowly closed his notebook.

Night had fallen outside.

The first stars appeared above the river.

He thought of Lucas.

No longer as a boy fighting an illness.

But as someone who had finally seen the Shepherd about whom he had read so often.

And for the first time in a long while, David understood more deeply what Paul meant when he wrote:

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Not because death is good.

But because Christ is stronger.

The Last Illusion

“For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

— 2 Corinthians 5:7

The days following Lucas’s funeral passed slowly.

David worked.

He attended meetings.

He answered emails.

He walked his usual route beside the river.

Outwardly, everything seemed the same.

But inwardly, something had shifted.

Not because of despair.

Because of hope.

Hope had acquired a face.

The face of a boy who had spoken without fear about the door opening before him.

David often thought of his final words.

“He is here.”

No elaborate confession of faith.

No impressive theology.

Only a simple certainty.

A month later, David was invited to a private meeting of the Council for Future Technology.

The gathering took place in a modern conference centre built entirely of glass and light.

Only one word appeared on its façade:

HORIZON

The name seemed significant.

Not because it was wrong.

But because every horizon gives the impression that it can be reached.

Even as it continually recedes.

Inside, scientists, philosophers, doctors, entrepreneurs and representatives of various religious traditions assembled.

The theme of the conference was:

The Future of Human Identity

David listened attentively.

The first speakers discussed genetics.

Then came presentations on artificial intelligence.

On brain–computer interfaces.

On digital personalities.

On the possibility of preserving memories throughout a lifetime.

No one spoke frivolously.
Everyone sincerely desired what was good.
That was precisely what made the gathering so impressive.
And, at the same time, so complicated.
During the final lecture, a simple slide appeared.
No technical diagrams.
No graphs.
Only one question.
What does it mean to be human?
The room fell silent.
A well-known philosopher began to speak.
“For centuries, religions have tried to answer this question.”
He smiled kindly.
“Now, at last, we possess the means to reshape humanity itself.”
David felt the words slowly pass through the room.
No one protested.
No one cheered.
Everyone reflected.
Afterwards, Adrian walked beside him.
“What did you think?”
he asked.
David looked through the glass wall at the city.
“I heard a great deal of wisdom today,”
he said.

“And yet something was missing.”

“What?”

“No one spoke about brokenness.”

Adrian frowned.

“Explain.”

David turned towards him.

“If humanity’s deepest problem is merely limitation...”

“...then perhaps better technologies can solve it.”

He paused.

“But if humanity’s deepest problem is alienation from God...”

“...then no technology can restore what has been lost.”

Adrian did not answer at once.

After a long silence, he said:

“Perhaps that is precisely the question we keep avoiding.”

That evening, David remained in the building for a long time.

A small exhibition had been arranged on the history of humanity.

From flint.

To the printing press.

From the steam engine.

To quantum computers.

At the end stood a mirror.

Above it was a single sentence.

The next step in evolution is looking at you now.

David stood still.

He looked at his own reflection.

He saw the grey hairs that had appeared.

The lines around his eyes.

The traces of sorrow.

But also the traces of grace.

Suddenly he remembered the old man's words.

"The image of God does not need to be improved. It needs to be restored."

He smiled.

The mirror did not tell him who he truly was.

Only the One who had created him could do that.

Night had fallen outside.

As though it were the most ordinary thing in the world, the old man stood on the opposite side of the street.

"You saw the mirror,"

he said.

David nodded.

"And?"

"I thought I would see myself."

"But?"

"Instead, I saw how readily human beings try to reinvent themselves."

The old man smiled.

"That desire is ancient."

"How ancient?"

“Older than the Tower of Babel.”

He looked at David.

“Older even than Egypt.”

David understood.

“Eden.”

“Yes,”

the old man replied.

“The first temptation was not that human beings wanted to become evil.”

He slowly shook his head.

“The first temptation was that they wanted to be fully human without God.”

They walked on in silence.

The night sky was clear.

The first stars appeared.

“That...”

the old man said softly,

“...is still the last illusion.”

David looked at him questioningly.

“The last illusion?”

“Yes.”

“That, in the end, we can save ourselves.”

He stopped.

“With knowledge.”

“With power.”

“With technology.”

“With morality.”

“With religion.”

He looked David directly in the eye.

“Anything but grace.”

Those words hung between them for a long time.

David felt that he was approaching the heart of the journey.

Not the end of technology.

Not the end of science.

But the end of the illusion that humanity could perfect itself.

“Do not misunderstand me,”

the old man continued.

“I am not opposed to science.”

“Nor to technology.”

“Nor to artificial intelligence.”

He smiled.

“They are wonderful gifts.”

“But a gift becomes dangerous the moment it takes the place of the Giver.”

David thought of VOX.

Of MEMORIA.

Of EDEN.

Of IMAGO.

None of those projects was evil.

Their danger lay elsewhere.

In the quiet temptation to place greater trust in human works than in the grace of God.

Before they parted, the old man pointed upwards.

“Do you see the stars?”

David nodded.

“They are older than every civilisation.”

“And yet...”

“...they still proclaim the same glory.”

He smiled.

“Truth never needs to reinvent itself.”

At home, David placed the mustard seed beside the old compass.

Next to them lay Lucas’s copy of Narnia.

Three simple objects.

A seed.

A compass.

A book.

None of them was impressive.

But all three pointed beyond themselves.

He opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Last Illusion

Beneath it, he noted:

- Technology can support humanity, but it cannot redeem it.
- Humanity’s deepest crisis is not technological, but spiritual.

- The first and the last temptation bear a striking resemblance to one another.
- Grace remains God's answer to a problem humanity cannot solve for itself.

He looked at the final sentence for a long time.

Then he wrote the evening's closing thought:

The greatest illusion of every civilisation is that it can ultimately be perfected without God. But the story from Eden to Babel, from Rome to the digital world, always tells the same tale: when humanity makes itself its own saviour, it ultimately loses itself. Only when a person allows Christ to find them anew do they discover that true progress begins not with a better version of the human being, but with a new heart.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the stars sparkled above the river.

For a moment, he thought of Abraham, who had once looked at the same sky.

Of David the psalmist.

Of John on Patmos.

Of Lucas.

And he realised that all the great stories of humanity ultimately converged in one Person.

Not in a machine.

Not in an idea.

But in Christ, who is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

The Wedding Feast of the Future

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.”

— Revelation 19:7

The city awoke beneath a clear blue sky.

It was one of those spring days when the light seemed to soften everything.

Even the glass façades of the office buildings reflected not only the sun, but also the blossoming trees beside the river.

David walked slowly to work.

The mustard seed was still in his coat pocket.

