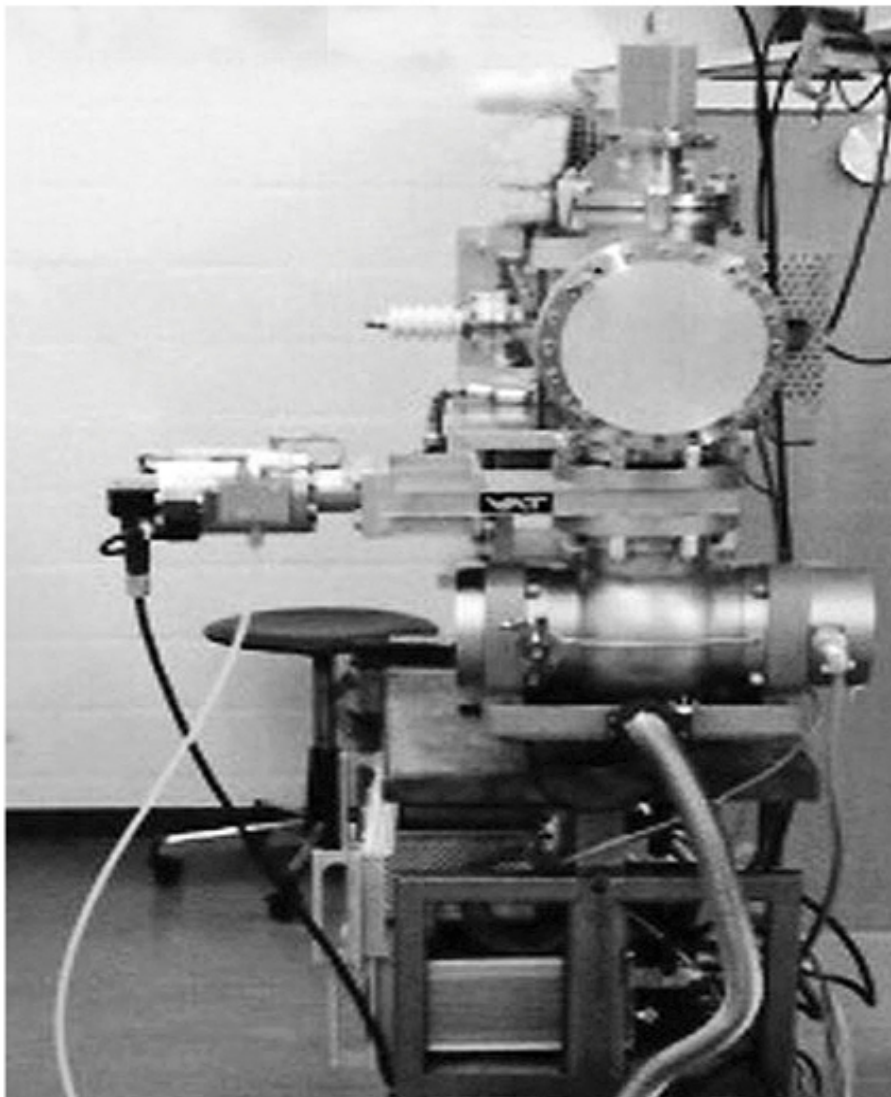


Andreas Pritzker

The **E**nd of Delusion

A Novel



A research project promising an innovative way of generating energy, torn between science and economy; a scientist, moving between different realities and starting to doubt them all; the industrial working environment, with its emotional deficiencies and its missing connection with nature; an European, confronted with the USA in the early 1990s: These are the elements that are interwoven in the fabric of this novel, which is being republished for a twenty-first century audience.

Andreas Pritzker, born in 1945, is a Swiss physicist and author. He has published the following texts: *Filberts Verhängnis* (novel, 1990), *Das Ende der Täuschung* (novel, 1993), *Eingeholte Zeit* (narrative, 2001), *Die Anfechtungen des Juan Zinniker* (novel, 2007), *Allenthalben Lug und Trug* (novel, 2010), *Geschichte des SIN* (science history, 2013). He also co-edited a number of oral history texts.