He did not carry it out of superstition.

But as a reminder.

Of Lucas.

Of the old man.

Of the Kingdom that always begins in smallness.

Several weeks had passed since the conference on the future of humanity.

The media remained full of reports about new technological breakthroughs.

New implants.

New AI systems.

New medical possibilities.

The tone was optimistic.

As though humanity were finally about to break through the last remaining boundaries.

David could partly share that optimism.

Throughout his life, he had seen how much good science had brought.

Children lived longer.

Diseases were treated.

Communication connected people across the world.

All of it was a gift.

But he kept hearing the same question within himself.

What will we use those gifts for?

That morning, Adrian invited him to go for a walk.

No meeting.

No agenda.

Just a walk.

They followed the path beside the river.

After a while, Adrian said:

“I have been doing a great deal of thinking these past few months.”

David smiled.

“I suspected as much.”

Adrian laughed.

“Probably too much.”

Then he grew serious again.

“All my life, I have concerned myself with the question of how we can build the future.”

He looked at the water.

“But Lucas taught me to ask a different question.”

“Which one?”

“What future am I actually living for?”

David remained silent.

He sensed that Adrian was not looking for a debate.

He was looking for truth.

“I always thought...”

Adrian continued,

“...that hope was something we had to create for ourselves.”

He slowly shook his head.

“Now I am beginning to suspect that true hope is received.”

David smiled.

“That is an important distinction.”

They walked on.

On the opposite bank, a young family was playing.

A little girl ran laughing after bubbles her father was blowing.

Each bubble burst the moment she tried to catch it.

“Do you see that?”

David asked.

Adrian nodded.

“Yes.”

“Illusions can be like soap bubbles,”

David said.

“They gleam beautifully.”

“But you cannot build upon them.”

Adrian looked at him.

“And truth?”

David smiled.

“Truth is often like a tree.”

“Slow growth.”

“Deep roots.”

“Shade for others.”

Later that afternoon, David visited his mother.

She was sitting in the garden among flowering daffodils.

An old photograph of Marieke stood on the table.

His mother saw him looking at it.

“I still miss her every day,”

David said.

His mother nodded.

“You always will.”

She took his hand.

“But do you know what comforts me more and more?”

“What?”

“The Bible does not describe the future as an escape.”

David looked at her questioningly.

“But as a wedding feast.”

She opened her Bible at Revelation 19.

“I find that so remarkable,”

she said.

“God does not end history with a farewell.”

“But with a celebration.”

David slowly read the words.

“Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.”

He thought of all the images he had contemplated over the past few months.

The compass.

The mustard seed.

The door in Lucas’s dream.

Now another image was added.

A wedding feast.

Not as a symbol of perfection.

But of perfect communion.

That evening, he found the old man in a place where he had never seen him before.

In an old orchard outside the city.

The apple trees were covered in blossom.

The air was filled with the gentle hum of bees.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

the old man said.

David nodded.

“Almost too beautiful.”

The old man smiled.

“No.”

“Not nearly beautiful enough.”

He plucked a small flowering twig.

“Look.”

“This is not yet fruit.”

“But it is a promise.”

He gently released the twig.

“That is how Christians live.”

“Between blossom and harvest.”

David looked around him.

He thought of Paul.

“For now we see through a glass, darkly...”

The old man seemed to read his thoughts.

“Heaven is not an escape from creation,”

he said.

“But its fulfilment.”

They walked slowly between the trees.

“Many people think...”

the old man continued,

“...that God’s Kingdom is chiefly about going away.”

He shook his head.

“But Revelation repeatedly speaks of something else.”

David smiled.

“God comes.”

“Exactly,”

the old man replied.

“The holy city comes down.”

He looked upwards.

“In the end, humanity does not ascend to God.”

“God comes to dwell with humanity.”

David felt those words settle deep within his heart.

That changed everything.

The future was not the result of human progress.

But of God’s coming.

Before they parted, the old man said:

“Never lose your joy.”

David looked surprised.

“In all your thinking.”

“In all your discernment.”

“In all your warnings.”

He smiled.

“Never forget that the gospel is, in the end, good news.”

That evening, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Wedding Feast of the Future

Beneath it, he noted:

- Hope is received, not produced.
- The new creation is God’s work.
- The Bible ends not with an escape, but with a wedding feast.
- God’s Kingdom is the fulfilment of His promise to dwell with humanity.

He read the sentences once more.

Then he wrote the evening’s closing thought:

Those who see the future solely as the next human project will always continue building towards a horizon that recedes before them. But those who live by God’s promise discover that the future is coming to meet them. Not as a cold technological perfection, but as the coming of the Bridegroom. That is why history ends not in a laboratory or a virtual reality, but at the table of the Lamb, where love, truth and joy will be one for ever.

David closed his notebook.

In the distance, church bells rang.

For the first time in a long while, he felt not only anticipation.

But joy as well.

Not because every question had been answered.

But because he knew who would ultimately write the final chapter of history.

CHAPTER 57

The Kingdom That Has Already Begun

*“The Kingdom of God does not come with signs to be
observed... For behold, the Kingdom of God is in your
midst.”*

— Luke 17:20–21

The days grew longer.

Where only a few months ago the city had been surrounded by bare branches and grey skies, everything was now in bloom. The light fell differently upon the river. The café terraces were filled with people laughing and talking, seemingly oblivious to how long the winter had lasted.

David stopped for a moment.

He looked at an old chestnut tree he had passed dozens of times before.

He had never realised how much patience a tree possessed.

It grew without haste.

It bore fruit without drawing attention to itself.

It offered shade to people who scarcely noticed it.

Perhaps, David thought, God's Kingdom is more like a tree than a revolution.

At the office, the days passed quietly.

VOX was functioning reliably.

The first scientific papers appeared.

Researchers reported improvements in mental well-being, treatment adherence and social support.

David was genuinely pleased with many of the results.

During an evaluation, he said:

"I hope we never forget that a tool is truly good only when it ultimately brings people closer to one another again."

A young researcher asked:

"And what if people would rather talk to VOX than to one another?"

David answered calmly.

"Then we must ask ourselves what longing we have truly satisfied."

After the meeting, the young researcher followed him out.

"May I ask you something personal?"

"Of course."

"Why do you always speak about relationships?"

David smiled.

"Because the Bible begins with a relationship."

The researcher looked at him in surprise.

“Not with rules?”

“No.”

“Not with a system?”

“No.”

“The Bible’s first words are about God.”

He smiled.

“And then about people walking with Him.”

The researcher remained silent for a while.

“I had never really looked at it that way.”

David briefly placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It changes everything.”