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1

When he woke up in the vagueness of dawn, Adam Schreiner felt like something had slipped from his grasp and floated away. Like a vision which he had clung to for a long time. Now he felt disconnected from the familiar events. As if the connecting threads between him and the forces that moved the world had been torn.

He looked in the mirror, wondering if the man who stared back at him with a doubtful expression on his face was really himself. Over the next few days, he was going to watch this man closely, register what he was doing and why he did it. How he would complete his tasks that were no goals as such. A part of him – born this morning – was going to watch the scene like a cameraman, not directly, but through an optical device that was not only going to allow him to view the scene from different angles, but was also going to record it.

Yesterday Schönholzer had summoned him. Without letting him know what it was about. Only to drop everything and come quickly. Schreiner sensed that something was in the wind. He tried to find out more from Schönholzer's assistant. She only shrugged and smiled encouragingly, as Schönholzer opened the door and dragged Schreiner into his office.

“The U.S. Department of Energy is going to scrutinize your project, Adam. We want you to be there. You'll travel tomorrow. The president will explain everything else to you. He wants to see you right now. In private. Adam, this is your chance. Who is ever so lucky to meet the president of our company? He shook my hand once, when he took a tour of our labs. Please don't bring shame upon us, Adam. Stay calm, speak clearly and concisely, and only when asked.”

Looking back, Schreiner saw himself enter the separate elevator to the otherwise inaccessible eleventh floor of the glass tower, from where not only the factory premises, but the whole world felt like toys to him. He thought, this is not my project. I merely observe what the Princeton lab is doing, and I write reports about their work for the executive board.

So far, Schreiner had only seen the president in photos. Up close the man seemed mousy and unremarkable. But when he spoke, Schreiner sensed the cold power and his ability to impose his will on others.

“You know that this project is very important to me. I have chosen it because it is not only profitable, but also because it has quite a public appeal – something I can’t say about most of our projects in R&D, I’m afraid. That’s the reason why I am taking care of it myself. I have read all your reports. You are lucky that you write so clearly and concisely, otherwise you wouldn’t be sitting here right now. From now on you will not only report to me about the assessment but you will actively represent our interests. So far we have invested ten million dollars, and since we’re not in the best of shapes financially, we need additional funding. This means that the assessment has to be positive. You’ll travel tomorrow. That way you will have a whole week to convince the experts of the DOE. Their names are on this list here. Do you know any of them?”

Schreiner caught his breath. He found the very idea of what the president demanded of him utterly revolting. He tried to hide his facial expression behind the list and scanned the names. Then he shook his head.

The president continued.

“They are all professors, aren’t they? I don’t know what to do with those academics. They don’t care where the money they live off is coming from. But you are a scientist yourself, so I’m sure you’ll find the right tone. Please teach them how the world ticks. Tell them that it’s exactly inventions like this

one the industry needs from the science community, not some fantasies conjured up in an ivory tower. I want you to act convincingly, the company is backing you. And please have a chat with Professor Franzotti before you leave. You can throw his expert opinion in the mix when you're over there. What do we have this expensive consultant for, if not for this? If necessary, get help from our rep in New York. Do you know him? His name is Rudloff and he knows how to wield influence. Do you understand what this is all about? "

Schreiner nodded. More than anything else he understood that the president was a man who knew exactly what he wanted. Much unlike himself. In research he was very target-oriented. But what he wanted to achieve in life he had yet to decide. Schreiner didn't live, he was controlled like a puppet.

The president went on.

"And then you immediately write a report about the positive outlook of the project. But please don't forget: write it simple enough so the lawyers on the administrative board can understand it as well. Even if the DOE says yes, we will still have to make further contributions. Oh and could you please do me a favor? Pay a courtesy visit to John Frost, he is an important partner. I was told you know him. Bring an expensive flower bouquet for his wife on my behalf. She used to be a very attractive woman in her day. Good luck, Schreiner, and don't disappoint me. For your own good. I will not tolerate failure for this project. If this assessment goes awry, I am not sure if we could keep you in our research department, you have to bear that in mind."

Schreiner felt a wave of protest building up in his mind. But before he was ready to unload, the president had already dismissed him. As he walked across the busy plant site to the research pavilions, he was still dazed from his meeting with the man who had the power to turn corporate affairs into a personal matter for Schreiner with little more than a few words. Before he entered the laboratory, he

turned around and took another look at the glass tower which rose darkly in the hazy skies.

This morning he felt isolated in an unusual way. The president's threat had pulled the rug from under his feet and put him in an uneasy state of limbo. It had torn the thread which had - until now - lead from his past to his future undisturbedly. In this mental state Schreiner wouldn't have been capable of making an appointment with Professor Franzotti. Good thing he had called the meeting yesterday. Reluctantly though. The professor usually bored him to death. He was performing complicated calculations on behalf of Alcoswiss. Schreiner believed that Franzotti should have come with him to defend his work himself, particularly since it was so hard to explain. But yesterday, when they were talking on the phone, the professor had laughed him off: "Oh no son, I'm simply too old for such a long flight!"

It was a cool and grey November morning. The clouds were hanging low in the sky and it was raining nonstop. The physics lab at the university was well-lit, even though there was no soul to be found in the hallways. Only the muffled and monotonous buzzing of some machines broke the silence.

"Come on in. Come on in." Franzotti was standing in the doorway to his office, grabbed Schreiner's arm and pulled him into his room. "My assistant is here too. We'll order coffee in a second. You'll have a cup, while we'll show you the results, no? They are interesting - highly interesting! I hope your company is going to be satisfied, even though I have to admit they don't look particularly promising. But in the end we are getting paid to deliver correct results, not pretty ones."

Heaps of computer outputs and diagrams were piled up on the desk. Franzotti began to leaf through them nervously, pointing out a statistical series here and a chart there. The assistant sat there and remained silent. The calculations were his work. Finally the young man was allowed to answer

Schreiner's questions. He did so gratefully, and Schreiner could tell he was eager to come into his own.

"And what do you think about the overall project?" Schreiner finally asked him.

Franzotti did not give his assistant a chance to answer.

"Well, at the current stage I don't want to commit myself to anything yet. I'm not one of those scientists who go peddling their preliminary findings. We have to intensify our studies. This being said - I hope your company is going to extend our consulting contract. Let's say the chances are not overwhelmingly high, but the novelty of this idea justifies the effort. Yes, yes. You may quote me on this." He nodded eagerly. "Oh and by the way - may I ask you a favor? Years ago when I was stateside I bought some radio equipment. Now I need a spare part, but ordering it from here is expensive and quite complicated. Please be a sport and get me this thing, will you? Here is the description of the part and the address of the store, which by chance is close to where you have to go anyway." He took a sip from his coffee. "And now let us all hope for a favorable assessment of the project."

Franzotti shook Schreiner's hand enthusiastically, he hardly wanted to stop. Schreiner was relieved when the professor finally let go of his fingers.

He drove home.

Reluctant to go on the trip at all he had put off packing his bag until now. He always tended to wait until the last minute to do so. Now he did it in a minimum of time by throwing the open suitcase on his bed and, retracing every step he took in the morning, he threw everything he needed in there. Because of this and like methods, Anna used to call him a systematic person (she would list how complicated he prepared a pot of tea, how he shaved meticulously, one area of skin at a time, or how he sorted the records chronologically as opposed to the rest of the family who put them on the shelf so carelessly). He was not entirely sure if

she meant it approvingly. Sometimes he rather believed to sense a mocking undertone in her remarks.

He also packed the murder mystery from his nightstand. Schreiner used to read murder mysteries. He remembered that last night Anna had once again asked him to finally read something sensible. First he didn't know what to say. Then he thought about it and came to the conclusion that the world was downright infested by subtle crime, and realized how much he enjoyed the idea that at least in literature law and order prevailed. Moreover, as a scientist he was interested in the process of investigation.

"Admit it, there is no human constellation that's not worth investigating. If you find too little or too much information the process becomes challenging. Proving guilt and finding a verdict is always uncertain and influenced by external circumstances. Just think about the assessment that's awaiting me."

Anna had laughed. She had shaken her head and gone to the kitchen.

He closed his suitcase which was badly scratched from frequent use. The older he got the less he appreciated these trips. The thrill of traveling the world was long gone. He was weary of Boston, Los Angeles, Oxford and more recently of cities like Tokyo and Seoul. When he had too many trips his family would start to complain.