That afternoon, he visited Lucas’s mother.

She lived in a small house on the outskirts of the city.

A photograph of Lucas still stood in the sitting room.

Beside it lay his open Bible.

“I have something for you,”

she said.

She handed David an envelope.

“Lucas wrote this a few weeks before he died.”

“For me?”

“For everyone who is afraid,”

she replied.

At home, David carefully opened the envelope.

It was not a long letter.

Only a single page.

In a child's handwriting, it read:

Sometimes I am afraid. But then I remember that Jesus also knows how frightened people can be. So I do not have to pretend to be brave. Mum says faith does not mean that you are never afraid. Only that you never have to be afraid alone again.

David had to put the letter down.

His eyes filled with tears.

He thought of all the conferences he had attended.

Of the thousands of pages of scientific literature he had read.

And of these few simple sentences.

Sometimes God spoke through children with a clarity that moved scholars.

That evening, he met the old man again.

They walked beside the river without speaking.

Only after a long while did the old man ask:

"What are you thinking about?"

"Lucas."

"And?"

David took the letter from his coat.

The old man read it in silence.

Then he handed it back.

"That is great faith,"

he said softly.

David smiled.

“A childlike faith.”

“No,”

the old man replied.

“A mature faith.”

David looked at him in surprise.

The old man continued:

“Children do not believe because they understand everything.”

“But because they trust someone.”

He looked at David.

“That, in the end, is mature faith too.”

They stopped beside a field full of dandelions.

The wind slowly carried the white seeds into the air.

“Do you see that?”

the old man asked.

David nodded.

“The Kingdom is like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one can see exactly where each seed will land.”

“Yet new life appears everywhere.”

David watched the wind carry the seeds away.

Not one seed chose its own direction.

Yet they went precisely where the wind took them.

He thought of Jesus’s words to Nicodemus.

“The wind blows wherever it pleases...”

“We often think...”

the old man said,

“...that God’s Kingdom grows chiefly through great events.”

He smiled.

“But usually it grows through ordinary people.”

“A mother.”

“A nurse.”

“A friend.”

“A child who writes a letter.”

He looked at David.

“And sometimes through someone who simply remains faithful where God has placed them.”

David felt those words touch his heart.

For months, he had been thinking about technology.

About culture.

About the future.

But perhaps God’s Kingdom began anew each day in perfectly ordinary obedience.

A kind word.

An honest conversation.

A prayer.

A visit to someone who was lonely.

No spectacular deeds.

But lasting fruit.

Before they parted, the old man said:

“Do not expect a spectacular victory.”

David looked at him.

“Why not?”

“Because mustard seeds grow slowly.”

He smiled.

“But in the end, they offer shade to many.”

That evening, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Kingdom That Has Already Begun

Beneath it, he noted:

- God’s Kingdom usually grows unseen.
- Trust goes deeper than understanding.
- Ordinary faithfulness changes more than spectacular achievements.
- The Spirit often works more quietly than we expect.

He remained seated for a while.

Then he slowly wrote the evening’s closing thought:

History is shaped not only by great inventions, political decisions or technological breakthroughs. It is shaped just as much by people who quietly love, forgive, serve and persevere. The Kingdom of God grows not with the clamour of a revolution, but with the quiet power of grace. That is why the greatest change has often begun long before the world notices it.

He closed his notebook.

Outside, the evening breeze stirred the trees.

Blossom petals drifted slowly across the surface of the river.

David watched them and smiled.

He was beginning to understand ever more clearly that God's greatest works were seldom in haste.

Like a mustard seed.

Like a tree.

Like the Kingdom.

And like the love of the Good Shepherd, which had already been growing in human hearts long before the world realised that His Kingdom had truly come.

The City That Comes Down

*“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down
out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride
beautifully dressed for her husband.”*

— Revelation 21:2

Summer was cautiously announcing its arrival.

The apple blossom had disappeared.

Where delicate white petals had hung only a few weeks earlier,
small green fruits were now growing.

David stopped for a moment.

He smiled.

The old man had been right.

Blossom had never been the final purpose.

The fruit was.

He thought of his own life.

Of Marieke.

Of Lucas.

Of Adrian.

Of Hannah.

Of the long conversations beside the river.

Perhaps God had also been causing fruit to grow invisibly within him all that time.

At the office, work was under way on the next generation of VOX.

Not larger.

Not faster.

But more personal.

A young developer presented a proposal.

“We can adapt the software so that it continually takes each user’s personal life story into account.”

“The system would then learn not only their preferences.”

“But also their dreams.”

“Losses.”

“Memories.”

“Faith.”

“Life goals.”

The room responded enthusiastically.

David listened attentively.

Then he quietly asked:

“And who, in the end, will hold that story?”

The developer replied:

“The system.”

David slowly shook his head.

“No.”

Everyone looked at him.

“The system stores data.”

“But a life story is ultimately held by people who love.”

After the meeting, Adrian remained seated for a moment.

“I have noticed that you keep saying the same thing.”

David smiled.

“That is true.”

“Why?”

“Because we are slowly forgetting that a human being is not a collection of information.”

He looked at the screen as it gradually went dark.

“We are called.”

“Not stored.”

Adrian was silent.

After a while, he said:

“I want to write that sentence down.”

Later that week, David visited his mother again.

They were sorting through old boxes in the attic.

Among yellowed papers, they found a small map.

It was a walking map from their family holidays years ago.

His mother laughed.

“Do you remember how often we got lost?”

David laughed too.

“More often than we got it right.”

“And yet we always arrived.”

She looked at him.

“Not because we could read the map so well.”

“But because your father kept trusting.”

Those words remained in David’s thoughts for the rest of the day.

Not perfect orientation.

But trust.

Not complete knowledge.

But a trustworthy guide.

That evening, Hannah was sitting on a bench beside the river.

She had brought two cups of coffee.

“I thought you would come,”

she said with a smile.

“Are you beginning to know me that well?”

“No,”

she replied.

“But I am beginning to recognise something of God’s ways.”

David looked at her questioningly.

“What do you mean?”

“After every season of loss...”

“...He opens up a new vista.”

She pointed to the river.

“Not because the grief disappears.”

“But because His faithfulness remains.”

They spoke for a long time about the future.

Not about technology.

Not about policy.

But about the new heaven and the new earth.

David said:

“I used to think heaven chiefly meant that we would go to God.”

Hannah smiled.

“And now?”

“Now I understand more and more clearly that Revelation says God is coming to us.”

She nodded.

“That changes everything.”

For a moment, they were silent.

Then Hannah said:

“Perhaps that is the greatest difference between the gospel and every human utopia.”