He had said his goodbyes in the early morning. Anna - who had accepted a position as librarian two years ago - had left for work, his daughter for her lectures at university and his son for grammar school. A perfectly normal day.

It rarely ever happened that he got to be alone in their apartment in the morning, exposed to an unfamiliar silence. A soft light was shining through the sheer drapes. Suddenly all the objects seemed to be set up in a certain hidden order. Today the familiar scene appeared as strange to him as the reality of a theater stage. As he looked around he saw lots of entertainment electronics; a shelf with about two

hundred records; bookshelves with approximately six hundred books. Almost intellectual. According to statistics, the average Swiss reader hardly ever owned more than a hundred books, as Anna used to point out. She had picked the books and of course read them all. His murder mysteries were exiled to the hallway, next to the bathroom door. He looked at several artisan handicrafts they had bought on various occasions; exotic plants; the saxophone that belonged to his son David. It stood in a metal stand, ready to be played. The temperature in the apartment was cozy.

Suddenly his life appeared to be complicated and diverse, anything but simple. Actually too complicated and diverse. What was it good for? The scholars of the ancient world supposedly carried all their possessions with them. Schreiner would have to leave all this behind if his plane was hit by a bomb, or he was shot in the streets while he was in the US. These days, like it or not, one had to consider things like that. People's fears were driven by the daily news broadcasts. There was nothing he could do. Everybody was exposed to this.

He called a cab and picked up his luggage. I'll be back in two weeks, he told himself, as he locked the door.

The plane to New York, a huge bird without a beak, took off on time. With gentle vibrations it slowly plowed through the thick white clouds and emerged into the timeless, silvery light of the morning sky.

After they had reached cruising altitude, a meal was served. Schreiner wasn't really hungry, but he decided to take the tray anyway. At least the elaborate choice of portion packs would allow him to pass some time. Particularly since overseas flights meant little more to him than a few hours of detention.

Rationally seen, the differences between a ten hour transatlantic flight and ten hours in police custody in a packed detention cell were few. Why then was it perceived to be fundamentally different? Because people's

conceptions of the world were centered around themselves. Because they didn't look at things from the outside, but had to view them through the filter of their emotions and experiences. This fact was the reason for all misunderstandings.

He imagined how Anna looked at him with a cheerful wink, provocatively asking him how he envisioned that. Whether he denied the possibility of human communication. Not quite, he would reply. But people are influenced by the constellations on the stage of existence, no matter if those are permanent or temporary. From that point of view they judge everything, and within their very own reality they are all correct. It's about recognizing the threads between what people believe and the lives they actually have to live.

Did he thus understand people? Or were there deeper motivations that were hidden behind those realities? They would have to be as elementary as the forces of physics, and he could only assume for them to be something like the seven deadly sins powerfully driving the people.

The plane plowed through the sky with consistently booming engines. Schreiner looked out the window. His view was obscured by a thin veil of ice clouds. Perfectly amorphous. The connection to the real world was severed.

He picked up a technical report he had taken on his trip in order to reduce the irksome pile on his desk, but he couldn't focus. Sentences like "the spallation neutron source for the study of condensed matter was designed as an interesting new development in the field of neutron sources without nuclear chain reaction, since an increase in the cyclotron's proton beam current was planned anyway" refused to sink into his consciousness.

He leaned back in his seat and ordered a drink. He thought about the days to come. And the president's threat. And about returning to a past he had not cast his mind back to for a long time. When the project had just started, he had worked in the Princeton lab for two years on behalf of

Alcoswiss. He remembered now that he had never been welcome there. What awaited him? It was about his future. Nonsense! It made no sense to agonize about the situation in advance. He dozed off.

It was about 6 p.m. CET as the plane flew over Newfoundland. But his perception of time had lost its bindingness. He saw himself floating between the time on his watch (as well as his biological clock) and the time outside the plane, defined by the glistening light of the early afternoon. The descent was initiated, and a friendly female voice asked the passengers to fasten their seatbelts.