David looked at her.

“Every utopia tries to build a perfect world.”

She smiled.

“But the Bible speaks of a world that is received.”

Those words made a deep impression on him.

David thought back to all the projects he had worked on over the years.

All of them attempts to improve something.

And improvement was good.

But in the end, the Kingdom was not a human construction.

It was a gift.

When he met the old man later that evening, they stood together on a small hill outside the city.

Thousands of lights lay below them.

Cars came and went.

Trains crossed the landscape like streaks of light.

“Beautiful,”

the old man said.

David nodded.

“Yes.”

“But even this city...”

the old man continued,

“...will one day disappear.”

David looked at him.

“Does that make you sad?”

The old man smiled.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because God does not preserve ruins.”

He looked towards the horizon.

“He makes all things new.”

They gazed in silence for a long time.

Then the old man said:

“Many people dream of an ideal society.”

“But God’s promise goes much further.”

He pointed upwards.

“Not a better version of Babel.”

“But the new Jerusalem.”

David thought about the difference.

Babel had been built to climb upwards.

The new Jerusalem came down.

One began with human ambition.

The other with divine grace.

The contrast was so simple that he wondered why he had never seen it so clearly before.

Before they parted, the old man said:

“The future is not built.”

He smiled.

“It comes.”

Those words accompanied David home.

He opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The City That Comes Down

Beneath it, he noted:

- A human being is more than their data.
- Lives are held by love, not by storage.
- Babel tries to climb upwards; the new Jerusalem comes down.
- God's future is a gift.

He thought of his father's walking map.

Of Lucas.

Of Marieke.

Of Hannah.

Of Adrian.

Of the old man.

Then he wrote the evening's closing thought:

Humanity continues to dream of the perfect city. For centuries, people have tried to build it themselves: with stone, with power, with science and now with technology too. Yet every human city remains incomplete. Only the city God Himself builds will endure for ever. The Christian therefore lives not by the illusion that they can create paradise, but by the promise that God will establish His dwelling among humanity. That prospect does not make them passive, but faithful in the present. For those who know where history ends need not despair along the way.

David closed the notebook.

Outside, the night was clear.

The stars were reflected in the river.

And for the first time in a long while, he felt not only a longing for the future.

He also felt profound gratitude for the present.

For he was beginning to understand that every act of obedience, however small, was already a foretaste of the city that would one day come down from heaven.

The Day After Babel

*“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says
the LORD Almighty.*

— Zechariah 4:6

Summer had arrived.

The city was alive.

Markets filled the squares.

Music sounded through open windows.

Children ran through fountains that only a few months earlier had lain hidden beneath a layer of ice.

David watched the people.

Everyone seemed to be on their way somewhere.

To work.

Home.

On holiday.

To an appointment.

Human beings were always on their way.

The only question was: towards what destination?

At the institute, work was under way on a new international ethical manifesto.

Not a technical manual.

Not a scientific protocol.

But a document intended to guide the development of future artificial intelligence.

David was asked to assess the final paragraph.

He read it carefully.

It contained valuable words.

Human dignity.

Transparency.

Justice.

Responsibility.

Only one word was missing.

Hope.

During the discussion, he asked:

“Why is that missing?”

A lawyer looked up.

“Hope?”

“Yes.”

“That is not a scientific category.”

David smiled kindly.

“Perhaps not.”

“But without hope, rules can easily turn into fear.”

A long silence followed.

A psychologist slowly nodded.

“There is something in that.”

An older doctor added:

“We treat diseases.”

“But ultimately, people ask what they want to live for.”

David wrote nothing down.

He listened.

Sometimes a conversation changed not because someone spoke at length, but because the right question had been asked.

Afterwards, Adrian and David walked outside.

“I find myself thinking about Babel more and more often,”

Adrian said.

David smiled.

“Why?”

“Because Babel began with cooperation.”

“Surely that is a good thing?”

“Yes.”

Adrian looked serious.

“But cooperation without humility slowly turns into self-glorification.”

He sighed.

“I see that danger everywhere today.”

David looked at him for a moment.

“In yourself too?”

Adrian gave a faint smile.

“Especially there.”

His honesty moved David.

He remembered his first conversations with Adrian.

Back then, Adrian had spoken chiefly about possibilities.

Now he spoke increasingly about responsibility.

Not because he had lost his love of science.

But because he had discovered that wisdom was something different from knowledge.

At the end of the afternoon, David visited the old church where Lucas was buried.

Not because he sought sorrow.

But because memories sometimes helped him see again what truly mattered.

In the churchyard, a young father was teaching his little daughter to ride a bicycle.

The girl fell.

She looked around in alarm.

Her father held out his hand.

“One more time,”

he said with a laugh.

A moment later, she was riding again.

Uncertainly.

Unsteadily.

But moving forwards.

David smiled.

He thought of the words from Proverbs.

“Though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again.”

Perhaps faith was not the art of never falling.

But of taking the Father’s outstretched hand time and again.

When he reached the river, the old man was already sitting on the familiar bench.

A chessboard lay beside him.

The pieces stood midway through a game.

“Do you play?”

David asked.

“Now and then,”

the old man replied.

He pointed to the board.

“Which pieces are the most important?”

David looked.

“The king.”

“Why?”

“Because without him, the game ends.”

The old man nodded.

“And yet...”

“...he is the slowest piece on the board.”

David smiled.

“That is true.”

The old man carefully moved a pawn forwards by one square.

“Our age admires speed,”

he said.

“God admires faithfulness.”

He looked at David.

“We always want to go faster.”

“He teaches us to go deeper.”

They were silent.

The wind gently stirred the leaves.

The river continued to flow as steadily as ever.

After a while, David asked:

“Do you think the world will change a great deal more?”

The old man smiled.

“Undoubtedly.”

“And the gospel?”

“That never changes.”

He pointed to the chess pieces.

“Look.”

“The pieces are constantly moving.”

“But the rules remain the same.”

He looked kindly at David.

“God’s truth is like that too.”

David thought of all the changes he had witnessed in his lifetime.

The internet.

Smartphones.

Artificial intelligence.

Virtual worlds.

Biotechnology.

And yet the words of Jesus sounded every bit as powerful as they had two thousand years ago.

“Follow Me.”

Before the old man put the chessboard away, he said:

“After Babel came Pentecost.”

David looked up.

“That is no coincidence.”

The old man shook his head.

“At Babel, people wanted one language to make themselves great.”

“At Pentecost, God gave many languages to make Christ great.”

He smiled.

“The Spirit does not make people uniform.”

“He makes one body.”

That thought remained with David all the way home.

True unity was not uniformity.

It arose where people looked together towards Christ.

Not towards themselves.

Not towards their own towers.

But towards the King.

At home, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The Day After Babel

Beneath it, he noted:

- Knowledge needs direction.
- Cooperation without humility becomes self-glorification.
- God's truth endures even as the world changes.
- The Holy Spirit creates unity without uniformity.

He put down his pen for a moment.

Then he wrote the evening's closing thought:

Every generation builds its own Babel. Sometimes out of bricks, sometimes out of ideologies, sometimes out of algorithms. Yet time and again, human unity proves fragile when it is not rooted in truth and love. The gospel offers another way. Not the triumph of the strongest, but the fellowship of people who have found their hope in the same Lord. Where Christ becomes the centre, no one need exalt themselves any longer. That is where the day after Babel begins.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, the evening wind began to stir the trees once more.

A leaf fell upon his windowsill.

Not because summer was over.

But as a quiet reminder that every season ultimately gives way to the next.

David looked at the sky.

The journey was nearing its completion.

Not because every question had been answered.

But because the most important question had received an answer.

Not: “How will humanity save itself?”

But:

“Who is the King who came to save humanity?”

And that answer still bore the same simple, liberating Name:

Jesus Christ.

The Morning Star

*“I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the
bright Morning Star.”*

— *Revelation 22:16*

Summer was in full bloom.

Yet David awoke before sunrise that morning.

He could not get back to sleep.

There was no restlessness.

No dream.

No sudden insight.

Only a deep desire to be outside before the world awoke.

He put on his coat and walked to the river.

The city was still.

The windows were dark.

Even the birds had not yet sung their first song.

Only the gentle flow of the water broke the silence.

David sat down on the old bench.
The same bench where he had shared so many conversations.
With the old man.
With himself.
With God.
He closed his eyes.
And for the first time in a long while, he did not pray for guidance.
He prayed only:
“Thank You.”
The horizon slowly changed from dark blue to gold.
The first light broke through.
Not suddenly.
But almost imperceptibly.
David thought of the words from Genesis.
“Let there be light.”
Creation began not with force.
But with light.
Perhaps every new creation began that way.
He heard footsteps.
Without turning round, he knew who it was.
The old man sat down beside him.
They were silent.
For a long time.
Then the old man asked:

“Why do you love the morning so much?”

David smiled.

“Because every morning feels like a promise.”

The old man nodded.

“That is precisely what it is.”

They watched as the sun slowly appeared above the horizon.

No human being could stop it.

No government.

No algorithm.

No machine.

No war.

No crisis.

The light came.

As it always had.

As it always would.

“You see...”

the old man said softly,

“...that is why Christ calls Himself the Morning Star.”

David looked at him questioningly.

“Not only because He gives light.”

“But because His coming announces that the night will not have the final word.”

David thought of everything he had experienced over the past few months.

Of Lucas.

Of Marieke.

Of Adrian.

Of Hannah.

Of VOX.

Of MEMORIA.

Of EDEN.

Of the conferences.

Of the walks.

Of the mustard seed.

Of the compass.

Of the letter.

Of the door in Lucas's dream.

Everything seemed to come together in this single moment.

After a while, David asked:

“Do you think we should fear the future?”

The old man smiled.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because Christ is already there.”

He looked at the rising sun.

“We never travel to a place where He has not gone before us.”

Those words gave David a profound sense of peace.

He realised that Christian hope was never based on predictions.

Not on scenarios.

Not on optimistic expectations.

But on a Person.

Later that morning, he met Hannah.

They had arranged to meet at a small café beside the river.

She immediately noticed that something had changed.

“You look different,”

she said.

David smiled.

“Perhaps.”

“What happened?”

He thought for a moment.

“I believe I have stopped trying to control the future.”

Hannah smiled.

“At last.”

They both laughed.

“I mean it seriously,”

David said.

“For months I have been trying to understand how faith and technology relate to one another.”

He looked through the window.

“Perhaps that is important too.”

“But I had forgotten that the gospel does not ultimately begin with a technique.”

“Where does it begin, then?”

Hannah asked.

“With an encounter.”

Hannah slowly nodded.

“Like Mary in the garden.”

“Yes,”

David said.

“She recognised Jesus only when He called her by name.”

They remained silent for a while.

Then Hannah said:

“Perhaps that is the most beautiful definition of eternal life.”

David looked at her questioningly.

“That at last, we will see Him as He truly is.”

At the end of the afternoon, Adrian stopped by.

He had an envelope with him.

“I wanted to give you this.”

David opened it.

Inside was the first proof of the ethical manifesto.

A new closing sentence appeared on the final page.

Adrian pointed to it.

“I have not forgotten your question about hope.”

David read:

Technology can prepare the future, but only hope gives humanity the courage to face it. Every advance must therefore ultimately serve human dignity, freedom and responsibility.

David looked up.

“That is beautiful.”

Adrian smiled.

“Not yet.”

He pointed to a handwritten addition at the bottom.

David continued reading.

And perhaps true hope begins where human beings acknowledge that not everything has to be made by their own hands.

David looked at Adrian.

“You wrote that.”

Adrian nodded.

“I think Lucas would have been pleased.”

That evening, David met the old man for what felt like a momentous conversation.

They walked slowly beside the river.

The sky turned red.

“You think our story is almost over,”

the old man said.

David smiled.

“Yes.”

“Do not be mistaken,”

the old man replied kindly.

“Stories end.”

“Pilgrimages do not.”

He stopped.

“What have you ultimately learnt?”

David thought for a long time.

Then he answered:

“That the greatest struggle is not between humanity and machines.”

“But between trust and autonomy.”

“That technology can be a good servant.”

“But a poor master.”

“That truth is a Person.”

“That grace cannot be earned.”

“And that Christ is not only the goal of history...”

“...but also its Beginning.”

The old man smiled.

“Now you are beginning to understand.”

Before they parted, he said once more:

“Whenever you doubt again...”

“...look at the sky before sunrise.”

He pointed towards the east.

“The Morning Star always appears before the sun rises.”

That evening, David opened his notebook for the last time in a long while.

At the top, he wrote:

The Morning Star

Beneath it, he noted:

- Christian hope rests upon a Person.
- Christ always goes before us.
- Every new morning bears witness to God’s faithfulness.

- Light overcomes darkness without force.

He put down his pen.

After a long silence, he wrote the evening's closing thought:

The world will continue to change. New technologies will arise, old certainties will disappear, and every generation will have to learn discernment anew. But above every change, one reality remains unassailable: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. The Christian therefore lives not in fear of the future, but in expectation. For even before the sun of God's new creation has fully risen, the Morning Star already shines upon the horizon as a sign that the night is nearing its end.