Schreiner could see the historic bay north of Cape Cod where the Mayflower had once touched the shore, as well as the silvery channel that separated Cape Cod from the mainland. A little later he spotted the huge bridges crossing Narragansett Bay. The human ant colony far below him tirelessly kept building shortcuts. In a reality which was subject to the laws of economy, mountains were pierced and waters were bridged in order to build the most direct route from point A to point B. In countless other realities, ruled by rituals that rooted people, the preferred route to a destination rarely used to be the direct one.

Schreiner recognized the landscape that was flying by underneath him. He suddenly remembered a weekend in October, when after a long rainy season the weather had changed overnight: the Saturday morning had been bright and clear with a mood in the air that made him suggest to Anna and the children, over breakfast at the sunlit kitchen table, to take a ride along the coast up north. Just like that, unplanned, a bit daring. And ironically it had been the children who had refused to come along.

“Sorry Dad, forget it. We’re invited to that awesome party. You’ll never believe how many girls envy me for that! And David simply has to come since there’s going to be a table tennis tournament. And actually, Dad, I have to say that we are fundamentally opposed to those senseless weekend

rides. They are a waste of time and gas!" declared Ruth. And David, swept away by his older sister, supported her unconditionally. Schreiner had accepted it and left alone with Anna.

The interstate in the inland cut through forests, glowing brightly in all shades of red; sometimes past ancient ridges, formed an eternity ago by fire and earth, ablated by water and air ever since. The countryside outside of the human settlements seemed untouched. Schreiner, driving his Pontiac with the powerful engine, enjoyed the ride with only little traffic.

At dusk they rode towards the bluish light of the coast and found a small harbor town with pretty whitewashed houses.

"You are our only guests", the elderly landlady of the bed and breakfast told them in her living room that doubled as her office. The building was perched on a cliff overlooking the ocean. "It's going to be a cold starry night, you better take these", she said, and handed them extra blankets.

Schreiner remembered that the situation had touched him in a peculiar way. As if he had entered a different world. This town had been bare of any hustle and bustle. Here time seemed to be running slowly and occasionally it even stopped. The style of the wooden houses lining the harbor was timeless. For centuries the clear, fresh salty smell of the ocean had mixed with the smoke of the fires in the old wood-burning stoves in the evenings. Locals stood around and chatted with each other. There were no cars on the road. The chipped tarmac had sandy potholes with bunches of yellowish, robust grass. With frayed edges it transitioned into sandy walkways. If you looked closely, you could see the paint flaking off the houses and the snags in the screen doors. But this kind of neglect was not a sign of poverty, much rather a sign of contentment. A modest life, as genuine as the names the Native American population had left behind.

The only restaurant in town was the “Fishmonger's Café”. The name was written in colorful letters on a reclaimed plank above the entrance. Inside, they were served a simple, tasty meal of stewed halibut at a rustic wooden table. When they left the restaurant, night had fallen. Above them, the sky was starlit. Faint reflections glistened on the calm ocean surface. The coastline faded into the night. Above the town the beacon of the lighthouse flashed into the darkness.

Aboard an airliner of the latest design on an airway leading directly from one economic area to another, Schreiner vividly remembered the scene. Something in his life had gone terribly wrong. Now he was one of those people whose everyday life was nothing but a frenzy of hectic activity with the sole purpose of continuously implementing apparently world-shaking plans.

Through the window he watched as the plane dove through the clouds towards Long Island and touched down. The air in New York was very cold and dry which made the inside of his nose tingle. After a short wait the shuttle bus to his car rental picked him up. The black driver wore a bulky cap and greeted him with the typical welcoming American smile. Singing gospels with his booming voice he dropped him off in the parking lot. During the ride Schreiner had watched his suitcase sliding around on the luggage platform. Is it going to fall over or will it remain standing? Subject to the forces of inertia, just like its owner.

Less than an hour after he had arrived he left the parking lot. They had given him a Mustang. In a way the name was befitting the untamed power of the big block engine. He started to perceive the reality of the foreign country to be intrusive. Heavy traffic on the Belt Parkway. All these people had some task to fulfill, tiny cogs in that subtle, all-encompassing machinery that had replaced God. He drove along the marshy coast of Jamaica Bay, lined with reeds, and passed the red brick buildings of southern Brooklyn. He