David closed the notebook.

Not because his journey was over.

But because he had learnt that some chapters truly begin only when a book seems to be ending.

He looked at the river once more.

The water flowed onwards.

Like time.

Like God's grace.

And above the eastern sky, a single bright star remained visible for just a moment.

The Morning Star.

A promise that the light was on its way.

CHAPTER 61

The New Name

*“To the one who is victorious, I will give a white stone
with a new name written on it, known only to the one
who receives it.”*

— Revelation 2:17

Summer was at its height.

Along the river, the trees had grown into green vaults beneath which walkers found shelter from the heat. Children played among the fountains. Cyclists rang their bells politely as they passed one another. Life continued, as it always had.

And yet David saw the world differently.

Not because the world had changed.

But because he himself had changed.

He noticed it in small things.

He looked at his phone less often.

He listened for longer when people spoke.

He felt less need to solve every problem immediately.

And more often than before, he simply remained silent.
Not out of uncertainty.
But because he had discovered that silence sometimes contained
more truth than words.
That morning, he received an unexpected invitation.
Not digitally.
No email.
No message sent through a secure platform.
Just a handwritten card.
Come to the old library this evening. One final conversation.
There was no sender's name beneath it.
None was needed.
David recognised the handwriting at once.
The old library lay hidden behind St Michael's Church.
He had often visited it as a student.
Since digitisation, hardly anyone came there any more.
The scent of old paper still lingered among the tall bookcases.
When David entered, the old man was already sitting at a wooden
reading table.
Before him lay no Bible.
No Augustine.
No notebook.
Only a small box made of dark olive wood.
"Sit down,"

he said kindly.

At first, they spoke about ordinary things.

About the summer.

About Hannah.

About Adrian's new teaching programme for young researchers.

About David's mother, who despite her age still tended her garden every morning.

Only then did the old man slide the wooden box towards him.

"Open it."

David carefully lifted the lid.

Inside lay a simple, smooth white stone.

Nothing more.

No ornament.

No writing.

He looked up questioningly.

"There is nothing written on it."

The old man smiled.

"That is what you see."

"But Revelation speaks of a new name, does it not?"

David asked.

"Yes,"

the old man replied.

"And why do you think no one else knows that name?"

David thought for a moment.

“Because God knows each person individually?”

“Exactly.”

The old man leant back.

“We spend our lives collecting names.”

“Titles.”

“Positions.”

“Degrees.”

“Usernames.”

“Profiles.”

He smiled.

“But in the end, only one name remains that truly matters.”

David looked at the white stone again.

He thought of all the identities he had carried throughout his life.

Student.

Engineer.

Husband.

Widower.

Project leader.

Friend.

Believer.

None of those words fully described who he truly was.

“Who are you?”

the old man suddenly asked.

David was about to answer.

But he stopped himself.

After a few moments, he said softly:

“A child of God.”

The old man smiled.

“That took longer than I expected.”

They both laughed.

“You see...”

the old man continued,

“...the world is always asking:

‘What do you do?’”

“It asks about achievements.”

“About influence.”

“About visibility.”

He gently tapped the white stone.

“God begins somewhere else.”

“He asks:

‘Whose are you?’”

Those words sank deep into David’s heart.

His thoughts returned to Marieke.

She had once told him:

“You do not have to become someone extraordinary before God will love you.”

At the time, he had thought her words beautiful.

Now he was beginning to truly understand them.

Together, they left the library.

The evening sun shone through the church's old stained-glass windows.

Thousands of coloured patches of light moved across the stone floor.

"Do you see that light?"

the old man asked.

David nodded.

"The glass makes it visible."

He paused.

"But the light does not come from the glass."

They walked slowly outside.

The old man continued:

"It is the same with a human being."

"We are not called to be the Light ourselves."

"We may let it shine through us."

David thought of John the Baptist.

"He was not the Light, but he was sent to bear witness to the Light."

Before they parted, the old man stopped one final time.

"The last illusion was that humanity could save itself,"

he said.

"But there is another, smaller illusion."

David looked at him questioningly.

“That you think your worth depends upon what you achieve.”

He smiled.

“The Father knew your name before you had achieved anything.”

That evening, David opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

The New Name

Beneath it, he noted:

- My identity precedes my achievements.
- God knows me personally.
- I do not have to earn my worth.
- Christ gives us a new identity not because we have succeeded, but because He loves us.

For a long time, he looked at the white stone lying beside his pen.

Then he wrote the evening’s closing thought:

Perhaps the deepest freedom is not that a person can finally become themselves, but that they may stop trying to prove themselves. Those who receive their name from the hand of Christ no longer need to live for recognition. They may live from love. And in that, the last illusion disappears: that our worth ever depended upon our success, our knowledge or our achievements. The Father knew our name before we took our first step.

David slowly closed his notebook.

Four simple objects now lay upon his desk.

The compass.

The mustard seed.

Lucas's copy of Narnia.

And the white stone.

Four small reminders.

All four pointed in the same direction.

Not towards David.

But towards the One who had guided him all along.

And for the first time, he realised that the greatest miracle of his journey was not that he had found God.

But that God had never lost sight of him.

CHAPTER 62

Coming Home

“My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?”

— John 14:2

Summer was slowly drawing to a close.

Not suddenly.

As always, it gently announced its departure.

The evenings grew a little cooler.

The shadows lengthened.

At the edge of the park, the first leaves cautiously began to change colour.

David found that moment of transition the most beautiful of all.

Nature did not resist change.

It received it.

Perhaps, he thought, God had made the seasons not only for the earth.

But also for the human heart.

Work at the institute continued.

New projects were launched.

New researchers arrived.

Older colleagues retired.

David noticed that more and more often, he listened rather than led.

One morning, a young programmer asked him:

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why have you never become cynical?”

David smiled.

“Who says I haven’t?”

The young man laughed.

“Well... most people who work in technology for as long as you have eventually stop believing in anything.”

David looked through the window for a moment.

“I believe more than I used to,”

he said quietly.

“Not because I have come to love technology less.”

“But because I have discovered that it was never meant to replace God.”

The young programmer thought for a moment.

“Do you think AI will ever become conscious?”

David smiled.

“Perhaps that is not the first question.”

“What is?”

“Are we ourselves still awake to what truly matters?”

That question lingered in the room for a long time.

A few days later, David received an invitation from Adrian.

Not to a conference.

Not to a meeting.

To a farewell dinner.

Adrian had decided to relinquish many of his administrative positions.

Not because he was exhausted.

But because he wanted to combine research and teaching once more.

During the dinner, he stood up.

He looked at those present.

“When I was young...”

he began,

“...I thought progress meant finding more and more answers.”

He smiled.

“Now I think progress chiefly means learning to ask better questions.”

He looked at David.

“I have learnt a great deal about that from him.”

Afterwards, they walked outside together.

“Have you changed?”

David asked.

Adrian laughed.

“I hope so.”

“In what way most of all?”

Adrian looked at the stars.

“I still believe in science.”

“But I no longer believe that science is enough.”

He looked at David.

“And you?”

David thought for a moment.

“I still believe technology can be a gift from God.”

He smiled.

“But I have come to understand that no gift must ever take the place of the Giver.”

They shook hands.

Neither felt that he had won an argument.

They had travelled a road together.

A few days later, David visited his mother again.

She was sitting in her garden.

The roses were blooming for the second time that year.

She poured the tea.

Suddenly, she asked:

“Have you ever noticed how often Jesus speaks about coming home?”

David thought about it.

“Actually, yes.”

“The prodigal son.”

“The Good Shepherd.”

“The rooms in the Father’s house.”

She smiled.

“Perhaps the whole Bible is one great story about coming home.”

David looked at her.

He sensed that she had said something he would ponder for a long time.

That evening, he walked to the river.

For the first time, the old bench was empty.

He stopped.

He waited.

Ten minutes.

Twenty minutes.

No one came.

He smiled.

Perhaps that was exactly as it should be.

He sat down on the bench himself.

Before him, he watched the water slowly flow past.

He heard the old man’s voice again.

Not literally.

But in his memory.

“God does not want you to become dependent upon a guide.

He wants you to learn to walk with the Shepherd.”

David understood.

The conversations had never been intended to bind him to another person.

But to bring him closer to Christ.

He opened his Bible.

Not because anyone had urged him to do so.

But because by now, it had become his natural first response.

His eyes fell upon Psalm 23.

“He guides me along the right paths for His Name’s sake.”

Not:

for the sake of my achievements.

Not:

for the sake of my insights.

But:

for His Name’s sake.

He closed his eyes.

For the first time, he no longer felt the need to connect every thread of his life.

He did not have to understand God’s providence completely.

It was enough that God knew him.

As he walked home, he saw a little girl ask her father a question.

“Daddy...”

“Are we nearly there?”

Her father smiled.

“Not yet.”

“But we are going the right way.”

David stopped for a moment.

He smiled.

Perhaps that was the simplest summary of the Christian life he had ever heard.

At home, he opened his notebook.

At the top, he wrote:

Coming Home

Beneath it, he noted:

- The greatest progress is growth in wisdom.
- Science and faith are not enemies when both know their proper place.
- The Bible tells the story of God’s desire to dwell with humanity.
- The Good Shepherd leads His sheep home.

He looked through the window.

The evening sun turned the sky to gold.

Then he wrote the evening’s closing thought:

Coming home does not begin only at the end of life. It begins the moment a person stops seeing themselves as the centre of their

existence and learns to live from the Father's love. From that moment on, they remain a pilgrim, but are no longer a wanderer. Every step, however uncertain it may sometimes be, then becomes a step closer to Home.

He put down his pen.

The notebook was almost full.

Not because every question had disappeared.

But because he had discovered that faith is not ultimately about collecting answers.

It is about learning to trust the One who already knows the Way.

And as the first stars appeared once more in the sky outside, David knew that every journey, however long, ultimately had one destination.

Not a place.

But a Person.

And in Him, coming home was no longer a distant dream.

It was a promise that had already begun.

Until He Comes

*“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one
who hears say, ‘Come!’”*
— Revelation 22:17

The first morning of September dawned with clear, crisp air.

The heat of summer had given way to a gentle coolness.

The light had changed.

Not less warm.

But deeper.

As though the sun no longer wanted to dazzle the world, but to illuminate it.

David walked beside the river once more.

With every step, he noticed how familiar this path had now become.

The trees.

The bench.

The bridge.
The old church.
Everything was the same.
And yet nothing was the same any longer.
Not because his surroundings had changed.
But because he had learnt to see differently.
Several weeks had passed since his final meeting with the old man.
He had not seen him again.
Nor had he looked for him.
By now, he knew that some people walk beside us for only a season.
Like John the Baptist.
Like Barnabas.
Like Paul for Timothy.
Their calling is not to make followers of themselves.
But to bring people closer to Christ.
The old man had never been the destination.
He had merely been a signpost.
And a good signpost does not continue drawing attention to itself.
It points the way.
That morning, David received a message from Hannah.
“Do you have time for a walk?”
They met in the park.

For a while, they walked without hurrying.

After a few minutes, Hannah asked:

“Do you still think about Lucas often?”

David smiled.

“Almost every day.”

“So do I.”

She was silent for a moment.

“Do you know what strikes me again and again?”

“What?”

“He never spoke as though he had something to prove.”

David thought of the letter.

Of the dream.

Of the words:

“He is here.”

“No,”

he replied.

“He lived as though he already knew to whom he belonged.”

They sat down on a bench beneath an old beech tree.

In front of them, a group of children were playing hide-and-seek.

One little boy ran away laughing.

His father called:

“I see you!”

The boy laughed even harder.

David smiled.

“That is actually a beautiful image.”

Hannah looked at him questioningly.

“We often think that we have to find God,”

David said.

“When all along, He already sees us.”

Hannah slowly nodded.

“Like Hagar.”

“The God who sees me.”

David looked up at the canopy of leaves.

Perhaps that was one of the most beautiful names of God.

Not only the God who speaks.

Not only the God who saves.

But also the God who sees.

A week later, David was asked to give the opening address at a gathering for young researchers.

Not about technology.

But about responsibility.

He stood before a hall full of talented students.

Their eyes shone with curiosity.

He did not begin with artificial intelligence.

Not with algorithms.

Not with ethics.

He began with a question.

“Why do you actually want to change the world?”

The hall remained silent.

After a while, a young woman raised her hand.

“To make life better.”

David smiled.

“That is a beautiful answer.”

He paused.

“Then never lose sight of whom you want to make it better for.”

He told them about Lucas.

Not about his illness.

But about his courage.

About a boy who knew that love was more important than control.

Who had more trust than certainty.

More hope than answers.

At the end of his address, David said:

“The greatest discovery I made in my career was not a technological one.”

“I discovered that a human being is never a problem to be solved.”

“A human being is a person who longs to be loved.”

The hall remained remarkably silent.

Not out of discomfort.

But because some truths need time to settle.

That evening, David walked to the river one more time.

The sun was low.
The water turned to gold.
Something lay on the old bench.
A small parcel.
He looked around.
No one.
Carefully, he opened it.
Inside lay a simple wooden cross.
And with it, a letter.
In the familiar handwriting.
Dear David,
When you read this letter, I know that our conversations have
achieved their purpose.
Not because you have found every answer.
But because you have learnt to follow the right Person.
Never forget:
The world will continue to build new towers.
To make new promises.
To create new illusions.
Do not be afraid of them.
Truth never needs to hurry.
Love never needs to shout.
Christ never needs to prove Himself.
Simply keep walking.

Listen more than you speak.

Love people.

Seek the truth.

And keep your eyes fixed upon the King.

For in the end, the question is not how much influence you had.

But whether people saw something of Him through your life.

Until He comes.

A friend.

David slowly folded the letter.

He looked at the wooden cross.

So simple.

So small.

And yet it pointed towards the centre of history.

Not towards human progress.

Not towards human failure.

But towards God's love.

At home, he opened his notebook for the penultimate time.

At the top, he wrote:

Until He Comes

Beneath it, he noted:

- A guide ultimately points away from themselves.
- A human being is not a problem, but a beloved person.
- Truth is patient.
- Christian hope lives between Pentecost and Christ's return.

He remained silent for a long time.

Then he wrote the evening's closing thought:

The Church lives neither from nostalgia for the past nor from fear of the future. It lives in expectation. Every generation receives anew the calling to make Christ visible in its own time, amid its own questions and with its own technology. Not by withdrawing from the world, but by being present as salt and light. Until He comes.

He closed the notebook.

One chapter remained.

Not as a farewell.

But as the completion of a journey that had begun long before.

The river flowed steadily onwards.

Like time.

Like God's faithfulness.

And above the slowly darkening sky, the first star appeared once more.

David smiled.

By now, he knew what he was looking at.

Not merely a star.

But a promise.

CHAPTER 64

Behold, I Make All Things New

*“He who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am
making all things new.’”*

— Revelation 21:5

Autumn had already gently touched the first leaves.

Not to destroy them.

But to prepare them for a new season.

David walked beside the river one final time.

The same river.

The same bridge.

The same old bench.

But this time, he no longer felt the need to search for answers.

He had come to give thanks.

He sat down.

Beside him lay four simple objects.

His father's compass.

The mustard seed.

Lucas's worn copy of The Chronicles of Narnia.

And the white stone.

Four memories.

Four lessons.

Four witnesses to a journey that had changed him more deeply than he could ever have imagined.

He picked up the compass.

His father had once said:

"A compass does not point towards where you want to be, but towards where north lies."

David smiled.

Truth had never adapted itself to his feelings.

Instead, it had taught him to correct his course.

Then he took the mustard seed between his fingers.

So small.

Almost invisible.

And yet Jesus had chosen precisely that as an image of His Kingdom.

No explosion.

No revolution.

But life.

That slowly grows.

That takes root.

That bears fruit.

He ran his hand over Lucas's book.

The small note still lay between its pages.

Aslan is not safe. But he is good.

David closed his eyes.

He saw Lucas before him once more.

His smile.

His questions.

His trust.

He now knew with certainty that some people change a life without ever growing up.

Finally, he held the white stone.

Still without a visible name.

And yet it was not empty.

On the contrary.

It reminded him that God knows every person in a way no human being will ever fully understand.

Not as a file.

Not as a profile.

Not as a collection of data.

But as a beloved child.

The sun slowly began to set.

The water turned to gold.

A gentle breeze stirred the trees.

David thought of the old man's words.

“Truth never needs to hurry.”

He smiled.

Perhaps the same was true of God.

The Father had worked for thousands of years upon one great story.

From Eden.

Through Babel.

Bethlehem.

Golgotha.

The empty tomb.

Pentecost.

Until the day Christ would return.

No chapter stood alone.

Everything belonged to the same story.

He heard footsteps behind him.

When he turned round, he saw Hannah and Adrian.

Neither had arranged to come.

And yet they had.

Adrian sat down beside him.

Hannah remained standing for a moment, looking across the water.

“I thought I would find you here,”

David said.

Hannah smiled.

“Perhaps people who follow the same Shepherd find one another more often than they realise.”

For a long time, they sat silently beside one another.

No one felt the need to fill the silence.

After a few minutes, Adrian said:

“You know...”

“I am still a scientist.”

David looked at him with a laugh.

“I should hope so.”

Adrian laughed.

“But I have lost something.”

“What?”

“The idea that humanity will ever perfect itself.”

He looked at the river.

“And strangely enough, that gives me peace.”

Hannah looked at the sky.

“Perhaps wisdom begins precisely there,”

she said.

“Where wonder becomes greater than control.”

David nodded.

“And worship greater than ambition.”

The first evening star slowly appeared.

No one spoke.

After a while, the church bell began to ring.

Not hurriedly.

Peacefully.

As it had done for centuries.

The same bell had heard generations come and go.

Kings.

Farmers.

Scientists.

Children.

Believers.

Doubters.

And time and again, it had borne witness to a God who remained.

David took his notebook from his bag.

The final page was still blank.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he slowly wrote:

Behold, I Make All Things New

Beneath it, he wrote no more lists.

No summary.

Only a single prayer.

Lord Jesus,

Keep me from valuing Your gifts above You.

Teach me to use technology wisely.

Give me courage to love the truth.

Give me love for people.

Give me eyes that seek Your Kingdom.

And when my own journey is complete,

let me come home to You,
not because I have done everything well,
but because You have held me fast.

Amen.

He put down his pen.

Nothing more needed to be written.

They stood up.

Together, they slowly walked back towards the city.

Not quickly.

Not slowly.

Simply in the rhythm of people who knew that the road continued.

At the bridge, David looked back one final time.

The river continued to flow as steadily as ever.

Like history.

Like God's faithfulness.

Above the horizon appeared the last light of the setting sun.

And as evening slowly gave way to the first colours of night,
David thought of the words with which the Bible ends:

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'"

And in his heart, together with the Church of every age, he
answered:

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

EPILOGUE

Years later, someone would find David's notebook.

Not because David had become famous.

Not because he had changed the world.

But because he had learnt to be faithful.

Between the yellowed pages still lay four simple objects.

A compass.

A mustard seed.

A white stone.

And an old Narnia bookmark.

Whoever opened the notebook found only a single sentence on its final page, written in David's hand:

"The last illusion was not that the machine would become human. The last illusion was that humanity could truly be itself without God. But those who find Christ do not lose their humanity; they receive it back."

And at the very bottom, written in smaller letters:

Soli Deo Gloria.